Faces

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Summary

Prompt for Sylwioszka.

Steve has created his own family on the streets with Clint, Natasha and Thor. He thought his family was complete until two little kids by the name of Tony and Bruce come along and they adopt the children into their group, deciding to be the best family the two little ones could ever hope for despite their dire situation.

Notes

Howdy, howdy, howdy!

I'm back from holidays!!! I had a blast :). Hawaii was so much fun and the presentation went really well over there as well :D. I got to do some writing on the plane on the way back and just really wanted to post it :).

This is for prompt Sylwioszka for both Tony and Bruce to be kids together. Originally, it was going to be a de-aging fic but after talking it through, we decided to mix it up a bit. I really hope you enjoy it, Sylwioszka!

Now, again, this has taken on a life of its own. It was meant to be a one-shot, but what do you know, it is probably going to be three or four chapters in total. Please let me know what y'all think of it. I know it has probably been kind of done before but I got the idea in my head and just couldn't let it go.

WARNING! Really important, guys. This story has HEAVY references to child abuse. It was originally meant to be all nice and fluffy before my angsty, little writer's brain got a hold of it. It's like I go into a trance when I write things then come out of it, read back over and go, 'Oh my god, I wrote that? That is terribly dark.' If it is too much, please don't read and upset yourself. If you do proceed, please do so with self-care. Be known, child abuse doesn't happen on-screen but it is pretty evident the physical as well as verbal abuse that happened. There is plenty of comfort as well, but it still may be upsetting to some readers.

See the end of the work for more notes.
No one Can Tell Me This Isn't My Family

Steve knew what people thought. That he didn’t have a family because it wasn’t the traditional type of one. Two parents, siblings by his side, maybe a dog, even a cat.

He’d had something close to the traditional family unit once. He remembered his ma dancing around the kitchen, listening to old jazz and swing music as he clung to one of her legs, being lifted up and down as she tapped out a tune to one of her favourite songs.

While he knew his pa had never left them, but instead, died when he was three months old in an accident at work, he found he could never really include his father in the picture when he remembered his old family. He only knew the man’s face from a photo. He couldn’t remember being taken out camping or swung about in the air like a father was meant to do with his son. Still though, he held on to the old photograph Ma had gifted to him of his pa on the night her cancer had won out.

It was the one and only battle Ma had lost, no matter how many times Steve had prayed as a little twelve-year-old boy for her to be the victor.

He’d never found a home with the traditional ones that the orphanage tried to place him in. Some of the women meant to be his new ma screamed too much while the men meant to his new father hit hard, fast and often. And when he was placed back in the orphanage, the place never represented a home for him.

There were faces there though. Faces that made him laugh the way he had with his ma, made him feel safe enough to cry in front of them, made him want to give his love again after letting it go dormant after Ma left.

Faces by the names of Clint, Natasha and Thor.

See, he couldn’t place these people in the categories he was told he needed for the traditional family unit. According to these categories, these faces weren’t his family.

But the more times Clint would crawl into bed with him because the brown-haired boy remembered his old pa far too well or every time Natasha shyly held his hand because she wanted to be reminded how touch could be used for love, not pain, or the numerous occasions Thor would jump into a fight when he was hopelessly outnumbered, the more times Steve became convinced that these people were his family. No matter what the stupid people in administration said.

Once, he’d said so his old case worker, Mrs. Carver, saying, ‘Just make Clint, Natasha and Thor my new family.’

Mrs. Carver smiled sadly at him, but with that hint of patronisation Steve saw most adults used on the kids here, like they were too simple to understand what they wanted and the adults had to explain things to them exceptionally slow. It always made Steve bristle when he was on the receiving end of that look.

‘We can’t do that, Steven,’ she said in a calming tone that just aggravated Steve all the more. ‘As much as we want to, we can’t always pick the family we want.’

After Natasha went away to a home for a month, the longest any of them had been away from each other after meeting in the orphanage, and came home with bruises on her arms from the mother, who had grown impatient when Natasha couldn’t understand some of the English words the woman had been using, Steve had enough.
While the orphanage couldn’t make them a family under the country’s laws, he could and he would. He could pick his family if he wanted to and this was the one he was choosing.

They ran that very night. Through the streets of New York, hardly one stranger sparing them a glance as they raced through the darkness, trying their hardest to get as far away from the dreaded orphanage and adults in it before dawn came.

To say it was easy would have been a lie. Sometimes Steve hadn’t been able to sleep at all in the night because of the cold. They had all collapsed four or five times from exhaustion or hunger. Thor had even been taken by the police once when caught stealing a loaf of bread, but they managed to spring him from the car before it pulled into the station.

However, one night, after they were on the run for a full year, Steve had been tucking Clint into a bed.

They had taken up residence in an old apartment building, where most of the ancient ten-storey place had been abandoned because of the desperate need of repair that the owner, an old man, was too stingy to pay for. The owner himself had taken up residence on the bottom floor, refusing to leave despite the numerous holes in the floors, walls and roofs. Not to mention amount of rats. Still though, the beauty of this was the group still had running water on the top floor where they lived, their presence unbeknownst to the old man that was fast approaching eighty.

Clint had just turned twelve and Steve managed to buy a cake for him. The younger boy was thrilled beyond belief, throwing his arms around Steve in a boa constrictor-like hug.

As Steve made sure the blankets covered him, with half-lidded eyes, Clint had murmured, ‘Love you, Steve.’

At that moment, Steve knew he made the best decision ever. At just fourteen-years-old, he knew he had his new family.

For years, he thought it had been complete. The four of them fell into a rhythm. Clint and Natasha were eerily good at pick-pocketing, Clint had taught Steve how to hustle at pool and Thor had such a damn honest look about him that shop keepers didn’t notice how he walked out of a market with half a dozen wares he hadn’t paid for.

For four years they did this. Until, one day, in the alley they jumped into after climbing down the fire escape from their little make-shift home, Steve came across two tiny little boys.

One was so small he fit on the other one’s back, while the bigger of the two was actually crawling along the glass-littered ground, heading to God knows where.

He had suddenly looked to Steve and the then-sixteen-year-old was captured in the intense gaze of chestnut brown eyes.

The child simply mouthed one word … ‘Please,’ … before he collapsed, the other child already unconscious on his back.

Whether he had been asking for help or simply mercy to not be hurt, Steve didn’t know. All he did know was that suddenly, both children were in his arms and he was somehow climbing up the fire escape to stand in the main living area. He had felt scared for the tiny lives in his hands, but strong as well, feeling strength pumping through him at the instinct to protect them.

They had both been filthy and beyond skinny. After cleaning them up, Steve saw bruises on the bigger of the two’s torso, but none on visible areas of skin, which made Steve sickened to the
The smaller of the two was a different case all together. His skin told a story of horror, so many old marks that would never fade.

Steve cried. It had been a long time since he had, but he did then.

Natasha, Clint and Thor came home then. No one questioned a thing. Clint and Natasha finished tending to the children while Thor got him settled.

Up until then, Steve never knew his family was incomplete. The day Tony and Bruce made their faces known to him told him otherwise. They were his family as well and no one would ever be able to tell him any differently.

Tony’s story came out fairly quickly. After his parents had died in a car crash and he was taken into custody by an Obadiah Stane, rather than the old butler he loved more than anyone in the world, Tony soon ran at just six, unable to take one more day of Obadiah’s mostly mental and rare physical abuse that never went too far to rise suspicion amongst the public. While the whole world went into an uproar over the missing Stark heir, the group managed to keep him hidden because he never, ever wanted to go back to Obadiah. And, if he was found, that was where he would be shipped back to.

Bruce’s story was one that came out in painful fragments, mostly from what the little three-year-old screamed out in his sleep, asking for Dad to stop hitting Mama then most of the time, begging Mama to wake up again.

Tony had come across the toddler in the front yard of Bruce’s Aunty’s place after Bruce’s father was jailed, as Steve assumed. Here, according to Tony, Bruce had been sobbing because of Aunty yelling at him again. While there hadn’t appeared to be any physical abuse, Tony was more than aware how bad mental abuse could be.

For most people, they wouldn’t have been able to fathom Tony’s next move. Steve probably would have been confused too if he hadn’t experienced what he did with the other three that made up his family. On top of that, spending five minutes with the two children and seeing how much they loved each other let Steve know why Tony did what he did.

The older child simply took Bruce with him. The six-year-old and three-year-old actually survived a full month by themselves. Their bond was unbreakable and from the sounds of it, instant.

When the two finally woke that first day, screaming and crying for hours in fear, Steve had known what a job it would be if they stayed. They weren’t just little kids, but damaged ones as well.

That was all right by Steve though. They were all broken. Together though, they were able to mend the gaping cracks. They were all like shattered pieces of a mirror that, when pieced together again, fit perfectly, slowly gluing together the breaks.

With the final two pieces in place, the mirror was finally complete and Steve loved looking at the family it reflected on its worn surface.

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Steve felt the presence before he even opened his eyes. His senses hadn’t always been so acute, but
after five years without his ma, he had hardened up in first the homes then the streets.

The footsteps he picked immediately. For the longest time, he only used to hear Natasha’s lithe step but only when she decided to be heard, Clint’s confident stride, but again, only when he decided to give Steve that much warning and Thor’s heavy, strong walk. Four years exactly when they had all decided to leave the home together, sick of the abuse, verbal and physical.

Just one year ago though, there had been two additions, which was the new footsteps now.

Steve could hear the quick intake and outtake of breath, which only cemented who he thought it was. He had always really known because there was only one person out of the new additions brazen enough to enter the sheets cordoning off his personal area in level they took up of the abandoned building.

He couldn’t help himself. He smiled, despite meant to be pretending he was still asleep.

That was all it took.

‘Steve! You’re awake! We can go now!’

‘Morning to you too, kiddo,’ the blonde teenager chuckled, still keeping his eyes closed.

However, soon, small fingers pried one eyelid open and he was greeted with a blindingly excited smile. Chestnut brown eyes twinkled down at him, now visible underneath the previously shaggy, dark brown hair that had went through a haircut just last week. The high cheekbones helped illuminate the smile while dimples curved deep within the skin.

‘Up!’ Tony declared, bouncing on his knees and he even shook Steve’s shoulder, an action that would have been unthinkable to the seven-year-old one year ago, even six months. ‘Up, up, up, we can go now!’

Despite being woken at some ungodly hour of the morning, Steve’s smile was genuine while his chest warmed at the little figure by his side.

Lazily stretching his long arms above his head, he brought his right arm around Tony’s waist as he sat up slightly, pulling the young boy to his side, wasting no time in placing a kiss in the silky hair.

‘No hug for me?’ Steve teased, playfully jostling the new adopted family member.

Of course he was joking. Tony generally pulled away from hugs and kisses, face screwing up in revolt. He was a teenager before his time.

Predictably, Tony immediately began to squirm, pulling at the oldest teenager’s forearm. ‘No!’ He protested, legs kicking but unable to escape. ‘No, Steve, no! We’ve got to go, no time for mush.’

Rolling his eyes at the child’s turn of phrase (Tony had left them all speechless many times with some of the things he could come out with), Steve gave the boy a noisy kiss on the cheek, eliciting an indignant squawk, before relinquishing his hold.

Immediately, Tony scrubbed at his cheek, leaving a black mark there, glaring up at the grinning teen.

‘I said don’t do that!’ Tony scowled and Steve could tell by how the chestnut brown eyes had saddened a bit that the child truly had enough of the teasing.

‘All right, all right, I’m sorry.’ Steve held out his hands in an apologetic gesture, though the fond
smile couldn’t be dimmed on his face.

Tony glared, obviously not believing in the sincerity, but he pushed himself to his feet anyway. Even standing, Tony barely stood just above Steve’s head when sitting on the floor. For seven, he was small and Steve tended to not think about why that was.

Trying to get a cheery response, Steve started in an enthusiastic voice, ‘So, after you’re both ready, we’ll go to the water park opening, huh?’

Despite the usual low temperatures in New York, a small kid’s water park in Central Park was opening that day, which mostly consisted of small fountains and squirting flowers for kids to run under over rubber pavement. Truthfully, Steve thought they were being pretty generous calling it that.

However, as soon as Tony saw the announcement on the front of an old newspaper Steve had taken from the trash, it had been all the seven-year-old had talked about until the four olders really had no choice but to plan an excursion.

Tony lit up, which for Steve, was just the most beautiful sight. ‘Yeah!’ He exclaimed, bouncing on the balls of his bare feet. ‘Let’s go!’

Steve chuckled at the enthusiasm as he pushed himself to his knees. ‘Easy, kiddo, we’ve all got to get ready first.’ With a glance outside, it looked like it would be lucky to be six o’clock.

Tony grinned up at Steve. ‘Bruce already is.’

Steve paused at that. ‘You … got Bruce ready?’ He asked cautiously.

The young boy nodded proudly. ‘Yep,’ he proclaimed. ‘Even got him breakfast and everything.’

It was only this past year experience that Steve had the strength not to cringe.

‘Yeah?’ He asked instead, trying to sound curious, but he swore his voice shook.

Tony didn’t appear to notice though as he enthusiastically tugged on Steve’s hand. ‘C’mon, I’ll show you!’

Unable to not smile at the bright life force beside him, Steve allowed himself to be led out past the sheets that were drawn across to give him his privacy. There were four other areas cordoned off for the three older kids and the bathroom area in the huge room in the old building.

The area in the middle had been turned into a little nest, a cot placed there with numerous blankets and pillows piled up around the edges to try to keep the occupants in until one of the four deemed ‘adults’ of the group were up. However, on first glance, Steve could see it very much was empty.

Holding back a sigh, he asked, ‘Tony, where have you put Bruce?’

‘I told you!’ Tony said impatiently, still tugging on his hand, leading the blonde teenager down the corridor that led to the other area of the building they had deemed their lounge room and kitchen. ‘I gave him breakfast.’

The child sounded so damn proud of himself that Steve knew no matter what he found, he would find himself praising the boy by his side.

Soon, Tony pulled him past the curtain leading into their ‘kitchen’, which was just a table that held
the food they stole or bought using money they swindled high enough away from the rats, a cabinet with several chipped items of crockery and utensils as well as a sink that still had water running to it.

There, sitting in the middle of it all, was Bruce, packet of cereal clutched in his stumpy fingers. On second glance, Steve saw the actual plastic packet had been filled with milk, which was spilled all across the floor, along with the cornflakes. They mostly decorated the tiny four-year-old though, spilling across the food-stained pants and over-sized jumper. The clothing had previously been in the piling set to be washed, but Tony had obviously retrieved them, thinking they were good enough for his declared little brother. The jumper was also on backwards.

And … yep, all the food and milk were through the dark brown, nearly black, curls as well, though Steve couldn’t fathom how that had happened. The pudgy mouth was covered in crumbs and milk while Bruce held a handful of cornflakes in his hand, halfway to his mouth. The right sleeve was absolutely soaked in milk.

He froze in his meal, honeyed brown eyes huge as he looked up as Tony and Steve entered the room. The poor little thing had been the picture of absolute contentment, but he immediately went shy as he saw the gazes on him, clutching the cereal packet to his chest, peeking up at Steve in particular, waiting for a scolding.

Tony simply smiled up at Steve, little head tilted so far back to look at the teenager. ‘See? Got him dressed and everything.’

Steve’s shoulders slumped helplessly. Natasha would call him a push-over, but he was well-aware of how full of it she was, bending to the will of these two little beings just as much as the rest of them and even threatening bodily harm to those that didn’t do what the two children wanted.

And how could he not melt when these two looked at him like that? Yes, it was a huge mess and the clean-up of Bruce was going to take forever while the rest of them were now without edible cereal for the morning, but he didn’t care. They were the two most beautiful little kids in the world and nothing would ever make him think different.

Bending slightly, he lovingly laid his hand on Tony’s head. ‘Such a good job, buddy. Thank you for being such a good help to me today.’

To Steve’s utmost surprise, he actually received a quick hug of the leg from Tony. The boy smiled up at him and Steve saw the gratefulness just permeating off the child.

‘You’re taking us to the water park today.’ Tony breathed the two words like they were sacred. The silent ‘I wanted to say thank you’ was embedded in there, but Tony was still too tight-lipped to make such declarations as yet, afraid he’d be made fun of if he wore his emotions too much on his sleeve.

Steve had to stop himself from scooping up the adorable kid there and then, but instead, settled for ruffling the boy’s hair.

‘Good boy, Tony,’ he praised, kneeling down beside him, so he wasn’t towering over Bruce, who was watching the exchange silently, but the shyness was fading as he saw his hero wasn’t in trouble. Bruce tended not to care if he was in trouble or not, but if someone was upset with Tony, the toddler fell apart. It was both sweet and worrisome.

Tony glowed at the praise, but tried not to show it, snapping, clicking and clapping his fingers in a habit Steve saw the child had whenever his brain was running super fast. Both children were geniuses, Steve was sure of it.
‘We can go to the park now?’ Tony asked hopefully, bouncing a bit on his feet again.

Steve smiled at that. ‘I might just have to clean up Bruce a bit, kiddo.’ Quickly pushing on with an enthusiastic voice though so Tony wouldn’t think he had done a bad job, he said, ‘But how about you go get one of the others up so they can start getting ready?’

It was a double-edged plan. That way, one of them could help Tony get ready, but he couldn’t tell the child that. Tony was fiercely independent and refused to acknowledge he still needed help with certain things.

Tony nodded enthusiastically and Steve caught the wicked little glint in the mischievous child’s eye before he took off.

‘Not Clint!’ Steve immediately called after him. ‘Thor or Natasha, but not Clint!’

Clint and Tony were experts at teasing each other and getting each one to rise to the bait. They wouldn’t get anywhere if Clint was the one helping Tony get ready. One of them would end up storming off.

Most likely Clint.

Steve gave a sigh when he didn’t get a reply and just simply waved his hand in a dismissal of the situation. It would sort itself out.

Turning his attention to the silent toddler on the floor, his expression softened. ‘And how are you today, baby boy?’

Bruce squirmed shyly at the attention, ducking his head a little. ‘Had breakfast,’ he mumbled, his voice a distinct husky tone that was the cutest thing.

Steve chuckled fondly at that. ‘I can see that, yes.’

The toddler smiled a little before shyly holding out his hand that was still grasping the handful of mashed cornflakes. ‘Want some?’

‘Aw, baby,’ Steve absolutely melted and slowly leaned forward to ruffle the head of curls so Bruce could clearly see what he was doing.

When he had first done it, the then three-year-old had freaked, thinking Steve was going to hit him. Steve immediately pushed off the darkness and instead concentrated on the toddler peering up at him, smile growing more, always slow to warm up in the mornings. Steve knew it was often from nightmares that often plagued the boy who should have been too young to dream what he did.

‘That’s yours, sweet boy, I’m fine, thank you,’ Steve murmured softly.

Bruce assessed Steve’s words with his head cocked to the side. ‘Do I have to get clean now?’

‘After breakfast, Steve will clean you up,’ the blonde teenager explained.

He often referred to himself in third person to Bruce and sometimes Tony. Clint was the other one that did it all the time as well. It was just something they both automatically did.

‘I bags that job!’ A voice called from behind Steve. ‘You go take care of your terror. He’s running riot, as per usual.’
He glanced over his shoulder to see the sleep-tousled Clint walking into the kitchen. By the walk, hands tucked deep down in the grey pants, Clint was ticked, obviously because he had been woken up.

Of course Tony did.

Despite it all, Steve smirked at his family member and subtly gestured to the state the toddler was in. ‘Yeah?’ He asked.

Clint peered around Steve. All leftover sleepiness and grumpiness left his face and his mouth split into a large grin.

‘What a clever idea, Bub bub,’ he laughed, easily coming around and gently lifting the toddler into his arms, packet full of cereal with the milk and all, not at all perturbed by getting the mess on himself. ‘We’ll never have to clean a bowl again in our lives.’

‘Tony thought of it,’ Bruce replied dutifully, forever the one to give his hero the credit, no matter how much he helped. Tony was exactly the same when it came to Bruce. ‘He gave me breakfast.’ He squirmed a little in the hold, but was warming up quickly this morning. He even gave Clint a smile rather than just burying his head so he couldn’t see them looking at him, forever shy of their fond gazes.

Clint laughed, giving the toddler’s backside a gentle pat. ‘Aren’t you a lucky boy then, huh?’

Bruce nodded, some of his shyness coming back as he offered Clint the handful of food, just like he had Steve. ‘Hungwy?’

The toddler often slipped in his speech and even sometimes accidentally lisped, which always made the rest of them melt. Tony’s speech was immaculate, often unwittingly showing how much his previous life had been drummed into him of proper articulateness. The manners he had been taught rarely raised their head however. Fancy that.

Clint peered down at the food with interest before giving a shrug and taking a bite of cereal that couldn’t be identified as cornflakes anymore, playfully blowing on Bruce’s little palm.

Steve gave a laugh that was half a groan at the resident slob of their residence.

Bruce squealed at the sensation on his palm, immediately tucking his hand to his chest. His mouth was half open, about to smile, but he paused, obviously worried he read the situation wrong and Clint actually wasn’t playing.

The brown haired fifteen-year-old saw it and nuzzled his nose playfully into the hand Bruce had been trying to hide, chuckling as he did so, showing it was all fun and games.

Clint was impressively good with the kids and Steve wondered if it was from the past days in the circus where Clint had once implied he would take care of the really little kids when the parents were performing, whether acrobatics or archery.

‘I was better than a lot of ‘em in both, yet I was stuck with babysitting,’ he grumbled once.

By how Clint was with Bruce and Tony when the two weren’t arguing, Steve knew Clint hadn’t hated it near as much as he pretended.

Bruce was giggling now, smile fully planted on his face, even able to be seen from where he tucked himself into the crook of Clint’s neck.
Seeing Steve still watching them, Clint waved him off easily. ‘I’ve got this. Go take care of your terror.’

Rolling his eyes at the nickname for the second youngest member of their make-shift family, Steve replied, ‘He’s a darlin’,’ before walking to the corridor.

He just managed to hear, ‘Not at six in the morning, he’s not,’ mumbled under Clint’s breath.

Smirking at the other boy, he walked back into the ‘bedrooms’ to find Clint had (once again) over-exaggerated a situation. Or maybe he hadn’t and Natasha had just taken control like the natural leader she was.

Thor was sitting on the cot in the middle, one shoe on while the other foot was bare. His blonde hair, which had streaks of brown through it, sat around his shoulders and was knotted from his sleep. Blinking, still half-asleep, he gave Steve a lazy wave before turning his attention back to getting his sleep-addled body to get his other shoe on.

Smiling back, Steve glanced around to finally spot the other area that was their bathroom, with a broken shower cubicle, toilet and rather large sink, which was big enough to sometimes give Bruce or Tony baths in when there was enough hot water, had its sheet pulled back.

Natasha stood there with Tony on her left hip. The seven-year-old was now dressed in a clean t-shirt and the special board shorts the rest had worked on saving up for to buy a pair each for the two kids. Both children had loved it, actually being able to choose what they wanted to wear, rather than whatever they managed to snag out of the trash or able to stuff under their shirts then easing out of a store like nothing had taken place.

Tony’s was a bright red with a lightning bolt, which was just so Tony, all life and colour. Bruce’s was a subtle grey with dashes of silver, which made Steve a little sorry, because it was like the toddler had been too scared or somehow thought it was wrong to actually pick something a bit nicer. Natasha had tried to explain it to him, but Bruce just simply shyly pointed to the same pair of shorts while clutching to the leg material of Natasha’s jeans.

‘Done?’

Tony’s impatient prompt brought Steve back to the present.

Steve blinked and watched with raised eyebrows as he realised Natasha was cleaning Tony’s face with a damp washcloth and Tony wasn’t spending every second trying to make his escape. While he looked none too happy about it, he stayed in Natasha’s arms and didn’t attempt to push away the cloth, though he did turn his face this way and that crankily.

Natasha smirked back, but Steve could see the love she had there for little Tony. ‘Such a good boy today, bratishka,’ she said teasingly, ‘no fighting or anything.’

Her Russian accent had faded over the years. It had been so strong when she came into the orphanage at ten, one of many young girls rescued from a corrupt boarding school for Russian children that was mean to ‘teach’ the best and brightest of the next generation how to be part of new elite fighting units.

Steve still didn’t know all of the things Natasha had seen in her young life. Thor had been abandoned by his parents at a very young age and been through many homes. While he never talked too much about his parents, he would sometimes share stories about a child, Loki, who he used to live next door too, who had been like his little brother.
Clint’s father had been abusive whenever he drank, a worker in a circus that moved around the country. Clint had an older brother, Barney, who left Clint with his father, and just never came back. No one knew whether he was dead or alive, but Steve knew Clint had his thoughts on this.

Truthfully, Steve knew they all hated talking about their pasts. While most would think the present was pretty dismal, Steve thought it was pretty wonderful, especially when he watched Tony sulkily cross his arms and give an adorable pout.

‘I just want to get this show on the road,’ he grumbled.

That elicited a laugh out of all three of them, which made the little boy even crankier. Tony was a little ripper, no doubt about it. His personality was award-winning as far as Steve was concerned. Clint would contest that with him, but only because he was sulky for being waken up so early.

‘Down!’ Tony demanded, already wriggling to free himself from Natasha’s hold.

‘One more spot, bratishka,’ Natasha said calmly, but gently, recognising the signs when Tony was truly having enough as the child began to whine in the back of his throat.

She rubbed another dirty spot on his cheek, which finally made one of Tony’s whines turn into a definite cry, eyes becoming a little shiny.

‘Okay, done,’ Natasha soothed, stealing a quick kiss, before setting Tony on the ground.

‘No kiss,’ Tony cried softly, scrubbing one hand along his cheek where the kiss had been planted, sniffing as he rubbed his left eye with a fist. It reminded Steve that he would most definitely be going down for a nap sometime this afternoon. The little boy didn’t like early mornings and while he was having naps less and less, this day was sure to be a bit too full-on to complete with a sleep. An over-tired Tony was not one easy to handle.

‘It’s not that bad, nakhal'nyy mal'chik,’ Natasha said easily, giving the silky hair a stroke before disappearing into her section.

Still sniffling, Tony whined softly to himself, stumbling away from Natasha, murmuring, ‘Is too.’

His gaze brightened as he spied Steve watching him with a sympathetic smile. Steve saw the moment when both of his arms nearly went up for the sign to be picked up, but Tony immediately tucked his elbows back to his sides, expression turning a bit horrified at what he’d nearly done. At the realisation though that he thought he wasn’t going to receive some comfort, his gaze became absolutely miserable and his whine turned into a cry again.

It broke Steve a bit. Tony would never ask for affection from any of them when distraught. Sometimes, when he was tired, he would allow himself to be coddled, but he would never seek it out.

Bruce had started to, shyly asking for cuddles and kisses, in a way that his mum must have initially taught him that the toddler could still remember. It was the most adorable thing and they all happily did it.

Tony, on the other hand, pretended he hated the affection, but Steve could see how much he craved it. He wouldn’t allow himself to though, and Steve couldn’t quite figure out why as yet. He certainly didn’t appear afraid of them any more, and often argued with them quite easily. He was also endlessly affectionate with Bruce and basically only ever referred to him as Bubba, baby or baby brother.
It didn’t matter though. Steve would forever give it to him, whether he asked for it or not. It was something he knew the whole group did, just casually being affectionate to the seven-year-old to show him it was all right and they did love him. And especially when he was upset.

Steve smiled at Tony and clicked his tongue sympathetically. ‘Not your favourite past time, is it, baby?’

He leaned down and hooked his hands under Tony’s armpits. Before Tony could protest, Steve scooped Tony into his arms, cuddling the boy to his chest.

Tony squirmed, legs giving a half-hearted kick. ‘I’m not a baby. Bruce is the baby.’

‘Very silly of me, buddy, I’m sorry,’ Steve was quick to agree, rubbing comforting circles on the boy’s back with his left hand, easily holding the child with just his right arm. He hoped the reassurance would be enough for Tony to just stay for a bit and enjoy a bit of comfort.

Tony made an offended, little, ‘Uh,’ sound, and to Steve’s absolute delight, actually rested his head on Steve’s shoulder.

Thor gave two thumbs up at that while Steve smiled widely back, delighted that Tony wasn’t immediately pushing him away.

Steve contented himself with stroking the precious boy’s back, swaying from side to side. It was hard not to press a kiss to Tony’s temple, but the blonde teen knew better than to push his luck.

Tony stayed still for several minutes, just sniffling now and then, until, in a tiny voice, so unlike the enthusiasm he usually attacked everything with, asked, softly, unsurely. ‘Are we still going to the water park?’

Both Thor and Steve frowned at each other at those words. Was Tony … thinking he was going to be punished for getting upset like all little kids did at times?

‘Of course we are, buddy!’ Steve exclaimed, giving him a little bounce. He was tempted to ask why Tony thought otherwise, but he really didn’t want to upset the boy anymore today. It should be a treat for him and Steve was a little desperate to make it one of the best days for both of the children.

‘Steven’s been looking forward to it all week,’ Thor said, voice deeper than the average sixteen-year-old, just as he was taller and larger than one as well. Originally from Norway, Thor still tended to sometimes speak very proper English, but knew all the pop culture references very well now.

Steve took the cue and gasped in over-exaggerated indignation. ‘Have not!’ He said, making his voice go high on purpose.

Giggling drew his attention back down and he was greeted with chestnut brown eyes devoid of all tears smiling up at him in delight and Steve thought he saw another little emotion there that Tony usually hid away pretty well.

Before he could see more though, Tony began to wriggle with a ‘Down,’ being said.

Sighing softly to himself in frustration, but knowing forcing Tony into being comforted would be a terrible idea, he reluctantly set the boy on his feet.

Tony was off, but before he could get too far, Thor’s arm had snaked out and scooped him up, giving him a brief, one-armed hug to the largest teenager’s chest.
‘Thor!’ Tony tried to pull away, dangling legs wriggling frantically. ‘No. No more trash. It’s time to
go.’

‘Love, not trash,’ Thor corrected gently, but set Tony down all the same.

Tony stumbled a little, as though finding it hard to find his feet, but Steve knew it was the boy being
too preoccupied in his mind, whether from the words or prospect of the park, Steve wasn’t sure.

However, Tony disappeared quickly, not even glancing back.

Thor turned a dismal gaze on to Steve, always one to get so upset when either of the little ones
showed how broken they were from the short lives they had lived so far.

Steve grimaced sympathetically back, glancing at where Tony disappeared. The boy appeared so apt
at hiding how deep the damage went with his quick words and thousand-watt smile.

It was more than worrying and hurt Steve more than any hit he ever copped in the system. This went
so much deeper, right into his soul.

A yell from the kitchen let him know that maybe his help was needed there though.

‘I better go keep those two from killing each other,’ Steve said, not bothering to say who he was
referring to.

Thor knew perfectly, calling a ‘Good luck with that,’ as he stood and stretched.

Entering back into the kitchen, he was surprised to see that Clint and Tony weren’t attempting to
annoy each other to death and the shout had actually been in play.

Tony was dashing around the table as Clint playfully gave chase. The black-haired boy was laughing
like crazy, calling, ‘Look, Bubba, look!’ to Bruce, who was huddled near the cabinet, clear out of the
line of fire. As always with Tony, Bruce was a lot more rambunctious and caught up in his older
sibling’s enthusiasm, he was cheering, though not too loudly. The packet of cereal and milk was no
longer in the toddler’s grasp, but instead, in Clint’s, and from the looks of the state of his shirt, he had
been helping himself to the crazy concoction.

A blonde blur to Steve’s right was the only warning the oldest teenager got that Thor was joining the
fray. The huge sixteen-year-old tackled Clint, never one to miss out on some good rough-housing.

For most kids Clint’s size, a person Thor’s towering height would have winded him, but Clint
slipped out of the grasp and was on Thor’s back before they had even landed, trying to get the over-
sized teenager in a lock, but Thor’s strength made that hard.

Tony was jumping up and down, enthusiastically pumping his arms in the air, ‘Bricker-bracker,
firecrackers, siss-boom-baa. Tho-r, Tho-r, ra-ra-ra!’

Thor stumbled in the play-fight, laughing so hard at the one-of-a-kind child.

‘You trade sides quick, you rotter!’ Clint called, but his grey eyes were shining as he used Thor as a
climbing post.

‘You better believe it,’ Tony called, which finally made Clint break, chuckling in helpless
amusement.

Natasha had silently joined them, leaning down to pick up Bruce. Steve just noticed that the tiny boy
had huddled in on himself at the inclusion of Thor, honeyed brown eyes widening in fear and his right hand’s fingers were being sucked almost frantically in his mouth. Sometimes, Bruce found it hard to tell the difference between when they were play fighting and real fighting. He’d never seen anything other than the real deal for the first three years of his life, which had finally climaxed in the death of his mother. A thought that never failed to make Steve feel physically sick.

However, Natasha didn’t allow those thoughts to make her stumble and she smiled gently down at Bruce as she slowly began hooking her hands underneath Bruce’s arms.

‘Loud this morning, huh, malysh?’

Unlike before, when, if someone approached Bruce when he was scared, the toddler would absolutely lose it, screaming and crying, going into shock and eyes becoming absolutely haunted, Bruce reached his arms up as soon Natasha got close, little fingers immediately gripping the material of the fifteen-year-old girl’s flannel shirt. He whimpered softly, but Natasha quickly settled him against her shoulder, patting his backside.

Bruce settled, curling into her embrace, head settling on her shoulder, but didn’t stop sucking on his fingers. None of them had the heart to try to stop the habit. When feeling even slightly threatened or scared, Bruce tended to regress to more baby-ish characteristics. The worse Bruce deemed the threat, the harder he regressed, sometimes to the point where he wouldn’t talk for days, crying when he just couldn’t articulate what he wanted.

It hadn’t been that extreme for a long time, but Bruce still did it with little things like this. Truthfully, Steve didn’t see anything really wrong with it. Obviously the younger Bruce had been, the less he remembered the threats that had become far too familiar so liked to try to go into that shell when he could. Besides, the toddler was only four anyway. The reason why Steve sometimes took issue with the habit of sucking on the fingers was in their lifestyle, sometimes they weren’t in the most hygienic of states or environments. He hated for there ever a chance for Bruce to get ill from simply sucking his fingers.

Natasha saw what Bruce was doing too and placed a kiss in his curls before promptly wrinkling her nose in play. ‘Why are you all sticky, malysh?’

Bruce curled further into her, not wanting to talk for the time being.

Steve respected that, as did they all, so quickly filled Natasha in. ‘Tony gave Bruce breakfast and got … creative.’

‘Ah.’ Natasha gave a nod before jerking her head back to the corridor. ‘I’ll clean him up. Those two will be busy for a while.’

Steve glanced at the two wrestling teenagers with a chuckle, Thor attempting to get a hold of Clint, but the younger teenager was just too slippery. ‘Yeah, probably.’

As the red-head began to walk away, Tony’s gaze was drawn to her, or more accurately, his little brother. His hand shot high up in the air.

‘I want to help baby get ready too,’ he called, but it was more of a request than a demand.

Tony loved to help with anything to do with Bruce, which tended to make any process twice as long. However, Bruce absolutely came out of his shell with Tony’s coaxing and playing while the older boy lit up at making the toddler smile. When that was the outcome, Steve would take all day if it meant the two acted like that always and not just with each other.
Natasha’s smile was soft and warm as she waved Tony forward. ‘You know I always love your help, solnyshko.’

Tony grinned and forgetting about the wrestling match, raced to Natasha’s side, trotting alongside of her as she began to walk down the corridor. The girl’s hand came down to rest on top of the young boy’s wild mop of hair.

The child treated her to a glare, but didn’t pull away from the touch.

Steve’s smile was huge as he divided his attention between that departing group and the other two blissfully tearing up their pitiful kitchen.

This was the best family in the world and no damn official could ever tell him otherwise.
To Try To Outweigh The Bad Memories

Chapter Summary

The group finally get to the water park. First, everything seems to be going perfectly. Of course, it never stays that way for Steve.

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone!

Another update on a prompt! I can't believe I've updated two days in a row. Yay!

I've just been writing parts of all different stories until I suddenly realised there was another chapter complete of this. I'm so happy you all seem to be enjoying this story. I can't believe it has already hit above a hundred kudos. So excited! Thank you guys for such an awesome response and all the beautiful comments! They make my day and definitely encourage me to keep on writing :). It means a lot, so thank you :). I was thinking that if people seemed to like this story, I would make it into a series as well :).

WARNING: Again, please heed the warnings that this does have many references to child abuse as well as depression and mentions of canonical character deaths. If you find this triggering, please don't read. If you do proceed, please do with self-care.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As Steve walked across the pedestrian crossing into the north entrance of Central Park, a large throng of people enveloped him from either side. He automatically tightened his grip on Tony’s hand.

The black-haired child’s expression was positively baleful as he looked up at Steve and he automatically tugged against the hold.

Steve frowned down seriously at him and his voice left no room for argument. ‘What are the rules for when we are out, Tony?’

Tony immediately turned his gaze to the ground, mumbling under his breath.

‘Pardon?’ Steve’s tone became firmer.

The child’s shoulders dropped in a dramatic sigh as he begrudgingly raised his voice. ‘That when we are in crowds, I have to hold someone’s hand.’

It was word for word when Steve had laid down the rule. That was the thing with Tony. He could dutifully recite off every, single rule they ever made, but never really heard them.

One time, when the child got up in the middle of the night to get a midnight snack, but left the bread on the floor, which of course, brought the rats, Clint had stared at the mess and gestured out wide at the wreckage that was their food for that morning.
‘What’s the rule about food, Tony?’ The younger teenager asked.

Tony stood amongst the ruins, arms crossed behind his back, looking the picture of innocence as he faithfully quoted, ‘Not to leave food where rats can reach it.’

Clint indicated around, absolutely flabbergasted, making inquisitive half-groaning, half-squeaking noises, unable to fully articulate how to respond to that.

The boy had blinked up at him for a moment before realisation dawned in his eyes and he’d given an, ‘Ooooh, right. Don’t worry, Clint, I won’t do it again.’

One example of when Tony knew the rule, but hadn’t heard it. Thank god that one had filtered in though and Steve was determined for the hand-holding one too as well.

‘Thank you,’ Steve replied. ‘Now follow it please.’

Tony scowled, not liking to be restricted in anyway or having some of his autonomy compromised. It was the worst punishment for the boy. He loathed timeouts with a passion because it meant having to stay in the one spot for an extended amount of time against his free will.

However, he stopped pulling so hard, but he did give a tug now and then just because could.

Rolling his eyes at the child’s pettiness, Steve glanced around to make sure their little group was still together.

Natasha was striding ahead, looking for all the world like a regular teenager taking a walk through the park. However, Steve could tell by how straight she held herself that she was anything but relaxed.

They had all pulled their best clothes together so as to not draw attention to themselves, and hopefully just looked like a group of friends taking their little siblings out for a day at the park. Still though, Steve couldn’t help but feel like they had a beacon gleaming off them, telling the world they were all runaways. While they had their best clothes, the items they wore were ill-fitting and a bit miss-matched, not to mention old looking, no matter how much they had been cleaned.

The thing he was most worried about was Tony being recognised as the missing Stark heir. Though they had kept his face out of the spotlight for a good year and he had changed a bit since then, Steve knew the case was still raging from each time he picked up a newspaper. He just hoped the people weren’t so observant and thought Tony was just another little boy at the new water park.

Thor was walking behind Steve and Tony, glancing around, looking like he was taking in the massive oaks reflecting of the glass-like lakes to the right of the footpath they currently walked on. But Steve knew he was actually keeping a lookout for any police nearby so they could redirect their path, exactly as Natasha was doing.

Clint was walking just beside him, Bruce tucked into his arms. The toddler was now dressed in his board shorts and a purple shirt that Natasha lifted from a shop for him, wanting to get the baby of the group a present that day.

The light brown-haired teenager caught his eye and subtly nudged him. ‘Relax. We’ve been out in public like this plenty of times before. There’s going to be heaps of people so we’ll blend right in.’

The logic helped Steve relax a bit and he gave Clint a grateful smile. ‘Yeah. Yeah, you’re right.’

‘Of course I am,’ Clint replied easily, smiling down at the toddler in his arms. ‘Aren’t I, Bub-bub?’
Bruce smiled lovingly up at Clint, humming softly in reply, slumping further into the teen’s hold, absently giving his now clean fingers a suck.

Steve grinned fondly at the placid toddler, feeling more at ease as he took in the tiny child’s contentment, while Clint chuckled, pressing a kiss to Bruce’s forehead.

Tony had no qualms either, beginning to tug more insistently at Steve’s hand. ‘Can we hurry?’ He begged before adding, ‘Please?’

The oldest teenager grinned before waving his hand to the others around him. ‘Let’s pick up the pace, guys.’

Tony grinned mischievously up at him. ‘You look like you’re directing a ship, Cap.’

It wasn’t the first time Tony teased him about leading them all, often referring to him as Cap. The boy had numerous nicknames for all of them, but Cap was one that was sticking for him.

‘Cheeky,’ Steve replied in good-humour, giving the silky hair a ruffle with his free, left hand.

Tony pushed his right hand through his hair, scowling up at Steve, but it soon gave way to smiles as the tall teenager lengthened his stride.

‘Yes!’ He cheered, jumping beside Steve, before breaking into a little trot beside him.

The blonde teenager felt a little guilty about moving so fast for Tony, but the boy was a boundless amount of energy. If Steve would have let him, he would have raced out in front of them all.

Soon, the sound of children’s laughter and splashing permeated the air and the group rounded the corner to find the new park.

It was packed, kids racing this way and that, under tipping buckets of water, huge fake flowers that had water running out of them and fountains which sprayed water intermittently from the ground, causing surprised giggles, as opposed to other fountains that spouted continually, causing an ever-cascading curtain of water that glittered in the morning sunlight. Most parents stood just on the outskirts of the water being splashed liberally around, not enthusiastic enough to join their children in the chilly water, especially since the morning itself couldn’t have been more than twenty degrees Celsius.

It wasn’t putting a damper on the children’s attitudes as they ran in and out of the water like it was summer in Texas. Some parents had waded ankle-deep into the small pools created all through the area, which was probably about a square acre in total, pants rolled up to their knees just for when the water would rise temporarily when a bucket would spill over into the water or if one over-enthusiastic child accidentally splashed them. First Aid workers lazily patrolled around the outskirts and upon immediate investigation, not a policeman was in sight.

The crash of water, children screaming and adults shouting out orders kind of crashed into Steve in a wave of sound. The smell of hotdog venders nearby, an ice cream seller shouting his wares while Steve’s sensitive nose could pick up the sickly sweet scent of the syrup used to decorate shaved ice all added to the atmosphere. He couldn’t help but cringe a bit as the elements, all combined together, becoming overwhelming.

He wasn’t the only one who he felt it. Natasha and Thor came closer together, the red-head’s gaze darkening at the chaotic atmosphere. He knew Natasha hated being in a place she didn’t feel total control over the situation, so was finding it all bit unnerving. Clint held it together well, but did step a bit closer to Thor, who in turn, leaned into the smaller teenager’s side.
Bruce whimpered, burying his face in Clint’s chest. That made the nervousness flee the brown-haired teenager and he rocked from side to side, shushing the toddler gently.

‘It’s okay, Bub-bub. Look, they’re all just playing. Doesn’t it look like fun?’

In reply, Bruce sniffled, but he did peek out from his hiding spot to watch two little girls go running around a spouting fountain, giggling to themselves.

On the other hand, Tony didn’t need to be convinced at all. The child whooped in excitement and jumped up and down in place, pointing to anything and everything.

‘Look, Steve, there’s buckets! Oh, oh, and fountains and … and huge squirting flowers! What even is that?’ He laughed at himself and continued to bounce. ‘Can we go? Can we go now? I want to run under everything.’

Tony’s enthusiasm made Steve forget some of his nervousness as his chest warmed. Yeah, this was why they were here.

‘All right, buddy, all right,’ the blonde teen chuckled, bending a little to look more directly at the child. ‘Can we just run over the rules again real quick?’

Tony nodded, for once, not at all put out by being made to repeat the rules. ‘No leaving the water park area without one of you, don’t go anywhere with strangers, if I see someone looking at me or Bruce a lot, I tell one of you, and …’ here, Tony finally took a breath before continuing, ‘I keep baby with me at all times.’

Steve grinned at the child’s humour before ruffling his hair. ‘Good boy, kiddo,’ he smiled, slowly letting go of Tony’s hand to see if he would just take off, despite reciting the rules just perfectly.

To his pride, Tony didn’t at all and instead, raised his arms above his head with a huge grin, waiting for Steve to take his shirt off for him.

Melting a little, Steve leaned forward and gently removed the shirt, careful to get it over Tony’s head as fast as possible when he lifted the material over the child’s face. Tony was extremely claustrophobic and didn’t like not being able to see for too long. It was why he often allowed the others to put shirts on and off him because if the child fumbled halfway through, it sent him into a panic when he couldn’t remove his shirt from his head.

As soon as Steve removed the shirt, Tony, with no shame at all, spun around, showing off his new board shorts, smiling up at all of them, just waiting for the compliments to come.

Biting the inside of his cheeks to hide his amusement at the little, natural-born showman, Steve wowed approvingly with the others.

‘Looking fly, Tony,’ Clint grinned while Natasha agreed, saying, ‘Very handsome, solnyshko.’

‘I shall never look as cool,’ Thor clapped the boy while Tony bounced excitedly at the praise, eyes absolutely shining.

‘Such a good fashion choice,’ Steve nodded approvingly as he moved over to Clint, gently removing the shirt from the toddler in his arms.

Bruce shivered at the cool morning breeze, skin prickling. He whimpered softly and Steve rubbed a comforting hand up and down his back. He tried not to cringe at the marks there.
While it was a bit dangerous to let Bruce go around without a shirt in public because his skin was imprinted with the story of his former life so could draw attention, Steve didn’t want to make Bruce feel more self-conscious than the toddler already was. It just wasn’t fair for Tony to be able to run around shirtless, but not allow Bruce to. While the scars weren’t so prominent on his tanned skin, if people took notice, they would see it.

Steve just hoped they thought he was marked from something that wasn’t so evil or was some skin condition, not what the tight-knit family group knew it to be.

When Bruce didn’t attempt to move from his cozy little nest in Clint’s arms, Clint laughed and bounced him lovingly.

‘Come on, Bub-bub, otherwise you’re going to miss out on the fun!’

‘Mm?’ Bruce mumbled unsurely, glancing shyly around again, fingers being sucked more insistently.

‘We’ll all be right here if you want to come back, okay?’ Steve leaned down on his knees so he could speak directly to Bruce, smiling kindly at the toddler. He understood how much Bruce disliked crowds and wanted to reassure him that anytime it got too much, he was allowed to call it quits. ‘Or if you just call out to us, we’ll come and get you, all right?’

That seemed to comfort Bruce a bit, but he still had a death grip on Clint’s shirt.

Before Steve could figure out a way to get Bruce to loosen his hold, Tony came running up, reaching up high to tug on the bottom of Clint’s shirt.

‘Come on, baby, it’s okay. You can hold my hand the whole time, okay?’

If Steve didn’t know how much Tony would have hated it, he would have gone, ‘Aww!’ It was just the sweetest offer on the little boy’s part and showed how much he loved his little brother.

As always, Bruce immediately perked up at his big brother’s voice. He glanced down at the grinning chestnut brown-eyed boy, his own tiny smile coming unbidden to his lips.

‘Pway?’ He asked around his fingers.

Luckily, Tony was well-versed in Bruce speak. When they first came to live with the group of older teens and Bruce went through the stages of unable to talk, Tony would interpret his wants to them, always knowing what Bruce needed to have done, until the older ones could start to understand Bruce’s signals and muffled words too. Still though, no one could as well as Tony.

‘Yep!’ Tony nodded enthusiastically. ‘We’re going to have the best game ever.’

This was the way Tony introduced most of his games to Bruce; each and every single time, Bruce believed the forever-enthusiastic boy.

So, despite the sucking of the fingers becoming a bit more frantic, he slowly unclenched his left hand intertwined so tightly in the material of Clint’s shirt that it was badly wrinkled there. Then, he reached out to Tony.

Clint smiled proudly, giving Bruce a kiss on the cheek with every sentence. ‘Where’s my kiss, huh? Where’s my kiss before you go?’

It was something Bruce had shyly done once, giving each one of them a kiss before going to bed, blushing furiously as he did so. Steve knew they all tried to do it back to him as often as possible to
let Bruce know how much the affection was returned and that Bruce didn’t need to feel ashamed for it because they all loved him so much.

Giggling softly at Clint’s playing, Bruce popped his fingers out of his mouth to give Clint a sloppy kiss before the fingers went straight back in.

‘Thank you very much,’ the brown-haired boy grinned, not wiping his mouth while the two little ones were present. Instead, he sat Bruce carefully on the ground where the toddler immediately reached for Tony’s hand.

Tony lit up and so unlike his usual rambunctious nature, gently took Bruce’s tiny hand in his, even leaning down a bit, just like he always saw Steve do, when he addressed the two younger ones.

‘That all better?’ He asked, just like Steve always did when he comforted one of them after they grew upset.

Clint bit his lips to stop laughing, not at Tony, but at Steve, and even looked to the oldest, tacitly saying, ‘Even he knows what a Mother Hen you are.’

Natasha was beyond amused and her shoulders had slumped in hopeless affection of the two little ones while Thor’s deep blue eyes melted at the interaction, especially when Bruce gave a shy nod.

Steve tried to make a face back at Clint, but he was too busy trying not to outright coo at them.

It was a hard task too. Bruce looked absolutely adorable in his new board shorts. While the toddler had initially been extremely skinny, the group made sure he was fed a lot more and now, despite his tiny limbs, Bruce’s middle was a bit pudgy, little tummy hanging over his shorts a bit. He didn’t bother holding it in at all, as all little kids did.

It took a lot to not just reach out and give the tummy a bit of a tickle because it was just too cute.

Tony, on the other hand, despite eating quite a lot now (the olders always made sure the kids were fed and they had a pretty good system going on now where they pretty much always had a supply), was still skin and bone. He was wiry, but that didn’t diminish his energy in the least. Tony was like the Energizer bunny who just went and went then collapsed, all energy depleted. Until after a good sleep then he was good to go again.

‘Ready?’ He asked now, swinging his arm back and forth, still holding Bruce’s hand, which brought a larger smile to the toddler’s face.

Bruce simply nodded, fingers firmly in his mouth, but he allowed Tony to start to lead him away.

Steve was extremely proud that Tony didn’t just dash forward, though the oldest was well aware of how much Tony would have wanted to. He had been dying for this trip and to see the restraint he was using to not push Bruce showed how good a heart Tony had, no matter how much he often tried to hide it.

‘Be careful and don’t wander too far,’ Steve called after them, ignoring the smirks from all three around him.

‘Did you pack them lunch in a little box too while wearing an apron?’ Clint teased with a smug smile, causing Natasha to snort while Thor openly laughed.

‘Oh, shut up, all of you,’ Steve said with a roll of his eyes and began to edge around the park, slowly following Tony and Bruce’s path.
The other three followed his lead, Thor walking along the other side, while Clint and Natasha went to probably scavenge some food with the money they brought with them.

Tony wasted no time jumping into one of the small pools at the edge of the park, not so close to all the children racing in and out of the buckets, gaudy flowers and fountains. The water pooled up to just above his knees even though he wasn’t all the way in. He laughed immediately, bright and happy, and Steve absolutely shone upon hearing it.

Bruce hung back, still clinging on to Tony’s hand, but not attempting to go in the water himself. The poor little toddler did look a little cold and just so tiny that Steve felt like going out to scoop the baby of the group up in his arms to watch Tony from afar. However, the blonde teen could see the curiosity there underneath Bruce’s nervousness so stopped himself from intervening. Bruce needed the fun most of all out of this whole group, because he had never, ever had anything like this in his life, unlike Tony, who understood the concept of a park.

‘Come on, Bubba,’ Tony called happily and gave Bruce a little tug, but Steve was relieved to see it was gentle, not trying to force the toddler in, but rather, encouraging him.

When Bruce still looked unsure, a mischievous look crossed Tony’s face. Before Steve could plunge in to try to intercept whatever the cheeky boy was up to, the child leaned down, cupped a bit of water in his right hand, before splashing his little brother with it.

Steve didn’t have a chance to scream out a reprimand because Bruce squealed, but not in distress, but absolute delight. It was obviously a bit cold for him because he shivered, but he immediately leaned down and clumsily splashed Tony with the water as well.

Steve shook his head in amusement. Only Tony could do that to Bruce and make him not only smile about it, but join in. Proof how much good they did each other. Bruce made Tony so much gentler, while Tony brought Bruce out of his shell.

It wasn’t long after that before Tony coaxed Bruce in the water and quicker again when Bruce actually let go of Tony’s hand to splash the water with both his hands, giving his distinctive, husky chuckle as it splashed over himself and Tony.

Steve found himself relaxing more and more, glancing around again. Thor was giving him the thumbs up from the other side, smile so bright amongst the strangers. Parents didn’t appear to be paying them any heed, too concentrated on their own children and the oldest thought they had actually be passing off as what he hoped: a bunch of friends with a couple of little siblings in tow just goofing off for the day.

His two charges spent about a half hour in the pool until Tony managed to coax Bruce out. The toddler stood to the side as Tony dashed in and out of two hanging buckets, copping one full of water right on the head. It sent Bruce into giggles, but he wasn’t game enough to try it.

‘The one time he’s happy to get his hair washed,’ Steve grumbled good-naturedly to himself.

They moved from there to a fountain that was spluttering, despite the park only being about a week old.

It was hands-down Bruce’s favourite spot though. Because the fountain was malfunctioning, no other kids were paying attention to it, but Bruce loved it because it was gentler. He would grasp at the intermittently spluttering water, throwing his head back and laughing as it shot into the sky, falling down in nacreous drops on to his curls. Tony played with Bruce for a while there, but when the toddler sat himself down, settling in, Tony dashed around some of the stronger fountains just
close by, never leaving Bruce’s sight or getting too far away from his little brother.

Steve couldn’t stop smiling. This was one of the best days by far they’d ever had. Each time a burst of bright laughter came from Tony or Bruce just made Steve so warm inside. He couldn’t fathom how no one could see how precious these moments were and just perceive the two little children as burdens.

As Tony had said so blatantly once, people were idiots.

The two didn’t really move from what they were doing there. Children dashed around Tony and the seven-year-old didn’t appear to mind at all. Because of Bruce’s claimed spot, no one really infiltrated his space so the toddler was content and seemed to go into his own little world, grabbing at the water as it spurted up and watching it fall. They were closer to the top end of the park now, more to the right then to the middle of it. Once, Bruce glanced around to see if the others were still around. When his gaze landed on Steve, the blonde gave him the biggest smile and wave.

He was just so happy when Bruce waved back, albeit shyly, but his smile was so much more open and he went back to his play with a lot more enthusiasm. Tony didn’t appear concerned at all where they were, just happy to be playing amongst the water. It probably brought some wonderful memories back for him because he once said he used to live in California most of the time, until his parents died. Steve guessed he probably used to play in the water most days out of the week.

Giving a contented sigh, Steve let his gaze wonder. He could still see Thor way over the other side, almost as tall as some of the adults and probably stronger as well. His golden hair with brown streaks stood out in the sun and he appeared to be in conversation with a young mum who looked no more than twenty.

Trust Thor to make friends wherever he went. Steve smiled fondly at the thought.

This was great for all of them really. They needed to be able to socialise more and not be hidden away all the time. Situations like these were perfect for them because there were enough people to not stand out and with their ages, their presence didn’t appear so abnormal.

Standing on his tip-toes to see around the adults milling around him, he finally spotted Clint at a food stall, can of Coke in one hand, hotdog in the other.

Steve huffed out a laugh as his family all did what he expected them too. Natasha wasn’t anywhere in sight, but, again, Steve kind of expected that. The girl would make herself known when she wanted to be. She had probably gone to a higher place because she liked watching goings-on from vantage points, something she’d picked up from Clint, who could pick things out from a distance better than anyone in the group.

The chatter and laughter around Steve didn’t feel so oppressive anymore. The smells of the food reminded Steve of the time his ma took him to the fair when he was just seven years old, scrawnier than Tony.

He closed his eyes for a moment, being drawn into the memory. He could see Ma, blonde hair almost white, as she held his hand, pointing to the balloons floating through the air and trying to coax him out from behind her whenever a clown walked past, explaining they were nothing to be afraid of. She bought him popcorn and took him to a show that was all slapstick comedy between some rogue cowboys and a dopey sheriff. While Steve could remember how corny the jokes were, at the time, he laughed like it was the funniest thing he’d ever seen. He had made sure to hold Ma’s hand at all times when they walked through the crowds and even won himself a stuffed bear at a shooting gallery (though looking back on it now, Steve thought Ma may have paid off the owner because his
aim used to be beyond awful).

It was one of the most beautiful memories Steve had. While it made his eyes sting a bit, he couldn’t stop the warmth in his chest that he was creating some new lovely memories with his special little family. He just knew his ma would be proud of him, passing on the love and affection he received from her to people that needed it so much, particularly the two youngest.

She would have loved them all. He knew she would have taken great pleasure in spoiling Tony and Bruce rotten, giving them lollies even just before bedtime, like she always used to do with him when he was sad. Bruce would have taken to her while Tony would have sought her out while trying to look like he wasn’t.

He often wondered how many past memories the others could sink into that brought them happiness. Clint and Thor had a few good ones. Natasha was more tight-lipped about it, but she once spoke of a woman she remembered very, very vaguely before she went to the ‘boarding’ school, with dark red hair and a smile that made her warm.

Even Tony did, though they all involved his precious butler, Jarvis. With the way Tony would sometimes refer to his parents, Steve thought perhaps Howard Stark hadn’t been all that wonderful to Tony when the man was alive either, the same as Obadiah. He couldn’t really get a gauge on what Maria Stark was like to Tony. While the child never spoke ill of her, all he raved about was Jarvis and that kind of spoke volumes.

Then, it came down to Bruce. While Steve knew Bruce loved his mother, she was tied up in all of the worst memories ever and the subject of Rebecca never really came up without a nightmare. For such a small life, Bruce seemed to have enough horrors to fill up all of theirs and then some left over to still take up his. It was sickening to realise.

This was why Steve was kind of determined to fill his mind with as many happy memories as possible. Both him and Tony. While it couldn’t take away what had happened to them, maybe the good moments could start to outweigh the bad, particularly in Bruce’s case.

Sighing to himself, suddenly feeling so exhausted because it was just draining realising what the two children had been put through, Steve opened his eyes, carefully scouring the water park with his eyes to spot his two littlest family members.

What he saw he swore made his heart stop.

Chapter End Notes

*ducks shoe*
Come on, guys! It's been ages since I've done a cliff-hanger!

*ducks a vase*
I'm sorry! I'm sorry, no self-control on my part.

*ducks a book*
Okay, that's going too far. Throw anything, but a book. Books are precious.
*throws another book so runs to hide behind a curtain*
*peeks out from the curtain*

Um, comments and kudos are really loved and appreciated?
Trying To Find Somewhere Safe

Chapter Summary

The day at the water park falls apart.

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone!

First of all, sorry for the cliff-hanger, guys. Very evil of me. I have dodged many numerous objects over the past week lol. But, to make it up to you, a nice long chapter. Can't promise no angst though, but I think with the cliff-hanger, y'all kind of expected that :D. And, it's me! I can't write anything without a good dose of angst lol.

Also, oh my gosh, thank you all for the overwhelming support for this story! It makes me so excited and really inspires me to keep on writing. I'm guessing there will be one, maybe two, more chapters to this story, but since people seem to enjoy it, I think I will make it into a series. I will create that soon, so be sure to either subscribe to the series or author subscription so you know when more is added to it :).

Lots of love to you all :).

As always, heed the warnings. There is several parts that people may find distressful where children are distraught and in danger so if you find this triggering, please do not read. If you do, proceed with self-care.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A man … a man Steve had never laid eyes on before … was leaning menacingly over Tony.

Despite the height difference, Tony didn’t waver in the least, standing steadfastly in front of the huddled figure of his little brother as the toddler clung to Tony’s waist like his life depended on it. His honeyed brown eyes were peeking up, wide with fear and recognition.

The man had more white in his hair than any other colour while his face had a large white moustache, giving his mouth a harder look while making his cold, blue eyes stand out from his otherwise non-descript features. There was something in his stance that spoke to Steve that he was an official. The teenager had learnt to pick out most plain clothes police officers, army and even social workers because they all just had a certain air of confidence about them, one that never questioned their own opinions of right and wrong.

At the realisation, Steve went cold. Despite the overwhelming sounds of the water park, they all faded out into dull hums in the background and all Steve could hear was the man’s voice, soft but gruff, standing out above everything else.

‘For the last time,’ he said. ‘Is that Bruce Banner or not?’
The words sat in the air like someone holding a gun, just waiting to discharge the deadly weapon and destroy everything Steve loved in the world.

The teenager didn’t wait to see if the man would fire.

Steve was running. Pushing through the adults, jumping over the children and dodging around the poles holding the buckets. Never once did his gaze stray from the scene playing out in front of him like the slow build to the climax of a horror movie.

He couldn’t hear Tony’s reply, but he saw the seven-year-old’s mouth move, chestnut brown eyes hard and cutting. Steve didn’t have to hear. He knew what the child would have said, to hell of the consequences for himself.

Tony was a master of redirecting attention. He often did it at home if he thought Bruce might get in trouble for something, behaving ten times worse in hopes the others would forget about what Bruce could have done and concentrate on him. It was the only way the boy knew how to protect his baby brother. No matter how many times Steve had tried to explain that they would never do anything to hurt Bruce, Tony always jumped to that mode, though he didn’t do it so extreme now because despite everything, Steve knew Tony never wanted to disappoint them.

This though? Steve could see Tony’s absolute hatred for this man and would have no qualms in doing whatever it took to get his attention off Bruce.

Steve’s suspicions were cemented when the man wagged his finger closely to Tony’s face, getting in his space, but more importantly, moving closer to Bruce. Though he hadn’t thought it possible, his horror grew as suddenly, Tony launched forward and bit the man on his hand. Hard if the man’s cry was anything to go by.

Everything around Steve became grey blurs and he stumbled in his mad flight to the group. He was in a nightmare. His legs couldn’t run fast enough, he couldn’t push through these people hard enough … he wasn’t strong enough

So, he was forced to watch as the man’s hand reared back and began to whip through the air, aiming for Tony’s face. His scream sounded inhuman as he saw Bruce suddenly yank at Tony, pulling his older brother backwards, knowing what was going to happen long before Tony realised he was the target of what was going to be a brutal backhand.

Still though, it wasn’t going to be enough. Even as Tony fell backwards from Bruce’s pull, the hand was coming down at such a rapid speed that it was going to clip Tony across the right cheek.

‘NOOOOOOO!’

Somewhere in the back of Steve’s mind, he knew that was him screaming as he ran. Ran as hard as he could. But he knew he wasn’t going to get there in time and that alone made him feel like dying there on the spot.

Then, like a miracle, the hand was redirected as the man stumbled hard, falling to his knees. Or more, accurately, was shoved so was forced to fall.

He gasped, cold blue eyes now filled with shock as he blinked upwards, wondering what rammed him so hard.

And, there, like an avenging angel, was Natasha. Blood-red hair in a wild tornado, her eyes shone with absolute murder, lips pulled back in a hair-rising snarl. She was breath-taking in the way that fear stole one’s breath away of whoever was captured in that fiery gaze.
The man was, staring up, face pale, as though he had seen the ghost who was telling him of his death before the reaper crept in and took it. Natasha was just a little bit above him in eye-height, as he stayed kneeling while she was on one knee and hand, left arm as well as leg extended out in a battle stance Steve hadn’t seen her use in years. It was one that had been taught to her in that boarding school and usually remained hidden among her memories of the place.

Mouth trembling, the man opened it to speak.

Natasha didn’t give him a chance. Yelling in fury, she struck, hard, fast and deadly accurate, the heel of her right hand coming out, catching him off-guard as to where the attack was coming from. She rammed it deep into the side of his neck and suddenly, he was limp on the ground, mouth gaping like a fish out of water after air.

That’s when Steve realised he’d burst on to the scene, body still functioning when his brain had shut down temporarily, unable to comprehend the horror of what was about to happen. The grey blurs were flashing in his peripheral, but he focused in on the two little figures huddled on the ground.

Bruce’s screaming managed to filter through, raw and hysteric. Steve had never heard him lose it this much. Then again though, the toddler had never seen Tony about to get struck before. His worst nightmare had played out before his eyes.

Steve wasted no time, grabbing the screaming toddler and silent Tony into his arms, glancing them over quickly. There were no physical injuries he could see, which allowed him some sort of reprieve. Though Tony’s chestnut brown eyes were wide in shock, not really comprehending what had nearly happened, at least he wasn’t in hysterics like Bruce.

Quickly tucking them into his arms, both faces burying into each crook of his neck, Steve spun around, gasping, but not from exhaustion.

Clint and Thor were now standing next to Natasha, forming a circle from which they had all blind spots covered. Clint’s eyes immediately glanced over the two children before his grey eyes locked with Steve’s.

‘Go,’ he shouted over the mayhem. ‘We’ve got this. Get them out of here.’

As much as Steve hated to leave his family to fend for themselves, the shuddering bodies in his arms reminded him of who needed him more.

Like when coming up out of water, the sounds broke over him. The screaming of children, now in fear, chaotic crashing of water as people trampled everywhere, unable to comprehend what was going on or what was the source of their panic. But most of all, Steve could hear sirens.

The high-pitched screeches succeeded in getting Steve’s feet to move. He felt he was flying as he leaped and pivoted around the bodies, ducking low and keeping the tiny beings clutched tightly in his arms, curling them away from any source of impact he came across.

Water sprayed in his face, but he didn’t, couldn’t, blink, racing, racing, racing, until the rubber pavement gave way to a cement footpath. His pounding footsteps were too loud on it though, like an audible trail of breadcrumbs.

Without second thought, he leaped on to the grass and into the array of oak, pine and willow trees. Staying far away from any paths, he ran and ran, branches slapping across his face, but he didn’t even grunt as he barged on, breath rasping as the sirens crept closer.

Exhaustion and fear suddenly swept through him, making him stumble to his knees. His chest hurt
while his whole body shuddered with panic, which made his legs collapse underneath him when he tried to stand again. He could feel his eyes burning, scared and tired of the continual fear of having his family being taken, the constant hovering of heartache around the corner. It was like you knew someone was about to die, but it hadn’t happened yet, but was always just on the horizon. He just wanted to curl into a ball and cry without reprieve.

That’s when he felt the hot breaths on his neck, one the distraught huff-huff-huff of a hysterical toddler, obviously plagued with too many horrors for him to handle. The other was the stilted breath of a boy, who couldn’t comprehend what was nearly done to him, too in shock and so close to a panic attack to be able to even cry.

Steve felt the weights in his arms in a different way. Just as he had that day he found them. They were his. They were his family god damn it. No one was taking them from him to place these two precious beings with people who didn’t understand them, yelled and even … hit …

Steve growled in the back of his throat.

No. No. Not on his watch was that happening. Tony and Bruce would be taken from him over his dead body and even then, they would have to pry his two boys from his hands.

This time, his legs held him when he pushed to his feet. Reaffirming his hold on the two children that needed him so much, but probably not more than he needed them, he took two deep breathes.

Then, he began to jog. Which soon broke into a run then into the sprint of his life. On and on he went until the sirens fell away to be a distant nightmare.

Only then did he huddle down in a copse of trees, not allowing the sun to grace his skin, but instead, let the shadows swallow the three of them up.

For a while, he just crouched there, leaning against a massive oak’s trunk, eyes closing briefly as he struggled to get his haggard breathing under control. Gulping, trying to wet his dry throat, he took a few deep breaths again, trying to kick his brain into gear on what had to be done next.

Bruce’s crying, hardly able to be heard because it was that hoarse, kicked in Steve’s instincts that he knew he’d had really since he met Clint, Natasha and Thor. That instinct to protect and love those around him that needed it the most.

‘Oh, my babies,’ he murmured softly, shifting down so his legs were splayed out in front of him.

He tried to pull the both of them back to talk to them, try to convey that everything was all right, as well as check them over. However, Tony clung to his neck, refusing to show his face. Bruce allowed him to manoeuvre the toddler, too weak to be able to fight anyway.

Steve somehow rearranged Bruce so he cradled the four-year-old like an infant. The poor bub just lied helplessly back, red in the face from crying, breath hitching with more tears, arms waving uselessly about, trying to do something … anything … to just make it all go away.

Tony wasn’t reacting at all, but instead, just clung to Steve like a baby koala, refusing to even let the teenager see his face. It was worrisome, but at the moment, Bruce was the one that needed Steve’s attention first.

‘Shush, baby boy, shush, shush, shush,’ Steve murmured, bringing Bruce up higher to brush a gentle kiss on the toddler’s forehead. It was sweaty and warm, showing how much Bruce had worked himself up. ‘We’re safe now. I promise. I promise. Don’t cry, baby. No one’s hurting us here, I promise.’
From what Steve could see, Bruce seemed physically fine. At the moment though, that wasn’t really helping matters. In a way, if Bruce had been hurt, Steve could have fixed it somehow, but this wasn’t something he could put a bandage on and make it all better.

Rather than having his eyes screwed shut, the honeyed brown were open and amplified by the tears, flickering around, trying to see the danger that was no longer there. The little chest began to heave with coughs, but still, Bruce wouldn’t stop crying, so painfully hoarse that it made Steve cringe.

He bounced Bruce gently, murmuring platitudes that sounded pathetic to his own ears. How could Bruce believe him when he had brought him and his older brother to danger in the first place? He had promised it would be safe. He had promised he would be right there yet he had taken his eye off the ball, letting a man get too close to them in the first place.

But, worst of all, he hadn’t taken all thoughts into consideration. He considered himself the protector of this family, yet he had totally neglected to think of someone recognising Bruce rather than Tony.

He should have though. Tony looked more different than he had a year ago. His hair was longer, wilder, maybe even a tad curlier. He’d grown more too, face maturing to not so much look like a baby, but more, like a little boy.

Bruce, on the other hand, other than putting on a bit of weight and maybe grown a tad, had hardly changed. He still looked almost exactly like that filthy three-year-old Steve had found clinging to Tony on the streets just over a year ago.

‘Oh, Bruce, I’m so sorry,’ Steve whispered, one tear managing to slip from his left eye, leaning down so his forehead rested on Bruce’s.

He was helpless to do anything, but whisper small comforts while Bruce finally cried himself into submission. He was still awake, tiny body shuddering now and then, little breath hitching as he sniffled. Steve didn’t know if that was better or worse. It was like Bruce’s baseline was still in tears.

At least he had calmed enough though for him to now turn his attention to the silent child in his arms.

‘Tony?’ He murmured, brushing a kiss over his damp hair. It was something Tony would usually hate, but Steve couldn’t stop himself from doing it. He needed to do it, needed to reassure himself somehow that the little boy was okay. ‘Sweeties, can you look at me, please?’

Tony only tightened his hold on Steve’s neck, to the point it was even a little constricting.

Steve frowned in fear, feeling like his chest was being pulled apart for another reason now. ‘Sweeties, are you hurt?’ He asked, voice getting tight, despite trying his best not to let his worry show. ‘Come on, buddy, you’ve got to show me if you are.’

This time, Tony shuddered. As though in fear. Of Steve.

The oldest teenager’s frown deepened and he immediately rubbed his hand gently up and down Tony’s back. Trying to show how his touch would never be used to harm.

‘I’d never hurt you, kiddo,’ he murmured softly, pressing another kiss to the silky, wavy hair. ‘That I can promise you without a doubt. Okay?’ When he still didn’t get a response, Steve leaned his head on Tony’s, squeezing his eyes shut as he was suddenly overwhelmed with it all, trying to hold back more tears. ‘I love you, baby. I’m so sorry that happened.’ His throat constricted painfully, but he managed to murmur, softly, again, ‘So sorry.’

Tony didn’t say anything. He didn’t even twitch. He just kept on holding on to Steve like his life
depended on it.

Steve was tempted to pull him back to at least check on him, but he knew that would be traumatising to Tony to man-handle him into doing something he didn’t want, especially at the moment.

For the first time in a long time, Steve didn’t know what to do. He was always the man with the plan. Not this time though. He had a toddler crying in his arms and a little boy that was in shock and he didn’t have a clue on what to do to just make it better.

Maybe if he wasn’t such a wreck himself that he would be able to devise what to do. At the moment though, all he wanted to do was cry.

So, he cuddled the two children closer and closed his eyes, using all his strength to not just break down.

He didn’t know how long he sat there. He just didn’t have the strength to move again. The only thing that brought him out of his rapidly spiralling thoughts was the soft, questioning voice.

‘Steve?’

Blinking his eyes open, he looked to his left to see Tony peering up at him. Tears were evident in his chestnut brown eyes, but it was obvious he wasn’t in shock anymore, just watching Steve, with a tad of fear.

Steve’s face broke into a watery grin.

‘Hey, sweeties,’ he murmured, leaning down, gently peppering the boy’s face with kisses.

It didn’t gain a smile or even a playful shoving off. Instead, Tony placidly took it and even cuddled in a little closer.

Steve didn’t say anything to that and instead, rubbed a hand up and down his small back again.

‘Sweetie, can you show me your face? Did the man hurt you?’ He asked softly.

The reaction he got wasn’t the one he was expecting.

Tony peered up tearfully at him, bottom lip actually trembling. ‘You’re not … mad?’ He asked softly, voice shaking a bit.

Steve’s mouth nearly dropped open in shock. ‘What? Sweeties, no, of course not! You did nothing wrong. He should never have tried to hit you.’

Tony looked down shamefully and a tear slipped down his nose. ‘I bit him,’ he admitted ruefully.

‘Because he scared you and Bruce,’ Steve ducked down his head to catch Tony’s eye and held it, gaze strong with the severity of his statement, but not at the child. ‘Even if you did something wrong, he had no right to try to touch you. Okay?’

Tony didn’t react to the words, but instead, his eyes grew worried as soon as Steve mentioned Bruce’s name.

‘Baby brother?’ Tony immediately pushed up and when he saw Bruce curled up in a little ball, still sniffling, his own face crumbled a bit, but he pushed on with a brave face. ‘Want to hold him.’

Steve knew better than to argue. He wanted Tony to not push off his words and listen to them, but
now wasn’t the time. ‘Okay. Just show Steve your face and hands so I can see you’re not hurt.’

‘Then I can hold baby?’ Tony asked, chestnut brown eyes turning heartbreakingly hopeful.

Steve worked hard not to let his voice shake. ‘Yeah,’ he said softly. ‘Then you can hold baby.’

Silently Tony held up his hands and turned his face from side to side so Steve could examine him. Steve felt he could breathe a bit easier at seeing there wasn’t a mark on his face. Thank all the gods for Natasha.

The little boy’s palms were a little red, probably from when Bruce pulled him to the ground, but other than that, he was physically no worse for wear.

Steve placed two gentle kisses on his palms, which Tony took silently, only increasing the teenager’s worry, but he kept his promise.

Crossing his legs, he carefully settled Tony on his lap, then, very gently, shifted Bruce to Tony’s own lap.

Tony’s arms automatically came up to cradle his little brother. Bruce was still small enough for the older boy to be able to hold him like an actual baby. Steve had taught Tony how to do it not long after they had come to live with the group. It had been the only way to calm down Bruce one night after a particularly bad nightmare.

‘Hold his head, sweeties,’ Steve murmured softly. ‘That’s it, kiddo, he can’t do it at the moment, he’s tired.’

Tony nodded along to Steve’s words and settled Bruce into his lap easily with the teenager’s help, one arm wrapped under Bruce’s upper body while his other arm curved around his little brother’s lower half, keeping him firmly in place. Bruce whined, scrubbing at his eyes, a bit unsure of what had just happened, too caught up in his little world.

Tony tried to bounce the toddler a little, but it was a bit jerky because Bruce was a bit too heavy for Tony to do it seamlessly.

‘Gently, sweeties,’ Steve admonished lovingly, threading a hand through Tony’s thick hair, taking comfort in the two little beings still sitting with him. They weren’t being driven away in a car somewhere, crying for him or one of the others, wondering why people weren’t listening to what they wanted or needed.

His stomach rolled at that and he had to shut down that line of thinking pretty quick.

‘Sorry,’ Tony said immediately and just went for gently patting Bruce’s shoulder.

‘No need to apologise, kiddo,’ Steve reassured, repeating the motion of stroking Tony’s hair. The more he did it, the steadier his hand got.

For once, Tony didn’t complain about the affection and actually leaned back into Steve’s stomach as he cradled Bruce. He peered up at Steve, showing an unsuresness that was worrying Steve the more he saw it.

‘Can I talk to him?’

Steve felt sick at the question, but he had to be strong this time. Something more had gone down than obviously the man going to hit Tony. For the time being though, he couldn’t tackle it. He couldn’t
ask Tony to re-examine what had so far been a horrific day, questioning him on what was said, who the guy exactly was and anything else Steve could think of. It was too much for Tony at the moment so the best he could do was reassure the boy that nothing had changed with him and allow the wound to scab a bit before he pushed Tony to talk.

‘Of course you can!’ He exclaimed gently, giving the boy’s hair a loving ruffle. ‘You never have to ask that, kiddo.’ Then, just to gently probe to see if Tony would say anything, ‘Why would you?’

Tony shrugged, immediately ducking his head down so Steve couldn’t look into his eyes. It was more than worrying, but if Steve knew anything by now, to push Tony to talk was the worst thing that could possibly be done. It scared the little boy, like his very thoughts were trying to be controlled, like Obadiah had tried to do to him.

He soon got distracted from his worried thoughts as Tony began to talk to Bruce. The gentle chatter soon filled the little hideout Steve had created as Tony began to tell the toddler all about how he would love to build the world’s strongest power then he and Bruce could watch television all day long. It sounded fairly plausible, of what Steve could understand.

At hearing his older brother’s voice, Bruce blinked up, finally managing to get a hand into his mouth to be able to suck on his fingers. Snot was running down his face and his cheeks were stained with the tears, more now and then slipping down from his eyes to join the others. However, as soon as he focused in on Tony, he paused in his silent crying and immediately latched his free, right hand on to Tony’s arm.

That immediately brought a ghost of a smile to the older boy’s face and he grabbed Bruce’s hand, running Bruce’s little fingers through his own. Just reassuring Bruce of his touch as well as himself.

Tony looked up at Steve, trying to go for one of his blinding smiles, but it just looked so sad. ‘He’s still tiny, huh?’

Steve worked hard to smile back, holding back his tears as he laid a gentle hand on Tony’s head and ducked down to be more on his level.

‘It’s a great thing then that he’s got his big brother to take care of him,’ he said softly, starting to understand some of Tony’s unsureness.

He thought he had gotten Bruce in trouble for how he handled the situation. Admittedly, biting the guy’s hand kind of amplified the situation quickly, but it was the attempted backhand that sent things into hysterics.

Just the thought made Steve wish he had been able to stay there for a few more minutes to maybe get a hit in on the damn monster.

Tony glowed at the reassurance, not actually smiling, but his chestnut brown eyes brightened so much that it hurt Steve that his biggest fear was not being trusted with his little brother. He was so quick to believe he was bad and was going to be punished. Steve hated it with such a passion and could only hope that one day, Steve didn’t have to reassure him all the time because Tony would just know what a good, special person he was, all of Obadiah’s verbal abuses having faded from his head.

Settling into Steve’s lap, decidedly satisfied for the moment, Tony leaned forward and gave Bruce a gentle kiss on the cheek.

Bruce murmured some soft sounds at that, fingers letting go of Tony’s hand to trace over Tony’s
face, as though reassuring himself there was no mark there.

‘Baby,’ Tony sang softly, a tad playful, but so full of loving. It was something that showed Steve no matter how much Tony wasn’t taught how to be loving from Obadiah, it was just ... in him. Even though this Jarvis had obviously shown Tony what it was, Steve knew it had always been there.

Exactly the same with Bruce as he heard Tony sing his nickname softly. He gave a soft hum around his fingers and snuggled into the embrace. For the first time since the incident, the tears stopped.

Steve felt like collapsing in relief and he planted another kiss on Tony’s head.

‘Such a good boy, Tony,’ he murmured, shuddering a little as some of the stress lifted from him. ‘Such a good, clever boy.’

At first, Steve didn’t think Tony reacted to the words. Then, he noticed the boy was nervously twitching his fingers, chestnut brown eyes clouded with unsureness.

Steve simply wrapped his arms around the two little boys, trying to form a protective barrier between them and the world. He wished he could protect them from their thoughts as well.

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Despite the exhaustion, Steve knew he had to keep on moving. With one glance at the watch Clint had lifted for him off a businessman for his sixteenth birthday told him it had been nearly two hours since they fled the water park. If the others ran fairly soon after him, they should be at their make-shift home by now and would be worried if he was much longer.

‘Come on, my bubs,’ he murmured, gently hefting the two little boys into his arms, gaining a soft whine from Bruce, but Tony remained silent. ‘Time to head home.’

The journey took longer than he anticipated. Bruce was beyond tired, crankily breaking into bouts of weeping when a noise would sound too close, forcing Steve to stop and settle him. It wasn’t helping Steve’s nerves any when he realised, for sure, that Bruce had gone to non-verbal again. He had expected it, but to see when Bruce just wailed, unable to articulate why he was upset stuck the dagger of guilt that bit further in each time.

Tony was eerily silent, unless Bruce started, then he would look at his little brother tearfully, bottom lip trembling at seeing Bruce so distraught.

It had been a long time since the toddler had been like this. Probably over two months and it was knocking both Tony and Steve to see him back like this.

As they slipped through the streets, Bruce starting up again when a clang in the distance made him jump. This time however, Tony started to wriggle to get down.

Steve held back a sigh as he bounced Bruce gently in the cradled position while tightening his hold on the little boy.

‘No, Tony, no down,’ he said, keeping his tone as light as possible while letting the child know it wasn’t a request.
Tony stopped dead at the words and that hurt Steve. Hurt him a lot. Especially when Tony looked up at him tearfully.

‘But I just want to get Bubba a present,’ he whispered and his voice cracked the slightest bit.

The child’s presents often consisted of pretty rocks that he would find in alleyways that he would present to Bruce like he had found a pot of gold. The toddler had a little collection at their home, tucked away in a rotting box, of all the presents Tony had ever given him.

Steve immediately gave him a gentle bounce as well, trying for a smile. ‘Oh, kiddo, that’s sweet, but I can’t let you wander when I can’t keep a good eye on you, all right?’

The last thing he needed at the moment was for Tony to disappear from his sights.

Tony’s lip trembled more at that, showing just how tired he was too and Steve felt another wave of guilt that he couldn’t really give each boy the attention they needed at the moment. All he could give was just enough to not have Bruce full on sobbing, but never enough to fully settle him while Tony was getting enough to not throw a full-blown tantrum, but not enough to be reassured to act like himself.

From the looks of it though, that wasn’t going to last long as the chestnut brown eyes welled up with tears.

‘Oh, sweeties, no, please don’t cry,’ Steve begged, bouncing him a bit more desperately and giving him a gentle pat on the backside. ‘You can get down when we get home, I promise.’

In his other arm, Bruce began to cough pitifully again in his cries, so hoarse, and Steve hadn’t even been able to give him any water.

The sound only succeeded in getting a couple of tears to streak down Tony’s cheeks.

Before he had two sobbing children in his arms, a shout that filled him with warmth flew through the alley.

‘Steven!’

The oldest spun on his heel, smile not forced at all as he saw golden hair flashing in the sunlight that managed to pierce the darkness around them.

‘Thor! You’re all right?’

The largest teenager sprinted to his side, relieved grin on his face at seeing them, but it immediately fell upon seeing the two teary children.

‘Yes, but … oh, oh, what have we here?’ Thor’s deep voice was soothing to Steve’s frayed nerves and he was deeply grateful when he easily plucked Tony from his arms, holding the child close to his broad chest. ‘Are you hurt, Tony?’

Tony immediately burrowed into Thor, doing the koala impersonation again, not bothering to talk.

‘He’s fine,’ Steve answered for him, now curving his free arm around Bruce so he could rock him better. ‘They both are, they’re just …’

He trailed off with a helpless shrug, patting Bruce gently on the backside in a bid to get him to calm down. It worked, somewhat. The toddler’s attention was now taken by Thor and he’d paused in his
breakdown to stare up at the other teenager with wide eyes.

Thor nodded in understanding, giving Tony a squeeze before leaning down and giving Bruce a gentle kiss. ‘A hard day for these little fighters then?’

Bruce sniffled in response, hand that wasn’t in his mouth brushing along Thor’s face as he gave the toddler the kiss.

The word of fighters made Steve look around the alley in desperation, remembering the other two.

He felt like his heart was literally sinking when Thor simply shook his head, mouthing, ‘Separated,’ not wanting to draw attention to the two children that Clint and Natasha weren’t with them.

Steve simply nodded solemnly, though he felt anything but calm. He wanted to cry God damn it. For the first time in a long time, he felt a longing to curl up safe in his ma’s arms and cry. Because, there, he felt in control, safe and comforted.

Today, he realised how much out of control he was of this situation and it scared him. It scared him so much and the absence of his two other family members was making violent shivers work their way through his stomach, so much so, that he held back a dry heave.

The walk back was quieter, but not more peaceful for Steve in the way that his worry had increased ten-fold. Bruce was more settled with the presence of Thor and Tony appeared more content that Bruce wasn’t in constant tears while also lapped up the largest teenager’s gentle murmurings as well as reassuring hugs.

They got to the fire escape and into their level with no further issues. However, upon seeing it empty nearly made Steve lose it.

Tony didn’t say anything, but he clutched to Thor tighter. To his credit, Thor simply rocked him gently and went about getting some supplies ready for a bath that he thought would do the children both wonders to settle.

Unfortunately, Bruce didn’t seem to think it was a good idea. As soon as Steve tried to sit him down on the cot to undress him, he began to scream. Not in fear, but in a baby who had truly had enough. Despite not talking, he knew very well both Clint and Natasha weren’t there. As well, Clint was usually the one that gave him baths so when he realised it was going to be Steve and Thor, he didn’t react well, tears spilling on to his cheeks while he was starting to lose his breath from crying so hard.

‘Oh, baby boy, no, no, it’s okay,’ Steve scooped him up, walking him around the sleeping area, frantically shushing him. ‘Just going to give you a quick bath then you can have a nap and you’ll feel so much better.’

Tony clung to Thor’s leg and tugged on it gently.

‘I know, little one,’ Thor soothed, bending to lovingly stroke his hair.

‘He wants Clint and Tasha,’ Tony mumbled, thumb running along the bottom of his lip and looking dangerously close to being sucked on, showing that it wasn’t just Bruce who wanted the two missing teenagers.

Thor picked up on it, kneeling down to take Tony into his arms, but the seven-year-old suddenly ducked away.
‘No,’ he mumbled, rubbing his right eye with his other hand. ‘Want … want …’

‘I know,’ Thor said, deep blue eyes sad. ‘I know. But for now, you need to have a bath then nap.’

Tony stubbornly shook his head and stamped his foot. ‘No! I want … want …’ he trailed off helplessly and gave a cry in frustration. It wasn’t for lack of words on Tony’s part, like Bruce, but more, the anger at not allowing himself to say them.

At hearing Tony’s cry, Bruce’s wailing grew in volume and he squirmed futilely in Steve’s arms, kicking his legs. The movements were so weak though because he was just that exhausted.

‘Thor,’ Steve said pleadingly, turning a helpless gaze on to the other teenager, the cries of the toddler tearing into his chest. What were they going to do? What the hell were they going to do?

Thor shrugged helplessly, own face in complete panic when Bruce started to gasp.

Before Steve could really crumble, a voice called out. One that simultaneously made him want to smile and cry.

‘What would you two do without us, huh? See, told you they would be lost without us, Nat.’

The result was instantaneous. Bruce sobbed, reaching out blindly, but he needn’t have bothered.

Clint was by Steve’s side, scooping the toddler into his arms, cradling him, bringing his nose down to lovingly nuzzle the tear-streaked face.

‘Oh, my poor, poor Bub-Bub,’ Clint cooed, tucking the tiny child under his cheek, swaying back and forth in a lulling motion. ‘Who’s a tired baby, huh? Don’t worry, Clint’s going to make it all better. You don’t have to think or worry anymore, Clint’s going to make it all just melt away. That’s it, Bub-Bub, breathe, just like that. Such a poor, tired baby.’

Bruce’s little fingers entwined in Clint’s shirt fiercely as he cried into the teenager, but it was no longer in hysterics, but instead, a tired baby on his way to being calmed right down. He was gasping, cries forming indistinguishable sounds, in which Clint just murmured softly, ‘Yes, Bub-Bub, I know. I’m sorry I wasn’t here. I know. I know.’

Bruce just cuddled closer again, though it hadn’t seemed possible, one hand disentangling from Clint’s shirt to stroke along the teenager’s cheek then stayed though. The toddler wasn’t letting go anytime soon, that was for sure.

Natasha didn’t say any words. She simply kneeled on the floor, holding her arms out wide to the little seven-year-old boy huddled into the corner, where he had gone to when thinking Thor was going to force him to have a bath.

Tony stared at her for a moment, as though making sure it was her and then, to Steve’s heartbreak, as though making sure it was him she was gesturing to. Then, he flew across the room, throwing himself into the red-head’s arms, a sob finally escaping his walls.

And just like that, the world shifted into the right place. Clint’s words filled the space Bruce’s cries left, soothing like a toasty blanket or soothing cup of tea which warmed your soul. Natasha’s strong, unbreakable presence was that special spot in a parent’s arms where you were untouchable.

The strong arm around his shoulders was what made Steve finally give way to what he had wanted to earlier in the day. He didn’t want to be strong anymore. He wanted to break, just for a little while.
He curled into Thor and allowed the largest teenager to lead him to the cot so he could sit down. He was grateful when the other blonde knew exactly what to do, not that it should have been a surprise to him, and stayed, so Steve could curl into his side and just … breathe.

His eyes flickered over Clint and Natasha. The brown-haired boy appeared ruffled, but okay, while Natasha had a nick just at the end of her right eyebrow, but other than that, didn’t appear hurt.

She must have felt his gaze because she looked up over Tony’s shaggy hair and sent him a soft smile. Clint sent him a wink as well as he swayed around the room with Bruce.

The red-head soon joined him, standing with Tony in her arms, rocking from side to side lyrically. Tony didn’t protest in the least and just held on to her, sniffling softly now, still not allowing himself to just cry.

That thought worried him. Bruce’s muteness did too. So did his weakness, his lack of being able to protect and just what his family had been through today … what could have happened … what could still happen …

He was surprised when he felt a large hand gently stroke his hair.

‘Enough,’ Thor murmured, not unkindly in the least as he tightened his hold on Steve so the oldest didn’t even have to hold himself up any longer. ‘No more. You’ve been through too much to talk now and you’re too close to the situation.’

Again, Thor gently stroked his hair and if Steve closed his eyes, he could remember when his ma used to do that to him, when he didn’t have to think about things like people he loved more than the world depending on him and him letting them down.

‘No more thinking.’ Thor’s voice rumbled through his chest, a comforting vibration. ‘Let go for a while. We will hold you.’

Truthfully, Steve couldn’t really decipher Thor’s words anymore. They were just a jumble that made a long, soothing note, which made his eyelids feel heavy.

Everything hurt. His head, his chest, his heart, his stomach. Unconsciously making the decision, he simply let go and curled into Thor. His mind went blank and he simply listened to the lullaby of Thor’s heartbeat, strong, unwavering and dependable.

Chapter End Notes

Don’t worry. There will be more :D. Virtual cookie for whoever can guess who the man was :D :D :D.

As always, I love it when you share your thoughts and kudos are always appreciated.

Peace and Love, Zam :).
The Best Family in the World

Chapter Summary

Tony has his breakdown, revealing some of what the man said to him in the park. Will Steve be able to make Tony see how he can finally let himself go and just be loved?

Chapter Notes

Hello lovelies!

Now, I know I have been promising an update of this for ages and now, it is finally here!!! Why it has taken so long was this was meant to be the last chapter, until I realised it really needed an epilogue. This was meant to be part of this chapter, but it just kept growing and growing (as usual with me lol) so I decided to separate them so rest assured, there will be another chapter after this to cover a lot of questions left unanswered. And also be full of a lot of fluff because this has quite a lot of angst in it.

I would also like to say a huge thank-you to all the lovely reviews I have been getting. I really can't say enough how much they mean to me and increase my confidence in my own writing so thank you, guys. That means the world to me.

So, the last update won't be too far behind because it is almost done now :). I really hope you all enjoy this.

Again, WARNING: Major references to child abuse and readers might find it upsetting that a child gets very upset in this chapter, but he gets the comfort he deserves. Still, it might be triggering. If so, please don't read. If you do proceed, please do so with self-care.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It was one of those times where Steve didn’t realise he had slept until he actually woke up. He didn’t snap awake, as he thought he would, but rather, eased into consciousness. It wasn’t because he didn’t remember what happened. He certainly did and if he would have been in his bed, he swore he would have jerked awake.

No, it was more because of the strong presence next to him, arm still wrapped around him, making him feel safe when he hadn’t thought the sensation was possible a few hours ago.

‘No nap!’

‘Look, even Steve had a nap, so you should too.’

‘Those sorts of mind tricks don’t work with me, Clint.’

Despite himself, Steve gave a soft huff of laughter at the one-of-a-kind turn of phrase no other seven-
year-old could ever come out with.

Blinking his eyes open, he could see Clint crouching down not far from the cot, looking torn between letting his head drop in his hands in frustration or just stare apathetically into the distance.

Tony was curled defensively against the curtain divider of Steve’s area. His black hair was regaining some of its waviness as it dried out, showing he had succumbed to a bath. Clint must have been sneaky trying to get him to have a nap because he wasn’t dressed in pyjamas, but rather, an old, grey shirt with the words ‘I know I’m not Perfect but I’m so Close it Scares Me’ written on it. It had been Clint’s when he was twelve. It swam on the seven-year-old, but Tony loved it for the words even though it sometimes hindered him in running around as it flopped around his knees, bony shoulders now and then peeking out of the collar as it slipped down his arm on one side.

That, coupled with a pair of holey, blue sweatpants showed Clint had been trying to make Tony believe he was dressing him for a lazy day at home. From the way Tony was huddled away from Clint, arms crossed firmly over his little chest, he had finally caught on, not to mention the tail-end of the conversation Steve caught.

Clint rubbed a hand over his face and Steve could see this time the tiredness in the younger teenager as he gave a sigh.

‘Kiddo, I know you’re tired, but can you please co-operate for me, huh?’ the light brown-haired teen pleaded. ‘If you come to sleep, Nat will even tell you a bedtime story.’

Natasha, who now had Bruce in her arms, nodded in the affirmative, standing next to Clint where she was rocking from side to side, humming softly to the toddler in her arms.

Bruce was more asleep than awake, wrapped in a thread-bare towel, pink toes sticking out of the material, fingers being sucked on rhythmically, showing Natasha had yet to dress him. She had probably paused to settle him before trying to get him out of her arms, dressed and into bed.

Despite the obvious exhaustion, the toddler wasn’t allowing himself to go the whole way, whining in distress each time Tony gave a protest, and they were gaining volume. The baby was more than over-tired, but wouldn’t give into the pull of sleep if he thought his big brother was upset in some way.

‘Oh, malysh,’ Natasha murmured soothingly. ‘It’s fine, your big brother is just tired and cranky.’

‘Am not!’ was the immediate response.

‘I’m sorry, Tony,’ Clint sighed but resolve came on to his face as Bruce started to cry softly. Pushing against his knees, he stood, holding his arms out and leaning down, going in to pick the young boy up, ‘but it’s nap time, darlin’. You need to sleep badly even if you don’t know it yet.’

‘No!’ Tony cried, pushing himself further away, chestnut brown eyes starting to glisten. ‘I don’t want to, no! No, no, no!’

Bruce’s cries heightened, Natasha’s soothing words doing nothing to calm him.

‘I’ve got him.’

Tony paused in his tantrum and Clint straightened, surprise flickering across his face at seeing Steve awake.

Thor tightened his hold on Steve for a second. ‘You sure?’ he murmured, gentle touch letting the
oldest know it was okay to say no.

However, Steve smiled softly back and gave the arm holding him a squeeze. ‘Yeah,’ he whispered back, voice coated with gratitude. Letting Thor know the other blonde had given him the strength he needed to get through what needed to be done now. ‘Yeah, I’m good.’

The tallest teenager simply nodded, not undermining Steve by asking again, but simply trusting his word on it. That meant a lot to Steve. It really did. It was something they all did with him, taking his word as truth if he insisted.

Their trust in him helped settle him and think with a clearer mind.

Clint gave a nod as well, stepping back from Tony, who was now looking at Steve with pleading eyes.

‘No nap, Steve,’ he pleaded pitifully, fists coming up to rub at his red eyes, emphasising the exhaustion he was insisting he didn’t have, ‘no nap, please.’

Smiling sadly at the sight, Steve extracted himself from Thor’s hold, a little regretful to leave the warm, safe spot. But he was needed again and couldn’t stop. He had the strength at the moment for that fact not to get him down.

‘Steve’s not going to make you take a nap, sweeties,’ he cooed, walking slowly towards the smaller boy so as not to aggravate him more, ‘I was thinking we could go into the kitchen and have a snack.’

Tony blinked, completely taken aback. He was too blind-sided in thinking he’d got his way to really protest Steve going to pick him up and the oldest quickly took advantage of it, scooping up his little boy, settling the child on his hip.

Clint simply gave Steve a look, letting him know how much the child needed sleep. The blonde gave a subtle nod back, letting him know the message had been received. Steve was rested enough to be able to get the child to have a nap the round-about way. He felt guilty nodding off, letting the other three take up the slack, despite how they would have been just as exhausted, but it was too late for that. The best he could do was make it up to them now by settling Tony down, letting them take a breather as well, gathering their own senses and coming to terms with what happened.

Speaking of which, Tony was sniffling and working on holding back frustrated and tired tears, fisting his right eye, mouth screwed up in a pout, obviously not sure if he should be protesting these new turn of events or not.

‘Everything’s okay, my sweet boy,’ Steve swayed into the kitchen, absently giving the child’s backside a comforting pat now and then. ‘Are you thirsty? Let’s check if we’ve got any milk left from this morning, hmm?’

Tony shook his head, but Steve kind of expected it. When Tony was tired, he liked to be contrary for the sake of it. He could have offered the child a ticket to Disneyland and he would have insisted he wanted to go to Disney World.

‘Don’t want any stupid milk,’ Tony sulked, arms going back in a cross over his chest. ‘Milk is for babies and I’m not a baby.’

‘I have milk,’ Steve pointed out, not unkindly.

‘Then you’re being a baby,’ Tony shot right back.
This time, Steve paused and studied the child again in his arms. Usually, when Tony was only extremely tired, he would throw spectacular tantrums. Very rarely, but now and then, they would happen and they were never half done. Stomping feet, tears, even screaming if he was really into it, the works. What he usually didn’t do was become insulting. With Clint, maybe. With Steve? No. Not now.

So, that was when Steve saw what he hadn’t the first time. The nervously, flicking eyes, stiffness in Tony’s back and the way he was leaning a little bit back from Steve, not relaxing into the hold. Was he … oh god, he was. He was waiting for a hit. In fact, he was so positive he was eventually going to get one that he was pushing them all to show himself it was inevitable so he had decided he was going to speed up the process.

Steve’s renewed strength since his comfort from Thor wavered then and there. He felt sick and tired again. However, this time, he didn’t feel like curling up on the spot and just forgetting. While it was devastating, he felt that old strength and determination flooding through him. The one that made him run away with the others from the orphanage … the one that kept him from going back … the one that allowed him to tuck Clint in each night with a smile, no hint of the tears he cried in the darkness whatsoever.

His initial reaction was to hold Tony tightly and reassure him how that was never going to happen. But Tony wasn’t the kind of child to react well to just words. Both he and Bruce needed proof, conducting little experiments all the time to see what would happen, Tony more so than Bruce. It was over six months before it seemed to sink in with them that they weren’t going to be thrown out or forgotten about all the time, no matter how many times one of the older ones said differently.

Tony used to push a bit to see the reaction he would get, but Steve could tell just by the determined set of his chin this was going to be a lot stronger than all those other times.

Hoping to maybe soothe him a bit, the teenager tried a different tactic. ‘All right, buddy, what would you like?’

Tony’s eyebrows shot up momentarily and Steve tried to quell his anger at the man out there for the child’s surprise at not being hit for being rude. However, Tony worked on frowning again, intent on carrying out his plan to see how everyone would hurt him eventually, but it just might take longer for him to push the right buttons.

‘I want a cookie,’ he said, arms crossing tighter around himself.

Steve sighed. Of course Tony noticed the box Clint snuck in yesterday, full of chocolate chip cookies. After a day like they had, Steve would have given it to him right away, but to give him sugar now would be disastrous for trying to get him down for a nap.

‘Sorry, baby,’ Steve said softly, meaning it more ways than one, wishing Tony could hear the love he had for the child in every word he said because he certainly put it there, ‘but no. No sugar this late.’

The result was instantaneous, as Steve suspected it would be.

Tony screamed and thrashed, frustrated tears spilling down his face. ‘Yes,’ he cried. ‘Yes, yes, yes, yes!’

The child had his little arms outstretched, pushing against Steve’s shoulders, just in a tantrum or
trying to escape, Steve didn’t know. Nor did he care.

Having to keep a firm hold of Tony because of the intense wriggling, he couldn’t let go to brush a hand through his hair. So, he just comfortably tightened his hold on him and placed a kiss in the still damp hair, beginning to sway again.

‘I know, baby,’ he murmured, giving the hair another kiss. ‘I know, it’s been such a long day.’

‘Not a baby!’ Tony screamed, kicking his legs frantically while his upper body writhed this way and that.

Sighing softly, Steve knelt. ‘Do you want to get down?’ He asked, trying to let Tony know he wasn’t trying to control him, but simply comfort him.

Tony’s eyes widened again, looking huge with the tears spilling out of them. The confusion and distress was just pouring off him. He still struggled, but it wasn’t aiming for anything, just listless kicks and arm throws. Never did he once go for a move that would hurt Steve though, unlike how he used to when he and Bruce first came to stay with them all. It wasn’t really a comforting notion because while it showed how much Tony now cared for him, it also exhibited how the child would take whatever treatment from him if he decided to dish it out because Tony had decided how much he did love the group.

‘No,’ Tony wailed in reply to Steve’s question, shaking his head from side to side. ‘No, no, I … no …’ his voice trailed off in sobs as at one moment, he went to lean into Steve then the next, he was pulling viciously away.

Steve felt like someone was literally twisting his heart at seeing the little boy so blatantly fighting with his heart and head. He wanted the comfort so badly, but the part of him, the one that thought things out and recorded people’s patterns, was just waiting for it all to fall apart.

He didn’t want to be left all alone and broken-hearted with his arms up to someone who wouldn’t take him into their arms.

This time, Steve felt the tears burning at his eyes. Who had taught Tony these things? What did that man say to reiterate them? It was wrong. It was just so wrong. Where did these people get off thinking they could do these things, to a child? To his child?

He didn’t know how, but one day, they would pay for doing this because he refused to believe they could just get away with it. For the time being though, he was going to be the family Tony not only wanted, but needed. And he wasn’t doing it out of some sense of duty, but because of how much he loved the little child, which he had to show to Tony. It might have contributed to the problem in the beginning, Tony thinking he was being kept because Steve was doing the right thing, not because Steve could never let go of both children because he loved them damn it. This wasn’t being done out of duty; he was doing it because they were these little, special beings Steve knew he could no longer live without.

‘I’m right here, kiddo,’ he whispered, quavering voice unable to get much volume. ‘And I’m not going anywhere.’

Tony shuddered at the words, shaking his head again, eyes squeezing shut, as though he could get shut out his wants by pure will alone.

‘Oh, sweeties,’ Steve sighed lovingly, going to draw Tony into a hug.

The child immediately pushed him away then looked heart-broken that he had. The resolve wavered
on his face, but shaking his head frantically again, he wrenched hard at Steve’s grip, this time letting the teenager know for sure he wanted to be let go.

Immediately complying, Steve gently set him on the ground, trying to help him get his feet. Tony just pulled away, stumbling, as he looked helplessly around, fist coming up to his mouth to be chewed on in aggravation, cries never wavering.

Steve immediately grasped Tony’s wrist firmly but gently. ‘Uh-uh, my baby,’ he grimaced sympathetically. ‘You’ll hurt yourself.’

It didn’t appear the child could get any louder but the black-haired boy screamed, pulling away before throwing himself on to the floor. His feet gave a few hits against the ground, but he simply buried his head in his arms, sobbing heart-brokenly, as though his whole world was about to fall apart.

As far as he was concerned, it obviously was. He thought Steve would hit him any moment now, having broken down his patience, like he had obviously done with so many other people. Waiting to see the masks break because they always did eventually.

Taking a deep breath, swallowing back his rage at all these other people because the least thing Tony needed right now was anger, Steve simply laid down on the floor alongside his little boy, hand coming out to rest on the heaving back. He was struck with how large he looked against Tony, which just made him want to gather the child into his arms all the more and cradle him in a dome of protectiveness.

‘No one’s hurting you here, sweeties,’ he said softly but strongly, just allowing the strength of his feelings to flow into every enunciation of his words. ‘That is something I can promise you. We love you. I love you. And people who love each other don’t hurt each other.’

Tony continued to sob, but with the way his legs kicked when Steve said something he wanted to believe but was too afraid to, showed he was at least hearing the oldest’s words over his cries.

Steve just rubbed his back, all the way from the nape of his neck to the small of his back, demonstrating the gentleness of his touch.

‘I love you, kiddo.’ In the dark of the ‘kitchen’, Steve was struck with how true his words were. He loved Tony like his very own little sibling. Both him and Bruce. Despite them only being in his life for just over a year, they were irreplaceable and cemented in his heart to stay for good.

This time, Tony shuddered, but the cries dimmed, just the slightest bit.

Taking a deep breath, Steve felt simultaneously strengthened and weakened by the feelings overwhelming him. His mouth opened and he let everything spill out, hoping the little boy could hear the truth to his broken open words.

‘Nothing is ever going to change that, buddy,’ he said softly, the sobs lessening in volume again as Tony continued to cry quietly while still listen to what he was saying. ‘Doesn’t matter whatever you say or do, I’m always going to love you.’ And he made extra sure to add, ‘And I’m never leaving you. Ever. You or your brother.’

Through it all, he kept up his gentle rubbing of the heaving back. The crying hadn’t stopped at all, but it at least wasn’t to the point of hysterics any more.

They stayed like that for a while, both laying prone on the ground, Tony’s face buried while Steve gently stroked the boy’s back, head resting to the side on his crossed arm.
He could remember all the times, when he was at the orphanage or when he was dumped at a home, people would bombard him with information then demand answers from him.

‘Any questions? Well, are there?’

‘Do you disagree with any of those rules? They are very important, but easy. You shouldn’t find them hard. Do you? Do you find them difficult to understand?’

‘You don’t seem to believe me. Tell me why not.’

It was so overwhelming, especially when he was being put in a new place and trying to get a gauge of the people he was with so he used to just clam up and nod. They never gave him a chance to gather his thoughts, work out his words so he knew what he wanted to let out and not and basically tried to feed him the answers anyway. He knew how irritating and intimidating for a person it could be, especially as a kid, someone larger than you demanding answers.

So, he remained silent, an understanding presence next to Tony as he worked out what to make of everything around him.

Eventually, after a good ten minutes, an imperceptible word happened in the midst of the sobbing.

‘What was that, sweeties?’ Steve asked, shifting unnoticeably closer to be able to hear better.

It was just minutely clearer the second time round. ‘N-Naughty.’

‘Naughty?’ The blonde repeated before it clicked and this time, he wrapped an arm around the little body. ‘Oh, sweeties, no, you aren’t naughty.’

This time, Tony frantically nodded his head. ‘Y-Yes,’ he stuttered. ‘Y-Yes, naughty boy. Naughty, naughty boy.’

The child’s face could be glimpsed from the side now as he lifted it a bit to nod. The eyes were squeezed tightly shut, eyebrows knitted tightly together, too afraid to face Steve for the admittance, while his mouth was absolutely crumbled, lips trembling so much that his teeth must have been chattering together.

This time, Steve couldn’t stop the burning at his eyes from slipping into the open, creating two stinging lines down his cheeks. He didn’t even think; he just scooped the boy into his arms, cradling him like a baby Tony continually insisted he wasn’t, following the innate instinct in himself to protect.

He’d never really felt it stronger than that day he cradled both children in his arms, stumbling into their make-shift home, clueless as to what to do, but only knowing he wasn’t letting these kids go.

Tony didn’t fight him, which hurt more. Instead, he curled up into a ball, hiding his face behind his hands, crying softly, hiccups interrupting his breathing even more.

‘Oh, my sweet boy,’ Steve murmured, own voice wavering with his tears.

Standing without using his arms, he weaved around the living area for a while, patting the child’s backside, to allow Tony time to calm and for him to gather his strength, which was scattering so much today.

After a few minutes, wet hiccups could still be heard, but Steve had gathered his strength together, though he just couldn’t stop the burning in his eyes from continuing to escape.
Brushing a kiss on the silky black hair, he laid the side of his face on the head, cuddling the precious bundle close.

‘You’re a special boy,’ he whispered, able to make his words clear despite the wavering. ‘I don’t care who says differently, some nasty person from a long time ago or that horrible man today, you aren’t naughty. You’re a good boy.’ He pressed another, lingering kiss to the hair. ‘My good boy. My most special, good boy.’

Tony’s shoulders trembled more as he shook his head again, so dejected and broken. ‘H-He said … h-he s-said b-bad brother,’ he choked out. ‘G-Got Bubba into t-trouble.’

‘Oh, no, no, no, buddy,’ Steve immediately reassured, absolutely stricken by the admittance. Tony, a bad brother to Bruce? It was so wrong that it was almost humorous if it wasn’t for the traumatised child in his arms. ‘You didn’t get Bruce into trouble at all today. I should have been watching you both better. That’s nobody’s fault but mine.’

At this admittance, Tony’s cries became more traumatised and he frantically reached out to grasp Steve on each cheek. ‘No,’ he cried pitifully. ‘Steve, you’re a good boy.’

God, the little boy was going to have him bawling then he would only upset the child all the more. Again, Steve’s heart swelled with Tony’s specialness. And struck with how, maybe, they were alike in many ways, so quick to blame themselves if something went wrong.

With that realisation, a weight, that horrible clingy weight which came with guilt, making you feel sick and heavy and lost and helpless all in one, just … eased away. To the point where he didn’t feel like he was a few seconds away from crumbling. A mistake had been made today, an overlook that, yes, had been terrible. But none of it was done on purpose and Steve knew more than anything in the world how much he tried, how they all tried, for nothing ever to happen to their little family ever. It was seeing Tony crying in his arms, trying his best to be the greatest big brother ever, and if he did one thing he didn’t deem the best, believed himself to be bad brother that made Steve realise how much it wasn’t a good or right way to think. Steve had done his best today. Unfortunately, it hadn’t been enough, but learning what he did, he now had a higher best to perform to. He needed to accept that and move on, knowing it didn’t make him love his family any less or him a failure. A mistake was made. He would do better. That was it.

It was why Thor, Clint and Natasha were handling this better. They recognised there was nothing more they could do and weren’t going to kick themselves until they bled out, as he was doing. No, they were no good to anyone like that. *He* was no good to anyone like that.

It wasn’t his fault. A mistake had been made which would never be made again. Nothing was done on purpose so it wasn’t his fault.

For the first time since the incident, Steve felt like he could actually breathe properly, all the way in then all the way out, letting his chest fill and deflate. Finally, he knew what to do again. He felt strong because he had these precious, little beings depending on him that he *could* and *would* take care of to the very best of his ability always.

Leaning down, he gently nuzzled Tony’s face.

Tony squirmed in surprise, shock written over his tear-stained face again at the affection still given to him, even after his admittance, as though he thought once he showed Steve he was a bad brother, Steve would no longer love him.
‘If it’s not my fault,’ Steve whispered, softly, but strongly, ‘then it’s not yours either. Simple as that.’

Tony’s mouth automatically popped open to argue with him, thinking there would be an argument. Then, he stopped.

Steve could see as the wheels turning in his head, chestnut brown eyes becoming dark with concentration. As he ran through what Steve just said, looking at it from every angle, trying to find a flaw in the logic. Then, when it finally all fell into place, the eyes filled with fresh tears as the poor little guy was overwhelmed with the realisation he hadn’t been naughty or a bad brother today, as the piece of scum at the park had obviously insisted.

‘That’s it, baby,’ Steve soothed, wrapping his other arm around the little boy and cuddling him close to his chest, large hand protectively cupping the head. ‘Let it all out.’ Pressing another kiss, this time to Tony’s forehead, he murmured, ‘Let it all out and I’ll be right here to make it all better. I promise.’

Tony didn’t push him away at all this time. Instead, he burrowed in close, hands fisting into Steve’s nicer blue shirt he’d worn to the park, shuddering from his tears, half from relief, half from exhaustion.

Smiling at the feeling of the child finally not pushing him away, but trusting him to hold Tony, Steve began to rock, walking slowly around the table as he talked to the child.

‘That’s my good boy,’ he cooed because if anyone could benefit from being told they were good, it was Tony. ‘My good, special boy. Where is he?’ He asked, using his left hand to brush back the sweaty curls and playfully rub his index finger under his chin. ‘Where is my boy, huh? Is he hiding? Is he hiding from Steve?’

Slowly, Tony peeked out from his hiding spot, snot running down the grubby face. He looked so young and innocent, chestnut brown eyes scared, but hopeful at the same time.

Then, he actually put his arms out to Steve. For the first time ever.

Steve had never smiled harder, tears and all. Easily shifting Tony into an upright position, he let the child wrap his little arms around his neck as tight as he could, before wrapping him up into the biggest bear hug.

They stayed like that for ages, Steve just relishing in Tony’s presence while Tony relaxed into him, the relief just permeating off his body, as he began to sniffle softly again. Completely overwhelmed that the first time he’d put himself out there, he hadn’t been left standing with his arms up, alone and abandoned. He’d been taken into the embrace and held like he was special, as he always should have been.

Then, softly, as he easily wiped his running nose off on Steve’s shirt, Tony asked tentatively, ‘Y-Your special boy?’

It wasn’t the special part he was questioning. Steve knew that instantly.

The oldest teenager simply reaffirmed his hold and placed a kiss on Tony’s temple. ‘My special boy,’ he confirmed.

Tony was still for so long Steve thought he had finally fallen into an exhausted sleep. But then, a gentle kiss was placed on his left cheek, like a secret little gift.

All of Steve’s tears were from pure joy then.
He remembered Ma once, sitting in her bed when she first got sick, tears spilling on to her cheeks which were too withered for a woman still so young. One rose was clutched in her hand from when Steve presented it to her to try to make her smile like she used to.

The sensations were like yesterday as he rushed to her side, wrapping her up in a hug as tight as he could without hurting her. Despite losing all her weight, she still felt so soft to Steve, better than any downy pillow. She smelt of flour and lavender while her body automatically rocked with him in her arms, like the rhythm was always dancing within her, just waiting to be called upon.

‘I didn’t want you to cry, Ma,’ he had whispered, holding back his own tears, because how would Ma smile if he wasn’t? ‘I wanted it to make you happy.’

‘Oh, it has, my angel,’ she sighed, voice a lot more whispery than it used to be, but Steve didn’t care. She was still just as perfect. ‘Ma’s crying because she’s so happy she has the best family in the world.’

Now, as Steve cuddled Tony in his arms, he cried that bit harder.

Steve had the best family in the world again.

***

‘Gone?’ Clint asked softly from his position of sitting cross-legged on Steve’s mattress on the floor.

‘Out like a light,’ Steve grinned, one arm under Tony’s backside while the other gentle patted his back.

He was grateful everyone deigned to comment on the tear streaks he knew was on his face.

Instead, Natasha simply just cocked her head to the side from her position to the right of Clint, also cross-legged, a silent question if Tony was okay.

‘Good,’ Steve confirmed back, so Clint and Thor would know too. Remembering what happened in the kitchen, he swallowed against the emotion in his chest, he murmured, ‘Really good.’

Thor’s smile absolutely shined from where he sat at the head of the bed, Bruce cradled in his arms. The small toddler looked even tinier in the largest teenager’s arms, now swaddled in one of Thor’s old coats, one that the sweet toddler had proclaimed to be his ‘bwanket’. Steve always melted a little at the sight.

While Bruce would give a little whine now and then in his sleep, when Thor would shush him and gently kiss the pudgy lips, he would settle back down, which was such a blessing from how it was earlier, when neither Steve nor Thor could do a thing to settle him.

Clint simply gave a nod and this time, Steve could see the sadness underneath the strong mask the third youngest male was very apt at portraying.

Natasha smiled softly and stood up, silently holding her arms out. Needing, once again, to feel that her solnyshko was okay.

Without hesitation, Steve gently manoeuvred Tony into her arms so they were chest to chest.
Natasha held him like Steve had been, but instead, used her free hand to cradle the crown of his head rather than pat his back.

Settling easily down, she leaned against the well and would intermittently press kisses to the sleeping child as Tony unconsciously snuggled closer into her, fingers fisting into her red shirt.

Steve gave the silky hair one last stroke before kneeling down to give Bruce a kiss, causing the toddler to stretch adorably in his sleep.

Smiling softly at the sight of the baby contented, at least for the meantime because he knew the nightmares would come for all of them, Steve settled back against the wall, just between Thor and Clint, holding out his right arm.

Clint didn’t even look. He just crawled on to Steve’s lap, something he hadn’t done since he was thirteen years old.

No words had to be said. Steve simply wrapped his arms tightly around the smaller teenager and Clint snuggled into his chest before going limp with a contented sigh. Meanwhile, Natasha curled into his other side, leaning her head on his shoulder, never letting her hold on Tony slacken. Thor settled on his left side, a constant warmth always burning.

Steve hadn’t slept that well in a long time, cocooned in by his family on all sides. All safe, all together and all just that little bit broken, but combined, they were a full image, fitting together as all things that belonged with each other did.

Chapter End Notes

Also, just letting you all know too that this is going to be made into a series. I have already gotten a set of prompts for this ‘verse for some interactions of Thor with the children so even when this story ends, it isn’t going to be the end of this ‘verse :D. Thanks for all the comments and kudos making that happen because it has made me decide to continue it with the overwhelming support for this story.

Comments and kudos will always be appreciated and loved. Really hope you all enjoyed the update :).
Epilogue: The Faces That Make Up My Family

Chapter Summary

One month after the water park, the small family are slowly healing.

There is one missing piece though. Bruce still won't speak.

Chapter Notes

Hello, my lovelies!!!

Here it is, the final chapter! And it is basically all fluff. After all that angst, I needed a nearly lethal dose of fluff so I really hope you all enjoy the tooth-rot :D!

Also, as I have told you all, I'm doing my PhD in Transformative Works. But now, it has become official that in the area of Transformative Works, I am going to be concentrating on the Marvel Universe :). So, thank all of you for giving me the encouragement, liking the way I write the characters and just all in all, being awesome readers because I wouldn't have done it in the Marvel Universe otherwise :D! So, this chapter is dedicated to all of you lovely readers who have continued to comment and read all of my works. You are amazing people.

Also, the organisation of the PhD has been hectic and so the updates will probably slow down because I'm not far off starting :).

WARNING: You would all know the drill by now. Strong references to child abuse. If you find it triggering, please do not read. If you do, please proceed with self-care.

I do not own anything Marvel related. The novel quoted in this chapter is original and belongs to me.

After all of that, please ENJOY!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Natasha settled down in the ratty, old one-seater lounge chair. It was probably the nicest piece of furniture they had in their home, a left-over product from when the previous owners left.

Crossing her legs, she easily settled Bruce in her lap. He pressed back into her stomach, fingers of his right hand being sucked on while he excitedly pulled at the faded green material of his onesie-clad foot, fitting perfectly in the cove her crossed legs formed. He loved it when they placed him in spots like that, always liking areas he felt he was protected from the outside world.

He gurgled with joy when Natasha balanced a book on her crossed ankles.

She smiled softly down at him, running her fingers through his unbrushed hair. ‘You feel a lot better after your nap, don’t you, malysh?’
Bruce leaned his head all the way back to smile up at her, fingers never once leaving his mouth. He could have simply turned to the side, but instead, opted to bend backwards to look at her upside down.

All worries were melted by the warm produced by the baby. She wrapped her right arm firmly around him, holding him in a permanent hug, while kissing the tip of his nose, which screwed up as his smile grew wider.

‘Yes, you’re cute,’ she cooed, unable to stop the voice she put on for the toddler because he had the talent of bringing that out in the whole group. ‘Yes, you are, the absolute cutest.’

Bruce blushed and hid his face in her stomach. However, he hopefully peeked back at the book, but wouldn’t indicate towards it to show what he wanted.

It was one of the few left in the apartment. There had been a dictionary, a cookbook Clint liked to read when he was hungry, saying the pictures helped him feel more full, a Bible Thor burned to make a fire within the first few days of discovering the place and a couple of others. This one Natasha held was a novel called *Hold My Hand*, about a sister and brother who were on a journey to find their real parents. She had read it a lot and it had helped with her grasp of English greatly.

When Tony and Bruce first came along, Bruce spotted her reading it and looked so longingly at the novel, she simply started reading it aloud because she knew he would have fled if she would have suggested she read to him. So, instead, he settled down in a corner and listened to her for a full hour.

It became a daily thing. She would sit on the seat and read, while Bruce would sit away, listening intently to every word she said. Until, gradually, each day, the toddler moved closer and closer until he was just next to the couch.

Taking a chance, she had reached down and gently lifted him on to her lap, making sure her grip was loose so he could escape if he wanted to. The poor child had stiffened and even burst into tears, worried he finally crossed some sort of line.

Natasha remembered swallowing down against the emotion which made her want to go use her talents and hurt some select people, and continued to read, voice shakier than she could ever remember it being.

After a good twenty minutes, Bruce’s cries dimmed to sniffles. He kept peeking up at her, shoulders hunched, waiting for it all to come crashing down on him, but when she just kept on reading, he began to listen to the words, for a brief moment, forgetting about his fears. When he realised he was relaxing, the poor baby had begun to cry again, not understanding what was happening and why he wasn’t being punished.

They had come a long way since then. Bruce even once brought the book over to her, the only time he outright requested for her to read to him. Overall, they had probably read the novel five times, but Bruce never got sick of it, which was why Natasha opted to sit down with him today and start it all over again.

There was a bit of an ulterior motive as well. After one month since the water park incident, Bruce was yet to talk so she hoped getting him into a position he was most relaxed, he may actually say a word. She tried not to let it hurt her that Bruce could still get so scared so he reverted to non-verbal. It was nothing personal, but she was desperate to hear that husky little voice again, for him to feel overall *safe* enough to just speak. And that was the crux of it. Speaking made Bruce feel unsteady, a bit broken open, so when he was terrified, the only way he knew how to protect himself was to not talk. It showed how unsettled he still was after everything because it was like even when he appeared
content, he couldn’t bring himself to open up again, afraid … just afraid.

Natasha was determined to make him feel absolutely safe again, even just for a moment, for him to talk. She couldn’t just tell him that either because if attention was brought to the fact, it made Bruce even more self-conscious, clamming up even further, though some tears would escape, thinking they were telling him he was doing something wrong or was simply odd.

Bracing herself against those thoughts, she gave Bruce’s tummy a pat, which was accentuated by the onesie, one the reasons she loved him in the outfit.

‘You ready, malysh? Ready for a story?’ God, she couldn’t believe how goo-goo her voice went when talking to Bruce.

It wasn’t stopping anytime soon because Bruce loved it, giggling up at her, patting enthusiastically at her hand splayed across his tummy.

Natasha laughed and cuddled him close, turning a few pages until they were at the beginning. ‘Okay, lapushka, here we go,’ pausing, she cleared her throat in exaggeration, gaining more throaty chuckles. Hiding her own proud smile, she began reading from the story, ‘Sandy leaned her head back while she swung high on the swing. It was the only way to swing really. That way, the world glittered around her, sunshine glinting off every surface, as opposed to staring at the ground, where a monotonous, ugly brown would stare back at her, never-ending and dreary …’

She allowed her words to rise and fall, not too loud, not too soft, as she read to her baby.

Bruce responded appropriately to her tones, humming in sympathy when she made her voice go sad for a moment, but would squeal when she spoke with enthusiasm, absentmindedly playing with his left foot, just like a baby did. It was something he only did when he was totally at ease, which made Natasha feel warm, a sensation she didn’t really get to know too well until Clint, Thor and Steve came into her life. The warmth brought by Tony and Bruce was different though. To see Bruce completely content just … overwhelmed her, but with good feelings, a myriad of sensations she couldn’t describe or name, but simply welled up within her, beautiful but could make her cry as well.

The mood was serene and she relished in the moment like when you sank into a hot bath after being chilled to the point you felt like your bones were cold.

‘Naataaasha!’ A voice sang out from the hallway.

She paused, a fond smile springing to her lips as she glanced over in that direction, Bruce perking up and looking too, making happy noises as soon as the voice made itself heard.

‘What are you up to, nakhal'nyy mal'chik?’

Tony was peeking around the corner, high cheekbones making his smile absolutely blinding.

‘Thor said him and I are going to do gymnastics because I ate all my vegetables.’ The little boy was bouncing on the balls of his feet like he was about to explode from excitement.

Natasha narrowed her eyes and stared further down the hallway. ‘Is that so?’ she called out.

Thor’s sonorous voice immediately replied, causing Tony to glance curiously over his shoulder.

‘Yes, an extremely safe and supervised gymnastics.’

‘One Steve would approve of?’ Natasha sent a reassuring smile down at Bruce, who was starting to
suck on his fingers anxiously at the loud voice, and she began a gentle rhythm of patting his tummy. It helped assuage the stiffness from his person straight away.

There was a distinct pause then before Thor finally talked. ‘Rather unreasonable, don’t you think? Is there one he would approve of?’

Tony pointed down the hallway, snapping his fingers, and nodded emphatically, looking intensely over at Natasha. ‘The man has a very good point.’

Laughter burst out of Natasha’s lips despite trying to hold them together, shaking her head in amusement. ‘Just be careful,’ she said, addressing both Tony and Thor. She resisted adding that if there was a bruise found on Tony, she would take it out of the tallest teenager’s skin because Bruce still couldn’t understand jokes like that.

‘Of course,’ Thor called back, sounding thoroughly offended, while Tony nodded so enthusiastically that it was a wonder he didn’t have whiplash from the movement.

‘Very careful,’ he proclaimed, determined to put her mind at rest in case she decided to try to put a stop to the activities he was obviously stoked about.

‘Thank you, Tony,’ she tried to say blandly but was unable to be amused by the little fast talker. He would make the perfect businessman, drawing anyone in with that captivating twinkle in his eye. A person just wanted to believe him.

Tony grinned back at her, loving it when he made one of them laugh. However, he lingered at the hallway, an air of unsureness entering his stance as he scuffed his heel along the floor.

Before Natasha encouraged him to speak his mind, she was pleasantly surprised when he took it upon himself to.

‘Um … do you … do you need any help with baby?’ He asked, fingers beginning to snap, crack and clap at a bit of a faster rate.

Usually, when Tony wanted to ‘help’, it often slowed down the process of whatever they needed to do to Bruce. However, in the past month, Tony had been a God-send with the toddler, who was in general, unsettled, and it took so little to set him off, crying very easily. However, Tony had been wonderful, entertaining and comforting the baby like the best big brother in the world, getting smiles out of him even when Bruce needed his hair washed, an activity which never failed to bring tears.

Even all of today, Bruce had been fussy, but he went down for an early nap at around 1 o’clock and was in an exceptionally good mood. He was a lot softer lately and Thor or Clint couldn’t roughhouse around him. The environment had to be as peaceful and quiet around him as possible, which was why sitting down with a book was the best thing for him.

Natasha’s smile was full and open as she regarded the little boy just at the entrance of the hallway.

‘Baby is doing very well after his nap, solnyshko.’ She brushed a demonstrative hand over the head of curls, seeing the blush on Bruce’s cheeks at being talked about. ‘You can go play for now.’

Tony nodded, but she could see the slight disappointment when he turned to leave.

‘Actually,’ she called out quickly. ‘It would be a big help if you could get his cup for me. He’s all comfy and I don’t want to move him.’

The skin around Tony’s eyes crinkled as he smiled that hard, all sadness evaporated, as it always
‘Yeah, I can do that!’ he exclaimed, racing over to the cupboard and grabbing Bruce’s sippy cup off it.

‘Such a good brother,’ Natasha said softly, hoping she kept the melancholy out of her voice at Tony’s need to prove how good a big brother he was. For a while there, the poor little boy wouldn’t play, just sitting vigilantly by his bubba in case he was needed at any moment. It had gotten better, but little worries were still lingering, as shown by Tony checking up on them before he launched into a game.

At Natasha’s praise, Tony’s smile became shy, but so much more pleased as he stood on his tip-toes to fill Bruce’s cup with water from the tap at the sink in their self-proclaimed kitchen as they were out of milk.

Most food was depleted, making Clint and Steve go out on a food run. She was trying not to think too hard on that so as not to become paralysed with worry at their safety. Instead, the fears were being pushed to the back of her mind as strongly as she possibly could and instead, she was focusing on just being in the here and now with the kids.

Using so much scrutiny to make sure the lid was put on the cup like it was the most important job in the world, eyes becoming intense with concentration, Tony then walked to the seat Natasha and Bruce occupied, holding the cup out reverently in front of him.

‘Here you go, Bubba.’ Tony presented the item to him with such flourish. It was a trait that had been missing for a while, the child being a little quieter and hesitant around them as he tested out the new waters Steve had broken open for him, but now, he was getting his old enthusiasm back again.

Bruce reddened even more at the sight of the sippy cup. He hadn’t needed it before, but he’d been so shaky lately. He hadn’t been able to drink anything without spilling it all over himself so Clint lifted the item from a chemist. The toddler was embarrassed for sure, but Natasha saw how much he relaxed when he had it, not having to worry about spilling anything, which sent him into an upset, obviously bringing back bad memories from when he had done it before. While it was like he knew they wouldn’t punish him for it, he just couldn’t get those images out of his head lately.

‘Come on, baby,’ Tony encouraged, ‘you have to have some water, it’s good for you!’

That was another thing. Bruce had turned off food and liquids a bit. He was slowly getting his appetite back, but that was the other good thing about the sippy cup. He could just carry it around with him and sip on it absentlly, which was making sure he at least got some nutrients.

At his big brother’s words, Bruce hunched over shyly, but reached out to take his special cup. As soon as it was in his hand, he shoved the spout in his mouth, not drinking it, but absently chewing on it.

Seriously, this kid and having things in his mouth.

Natasha pressed her lips on the curls to hide her fond amusement so Bruce wouldn’t see it and take it the wrong way, thinking she was laughing at him, not just feeling pure joy at the overwhelming love she had for her darling malysh.

Tony grinned up at Natasha, who peered down, just her eyes showing, glinting with affection. The black-haired boy read her emotions and he rocked from side to side as he glanced back at his little brother, hands clasped in front of him.
‘He’s so cute, huh, Natasha?’ he said, going all gooey over his little brother. He was such a little mother hen sometimes with Bruce and the two of them combined where going to make Natasha literally melt one of these days at their combined adorableness.

The baby whined at the attention, burying his burning face in Natasha’s shirt. However, he still allowed enough room for him to still bite on the spout of his cup.

Natasha ran light fingers along the bottom of his foot, which gained an adorable squeak and leg kick, causing Tony to openly ‘Aw’, at the toddler unintentionally making a cute scene of himself.

‘He is,’ Natasha agreed with a smile before reaching over and tickling under Tony’s chin. ‘Very much like another little boy I know.’

‘Natasha,’ Tony immediately whined, jumping back and rubbing under his chin vigorously to try to erase the tingly feelings her fingers left behind. ‘I’m handsome not cute.’

The girl conceded with a chuckle, so much deeper than most girls. ‘Fine, fine, you win.’

Tony lifted his chin, eyes becoming scrutinising, and Natasha stared back, masking her face perfectly of any humouring. It satisfied the child as he gave a nod and firm ‘Good’, before beginning to walk away.

Bruce peeked out from his hiding spot and as soon as he saw Tony heading towards the hallway, he sat up ram-rod straight.

‘Uh!’ He cried, sippy cup dropping on to his lap, as he reached out desperately for his big brother.

Tony glanced back at the sound and when he saw Bruce, his face didn’t break into the exuberant joy he usually had. Instead, this time, his expression morphed into the softest look, eyes twinkling beautifully, lips quirking into the gentlest smile. At that moment, he looked a lot older than the seven-year-old he was.

‘Sorry, Bubba,’ he said, racing back, and grabbed Bruce’s tiny hands in his own small ones. ‘I forgot to say goodbye! Silly Tony.’

Natasha bit back her coo at Tony copying the way Steve talked to the two of them.

Bruce preened under his big brother’s attention, making happy noises, little nose wrinkling up as he listened to every word Tony said with complete adoration.

Smiling lovingly back, chest pumping out at Bruce’s obvious love for him, Tony leaned forward and pressed a kiss on Bruce’s pudgy lips, making Bruce give a happy laugh, bouncing a little as he grinned up at Tony.

While Bruce’s sensitiveness had been terrible to see, for Tony, it increased his confidence as a big brother to such a level that he was no longer asking if it was all right to interact with Bruce, as he was for the first few days after the incident. The love Bruce had for Tony couldn’t be ignored even by the child who possessed such self-confidence issues. For Tony, if Bruce thought he was good enough, that was enough and it was a weight off of Natasha’s shoulders, as she was sure it was for the rest, to see the thought of Tony being a bad older brother wasn’t sticking in the little boy’s mind.

‘Good boy, Bubba,’ Tony smiled softly. He grabbed the sippy cup and gently slipped it into the baby’s mouth, who reluctantly accepted, unable to deny anything his big brother decided was for the best. ‘You can have your drink now and I’m going to play with Thor. You just call though and I’ll come back. Okay?’
Natasha grabbed the bottom of the cup so she could trade hands with Tony, gaining a grateful smile.

Murmuring, ‘Okay,’ as though cementing the plan, Tony pressed another kiss to Bruce’s cheek before heading towards the hallway, a definite skip in his step as he left the room.

Bruce whined softly around the spout, but other than that, didn’t fuss at his older brother’s disappearance.

‘Such a good malysh,’ Natasha praised, gently pushing him back so he could rest against her again.

He stiffened momentarily, but then allowed her to do it and even when she brought the cup higher, he tipped his head back, allowing her to give him the water.

‘Clever malysh,’ she whispered, slowly using her other hand to prop the book up again so she could read from it.

The atmosphere was even more relaxed than before, Bruce listening to the story with half-lidded eyes, absolutely limp in her lap. Though he did perk up when there was a bang from the bedroom. Natasha inwardly cringe then relaxed when Bruce didn’t react badly, but just peered up at her in concern, honeyed brown eyes huge from behind the sippy cup.

Biting her lip to keep from openly cooing at the vision, she cocked her head to the side as she called out. ‘Everything all right in there?’

‘Yep!’ was Tony’s instant, enthusiastic reply.

‘The cot may have suffered an injurious blow though,’ Thor replied.

Rolling her eyes to the roof, she glanced down to see Bruce had lost interest in the conversation as soon as he heard Tony’s voice. Instead, he was sitting up again, staring intently at a section of the novel, leaving behind the sippy cup she still had poised in her hand for him to drink.

‘What’s so interesting, lapushka?’ She asked softly so as not to startle him.

Bruce glanced back at her, an intensity in his eyes he got when he was really in deep thought, showing his intelligence most people would bypass because of the way he regressed.

He tapped at a word on the page, looking from it to back at her expectantly.

She peered down where his finger was pointing.

‘Sister?’ When Bruce tapped again, she saw he was pointing to two words. ‘Big sister?’

At Bruce’s nod and proud smile, which served to amuse her to no end that a toddler was proud of her for understanding, she raised a questioning eyebrow. ‘What about it, lapushka?’

Bruce bit his lip, obviously thinking how to communicate what he wanted to. He turned back to the novel and, with grievous care, turned a few pages to the left, making sure not to even crinkle the parchment. Eyes scouring the black ink, he tapped at another word.

She peered around him, no longer surprised at how he could read. He could at three and his reading had just improved out of sight the more she read to him where he would often mouth along to the words, imprinting what writing made what sound. The child was a little genius.

‘Mother?’ When Bruce made an unsure grimace, indicating he was sorry, but it wasn’t quite right (the child had such an expressive face, able to say so much with so many different sets of frowns and
smiles), her chest felt icy. ‘Mama?’ she asked softly.

Bruce smiled up at her, squirming a little, a bit shy and unsure at asking things, but the questions were burning too much for him to stop. He turned in her lap and sat up on his knees, tapping in the middle of her chest.

She knew he wasn’t indicating to her per se. The movements were too persistent, asking for something deeper. When his fingers brushed against his lips then tapped at her again, more urgently, but no less gentle, she got it.

‘How would I say it in my language?’

The toddler squeaked, falling back on his backside, as he clapped happily. Curls fell into his face as he craned his neck back up like he was staring up at the top of a skyscraper.

Bruce had always shown such an interest in her language and it strangely meant a lot to her. A part of her wasn’t being forgotten, but meant so much to the beautiful toddler for some reason. He was also freakishly good at it, pronouncing the words fairly well but remembering them outstandingly.

But, for her though, it was like she was passing on a piece of herself, preserving it so it would never die, and to someone who held it close to his heart. For her, it was a special connection she was given with Bruce through this and she felt another wave of love for the baby in her lap, removing the ice from within her when he talked about the word mama.

She playfully tapped the tip of his nose, holding back a chuckle at how his eyes crossed slightly to track the movement then shook his head, sending his curls everywhere to try to straighten his vision, staring up at her as though asking, ‘How do you do that?’

‘Well,’ she ran her tongue over the word, straightening out her voice from any laughter before she pushed on. ‘You say big sister like this.’ She leaned down a bit so Bruce could study her mouth because it helped him with the pronunciation. ‘Bol’shaya Sestra. You see? Bol’shaya Sestra.’

Bruce peered intently at her lips. His own parted and her heart leaped as she swore he was about to speak, but nothing came out. Instead, she could see the wheels turning in his head as she spoke, cementing the words into his mind. She didn’t let her upset show though and pushed on brightly.

‘And Mama is simply Mama,’ she finished with a grin. ‘Though just lather on the accent and people will think it’s somehow different.’

Bruce giggled at her, getting her dry joke. Yes, Clint, she could make jokes. Just because he didn’t get them didn’t mean she wasn’t funny. Bruce got them and they made him smile so that made her hysterical, so there.

The smile faded though as his expressive face became reserved, deep in thought, and he tapped his lips with an index finger, slipping it in to momentarily give it a thoughtful chew.

Hiding her amusement, she sat quietly, letting him sort out what he needed to ask.

A grateful flicker of his eyes to her own indicated he noticed her letting him think and was thanking her for it before going back to deep thinking again. Then, he lit up as he knew how to say what he wanted, clapping his hands together with purpose, slowly and deliberately.

It showed how much she had improved in Bruce’s language that she got what he was saying by the third time he did it. ‘What’s sort of like a combination between the two?’
Bruce outright squealed, patting her leg enthusiastically in congratulations.

Natasha ruffled his hair, lips in a permanent state of being turned upwards, lines around her mouth filled with love and affection. ‘Thank you, malysh,’ she murmured gently, keeping her hand on his head as he peered up at her happily. She paused for a few moments, running her old language through her head. ‘Well …’ she said slowly, thinking his question through. She was never one to just bypass whatever it was the kids asked. If it was important to their little minds, it was important, irrelevant if she could understand why or not. So, she took her time and thought it through thoroughly before answering, which by the touched look on Bruce’s face, he realised as well. ‘I think it would probably be sestrichka.’

It wasn’t insanely accurate, but it was the closest she could come up with. It was a very affectionate term for a sister, so it would be only said to a wonderful sibling. She figured that was kind of a close term for a motherly older sister, who took care of you.

At Bruce stretching up a bit to better see her lips, she leaned down again so he could see.

‘Sestrichka,’ she repeated, watching as his mouth opened, but once again, nothing came out. His little lips were so adorably pudgy while his expression was just so serious, which was the cutest when the toddler was taking something so critically that she couldn’t resist leaning forward and stealing a quick kiss. ‘Mwah.’

Bruce’s mouth dropped open in shock at the stolen kiss, hands coming up to his mouth, eyes huge, before he burst into giggles, which grew when she tickled his slightly protruding tummy.

‘I love you,’ she said softly, because she thought sometimes she mightn’t say directly enough, but instead, through all these gestures that maybe weren’t being read properly.

Bruce simply stood up on wobbly legs and threw his arms around her neck.

It was okay if he didn’t want to talk. He didn’t have to. It was all said in just that there and that was enough for Natasha as she cradled him close. She murmured words to him in Russian, which made him hum in contentment, head tucked up underneath her chin as he sucked lazily on his fingers.

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‘I think I’d take a really good mug shot.’

Steve tossed a withering glare over his shoulder as he walked down the familiar old alleyway to the fire escape. ‘That isn’t funny on one, single level.’

Clint waved that day’s newspaper in his face, making the image of himself fuzz on the front. ‘Look at this picture and see if you think I’m joking.’

‘Get that out of my face otherwise it’s going in the bin.’

‘You have no taste for the aesthetic.’

‘Thor’s new word of the week?’

The guy had an obsession with reading the dictionary at the home and liked to introduce a new word
into his vocabulary every week or two.

The brown-haired boy smiled widely. ‘Yep!’

Steve rolled his eyes, feeling a small smile coming on to his face, his weary mood fading the more Clint goofed around.

Which was obviously his little brother’s plan.

It had been a month since the incident at the water park and it hadn’t been one of the easiest ones they had out on the streets by far.

The nightmares had come, as Steve knew they would. Bruce woke that very afternoon, sweating and screaming for a full half hour before they could get him to calm down. That had woken Tony up, who proceeded to cry quietly the whole time Bruce was upset.

The only thing which finally succeeded in calming them was getting Tony to hold Bruce, which soothed the toddler immediately while Tony swelled with pride upon seeing it.

Steve had been so concentrated on those two that he hadn’t even taken into consideration nightmares for the others. It took three nights, but shockingly, it was Natasha who woke in a fit, punching and kicking wildly in her sleep, scaring Tony and Bruce to the point Thor and Steve had to take them out of the room, leaving Clint to calm her down. After an hour, she came out, eyes red and hair askew. Fear was written all over her face when she saw the little ones, obviously scared they would hold it against her for waking up like she did. However, upon seeing her, Bruce raced over and threw himself against her legs, hugging her fiercely. He still wouldn’t talk, but the message was received loud and clear, Natasha slumping to her knees, expression soft with relief as she took the baby into her arms.

Unfortunately, the nightmares weren’t all founded on unrealistic fears. Steve crept out a few days later for food to see Clint and Natasha’s pictures plastered all over newspapers. Slightly fuzzed images, but clear enough as far as he was concerned, as they disappeared into the panicking crowds that day, saying they were wanted for questioning over an incident where a man known as Thaddeus Ross was assaulted

The picture of him standing proudly in a General’s uniform confirmed him as the man in the park that day. And as Steve stood next to a garbage bin, frantically reading the news article as soon as he saw the picture of Clint and Natasha, his face paled and he had to dash around the back of a little bodega to throw up in privacy.

Ross was identified as the fiancé of Susan Banner. He remembered as strong as yesterday Tony saying he had taken Bruce away from his Aunt Susan. Which meant this man … this man who had went to backhand a child’s face after scaring him and accusing him of being a horrible human being … had access to Bruce. Which was why … why Bruce still wasn’t talking. And how he knew before all of them that Ross was going in to strike Tony.

He came home that day just that little bit more broken. Even though Bruce had been napping, he took the baby into his arms and curled into the corner with him. Clint, Natasha and Thor knew not to bother him and let him do what he needed.

Tony had peeked around the curtain of his cordoned off area, uncharacteristically standing shyly away to see if he wanted to be left alone. Only when Steve opened out his spare arm did Tony come forward, diving into his side and simply staying with him.
‘You knew about Ross, didn’t you?’ Steve whispered after a while. ‘That’s why you took baby, wasn’t it?’

Tony didn’t ask him to clarify; he simply nodded, looking too solemn for a child his age.

Bruce waking up broke the mood, crankily whining at simply coming up from his nap. Soon though, he was all smiles as Tony leaned on Steve’s thigh and made silly faces at the baby tucked into the crook of Steve’s left arm.

Steve wanted to cry, but he had to laugh because Bruce needed to hear those sounds. He’d heard enough of tears and screams to last him several lifetimes.

For the rest of the day, he kept the toddler as close to him as possible, causing Bruce to glance at him in concern sometimes. However, he would break out into the shyest grin when Steve would kiss the tip of his nose. Bruce loved it when any of them did that.

It was decided from that point Natasha and Clint had to stay out of the spotlight for a while. After two solid weeks though, they were going stir-crazy. So they were now going out at times, but always separately so it would be harder for people to jog their memories of the two, and always as incognito as possible.

To say it was stressful was an understatement, which was why Clint was trying to make some light of it now. It helped a little, but Steve couldn’t really shake the anxiousness coating his body until they were all safe and sound in their little haven.

A happy squeal made all the residual tensions just melt away and the smile that shone on Steve’s face wasn’t forced at all.

‘There’s the cutest baby ever!’ All hardness Clint possessed in the outside world disappeared as he dropped to his knees as he held out his arms to Bruce, who was frantically scrambling off Natasha’s lap to race over to Clint as fast as his little legs could carry him. ‘Yes, that’s it, come to Clint,’ the light brown-haired boy cooed and immediately snatched up the toddler as soon as he got within reach, cuddling him close to his chest.

Bruce gave an indistinguishable happy sound, snuggling up underneath Clint’s chin. He had become very clingy to both Clint and Natasha after what happened, as though still afraid tone day they weren’t going to come walking through the door.

Steve immediately pushed aside the thought before it could really take hold.

‘I just got him settled, Clint,’ Natasha grumbled, but the twinkle in her unique green eyes gave away how she wasn’t too put out. Her scrutinising gaze flickered over the both of them, making Steve’s heart clench at what she and Thor must have been going through here whenever the two of them were out. Steve certainly knew because he stayed in a state of permanent nausea when Thor and Natasha had to go out, never leaving until they came back, and then even some.

After placing a kiss on Bruce’s curls, earning him a gummy smile which warmed his insides from the cold of the people on the outside of their little world, he came over and wrapped the red-headed girl in a huge hug. He normally would have gone to steal Bruce away from Clint before he came over to her so he could get his customary hug and kiss, but lately, whenever either Clint or Natasha returned, Bruce didn’t want to leave them for a good while. Steve or Thor had to always wait now until the toddler was satisfied of the two fifteen-year-olds’ well-being then get their greeting. It was more than slightly heart-breaking.
Natasha muttered something in Russian Steve was pretty sure translated into some sort of insult, but she curled into him, fingers clutching into his shirt tighter than usual, so he held on to her that bit longer to silently give her the comfort she needed.

‘Thor and Tony?’ Steve asked as he pulled back, but kept his right arm around her shoulders and she stayed leaning into his side.

He and Natasha could communicate like this. A couple of words here, a quick gesture there, and they both knew perfectly well what the other one was saying.

‘We have arrived!’ Thor suddenly appeared from the hallway leading to the bedrooms, one arm spread out theatrically, while the other held Tony. The little boy’s arms were spread out wide in a ‘Ta-da!’ gesture, smile huge on his face at the stance he was doing, obviously planned ahead by Thor.

Steve laughed, feeling just that bit warmer upon seeing the two of them, particularly the glowing smile on Tony’s face. ‘So I see.’

Thor grinned back, bouncing Tony in his arms, eliciting giggles. ‘What have you got to tell Steve, my little warrior?’

The child puffed up at the nickname before gesturing his arms out as wide as he could possibly go while his smile grew the tiniest bit shyer as he gazed at Steve, obviously hoping for a certain reaction at what he was about to say.

‘I ate all my vegetables at lunch today!’ He announced, chestnut brown eyes and smile turning painfully hopeful.

Steve took his cue immediately, gasping in elated shock as he gave his hands a clap before leaning on his knees to be more on the child’s level. ‘Did you, baby?’

This time, Tony didn’t protest the nickname at all. Instead, he lit up, like he was absolutely glowing, a special little light.

‘Yep!’ he declared, practically palpitating with pride.

‘He was very excited to tell you,’ Thor added with a fond smile and affectionate bounce of the boy in his arms. It was probably on account of the build-up Thor and Natasha would have provided Tony with, saying all the time how proud Steve would be.

It was something they were putting into place after Tony’s admittance of being seen as a bad kid and feeling so insecure that he readily accepted some stupid stranger telling him terrible things. They were trying to build a sense of pride within himself and show what a good, little boy he was, just with things like eating his vegetables or letting himself be taken for a shower.

Tony was soaking it in like a sponge and was showing more and more of his bright personality. Not to mention affectionate, no longer pushing away their cuddles and kisses (though he would cheekily sometimes make a game of it), but instead, taking it all in. He was gradually seeking it out more, a huge step in trust after seeing Steve gave so much love to him that day, even after trying to convince the oldest of what a bad child he actually was.

‘I am so proud of you, kiddo!’ Steve clapped his hands again before striding forward and scooping Tony out of Thor’s arms, holding him high in the air.

Tony squealed, legs kicking in excitement. ‘Throw me up then catch me, Cap!’
The oldest immediately winced at that, bringing the child firmly and safely into his arms. ‘No, Tony, that’s too dangerous.’

Tony rolled his eyes. ‘Thor does it,’ he pointed out, looking too smug for his own good.

Steve sent a glare over at the other blonde, who shrugged sheepishly. ‘He likes it,’ he protested weakly.

Heaving a sigh, Steve begrudgingly admitted (to himself, never to anyone else) that maybe he was a tad overprotective of the two littlest ones. But just a tad.

Instead of arguing his point, he turned a proud smile on to Tony. ‘Such a good boy, buddy,’ he praised. ‘Kiss for Steve?’

Tony blushed, but his chestnut brown eyes twinkled with happiness as he leaned in and gave a quick kiss before turned redder and looking everywhere but Steve.

Steve ‘Aww-ed’ silently at the adorable child. Tony was the sweetest when he went shy at affection. It was seriously too cute.

‘Hey!’ Clint called out. ‘Where’s my kiss? How come Steve always gets one and I don’t?’

Tony giggled, recognising the game and raised his nose in the air snootily. ‘Because Steve’s aren’t sloppy.’

Clint gasped in over-exaggerated hurt, clutching his chest with his free left arm, causing Bruce to blink innocently in concern. He gave the toddler an exaggerated wink to show he was playing.

Not one to be so easily convinced, the sweet toddler gave Clint a kiss as though to make everything better and patted his cheek in a comforting motion.

‘N’aw, sweetheart,’ Clint melted with helpless fondness, cuddling him close, while Steve was sure he wasn’t the only one cooing at the interaction, ‘what would I do without my darlin’ Bub-Bub to make sure I was okay, hey?’

Bruce grew shy at the fond gaze, ducking his head into the crook of Clint’s shoulder, but making sure he was turned enough so he could suck on his fingers.

Chuckling lovingly at the baby, Clint rocked as he began to walk towards Natasha.

When Tony saw where Clint was heading, he perked up in Steve’s arms.

‘Clint?’

Said teenager cocked his head questioningly over at the child.

Absently, Tony fiddled nervously with the frayed collar of Steve’s shirt as he divulged softly, like a huge secret, ‘Um … I ate all my vegetables today.’

Clint’s eyes became inexplicably warm. ‘Oh, buddy, you did too! I’m so sorry, I forgot to congratulate you!’

He immediately came forward, pressing a kiss to Tony’s forehead before quickly stealing a real one, causing Tony to burst into giggles at the teenager’s playful nature.

‘Clint,’ he whined, smile giving away his humour, rubbing his mouth with the back of his hand.
‘Can’t wipe it off, bud,’ Clint said cheerily. ‘It’s there forever.’

‘Is not!’ Tony immediately scowled, slapping his hands down on Steve’s shoulder in emphasis of his point, making himself squirm, causing Steve to tighten his hold on the wriggling boy.

‘Is too.’

‘Is not!’

‘Is too.’

‘Is not, not, not!’

‘Is—’

‘Stop teasing him, Clint,’ Steve stepped in with a sigh, giving the small boy in his arms a comforting bounce, causing Tony to snuggle into him with a little ‘Mm’ sound. ‘He probably hasn’t even had his nap.’

Clint made a face at Steve, but stopped anyway as Tony’s eyes snapped wide open at the last word.

‘No nap,’ he exclaimed, pushing himself up straight as though to show his wakefulness. ‘I don’t need a nap, I’m a big boy.’

Steve glanced over at Thor for confirmation of this proclamation. Tony was still at the stage where he sometimes needed a sleep in the afternoon, but could sometimes get away without one.

When Thor waved his hand from side to side in a ‘So-so’ motion, he knew Tony was actually in a terrible need of nap. The other blonde hated to rat out the little ones with anything they didn’t like doing so for him to indicate Tony may need a rest showed how badly it was needed.

Tony looked up at Steve with a begging gaze, chin trembling. The rapid mood change showed his tiredness because when he needed a nap, it really didn’t take much to set him off. Simultaneously, Tony was being a bit more liberal with the tantrums because it was like he had to check sometimes if the love he received was going to change. That was only at times though. Mostly, it was because he was tired and now comfortable enough not to hold it all back.

Immediately Steve gave his forehead a kiss to try to soften his words, but Tony simply whined, sensing what was coming.

‘Just a quick one, sweeties,’ he cooed, threading his hand through the silky hair as Tony gave a broken sob at his words, like he was condemning the child to a timeout. It may as well have been with the way the poor little guy was reacting. ‘I know, I know,’ he soothed, ‘it gets so hard when the day gets further on, doesn’t it?’

‘Steve,’ Tony cried, going into a wail when the older one began to rock towards the hallway and he reached out frantically to whoever was nearby, which happened to be Natasha as she hopped up from her chair to try to comfort him a bit.

‘Oh, solnyshko,’ Natasha kissed the little hand, but avoided the boy getting a grip on her, which only increased his distress, which made her give his palm a kiss as well. ‘It will all seem better after a nap.’

Tony shook his head, causing his hair to fall into his face, and reached out again, crying out as Steve moved further towards the hallways, effectively putting Natasha out of reach. He began to pat Steve
frantically on the shoulder.

‘No … no,’ he cried. ‘No, Steve, I … I want … I want …’

Steve stopped in his tracks immediately. Poor Tony could never get the words out of what he wanted (or really needed) because he was always too scared of what the reaction would be. Steve was determined for him to be able to finally vocalise what it was he did need.

Giving the shaggy hair a stroke, pulling back the strands sticking to his face from the tears, Steve gave the soft cheek a kiss as he continued to stroke Tony’s hair, rocking the little boy as he continued he weep.

‘Okay, sweeties, deep breaths for me,’ he soothed, giving the boy’s backside two pats. ‘Deep breaths then you tell Steve what you want and he’ll see what he can do.’

Hiccuping with his tears, Tony snuffled into Steve’s embrace, resting his head on the other’s shoulder.

‘There we go,’ Steve murmured, pressing another kiss to the hair. ‘It’s all okay. You think you can tell me what you want, baby?’

Tony whined a little at the name and Steve was more than shocked to see his thumb go into his mouth. The child never sucked his thumb. Once, when he was napping, but when he woke, he had rubbed the digit so vigorously on his shirt, giving a decisive nod like he had officially erased the incident.

And here he was, doing it in front of them all without even trying to hide it. Clint looked worried over the fact, but was trying to hide it while he shushed Bruce, who was full of sympathetic tears for his older brother, crying softening just a fraction when Tony’s did.

Natasha simply looked expectantly at Steve, like he would know exactly what to do while Thor mouthed, ‘It’s actually a good sign.’

At the statement, Steve relaxed, not realising how stiff he had went in fear. Thor made a really good point. It wasn’t that Tony was so upset he was sucking his thumb; it was actually he was comfortable enough to finally do what he sometimes so obviously wanted to.

Keeping up the patting of his backside, he murmured words of comfort until Tony was simply sniffling, thumb still in his mouth while his other arm had come up and was wrapped firmly around Steve’s neck.

That little sign of affection made warmth chase away all the anxieties clinging at skin, just making him feel contented for once.

‘What do you want, my baby?’ He asked softly, swaying gently, Tony completely limp in his arms.

The child whimpered and murmured something as he wiggled slightly.

Steve comfortingly tightened his hold. ‘Come on, kiddo,’ he coaxed. ‘You can tell me anything. I promise.’

Again, Tony stayed quiet for a few moments. Then, he turned and nuzzled his damp face into Steve’s neck.

‘I want to stay with you,’ he choked out through his tears, arm tightening around Steve as he cuddled
in as close as he could.

Then and there, Steve knew he was sunk; Tony was going to live the rest of his life sleep deprived
because there was no way Steve would ever be able to say no to him from now on.

‘Oh, kiddo,’ he breathed, wrapping Tony up in his arms as tight as he could without hurting him,
shoulders slumping helplessly in defeat. ‘Oh, kiddo, of course you can stay with me.’

Natasha raised her eyebrows at him and he knew she was mentally calling him an absolute push-
over, yet, if he would have refused, she would have come over and decked him.

‘I think you have a little admirer,’ Thor said fondly. He came over, rubbing a large, gentle hand over
Tony’s back, trading smiles with Steve, the oldest knowing his must have been absolutely smitten
with the little boy in his arms.

Clint saw it because he made another face at Steve. ‘Stop looking so damn smug,’ he grumbled. His
words were softened with a wink before he turned his attentions to Bruce, who still hadn’t stopped
crying softly.

Shifting the toddler so he was being cradled, Clint lovingly nuzzled the baby, talking in a low,
soothing voice until Bruce was simply murmuring little sounds back of, ‘Uh … uh, ma.’

‘Yeah, I know,’ Clint hummed understandingly, nodding along to Bruce’s ‘words’. ‘You don’t like
it when big brother gets upset. He’s okay though. Just tired. A bit like you I think, hmm?’

‘He’s had a nap,’ Natasha chimed in, curling back in her seat now everything was settled. ‘I think
he’s still a little sleepy though.’

‘You reading to him?’ Clint indicated to the book, nostalgia seeping into his tone as he quirked his
head.

Before Natasha could reply, Bruce sat up a bit in his arms and patted his chest. ‘Ah!’ he said,
pointing to the book.

The light brown-haired teenager smiled down at him. ‘Yes, book!’ He agreed, gently cleaning the
toddler’s face of tears, Bruce placidly allowing him to. ‘Do you want Natasha to read to you again?’

Bruce immediately began anxiously sucking on his fingers and Clint hid a wince as he realised his
mistake. The toddler was still a bit iffy on being asked what he wanted so they had to word their
sentences not to put him on the spot and make him worry he was requesting something too much,
which had obviously been an issue for him in the past.

Luckily, Natasha jumped in. ‘I know I really want to.’

The baby’s elated little gasp had Steve trading another fond, amused smile with Thor.

Clint laughed, giving him a gentle bounce, before handing him over to Natasha, who already had her
arms up for him. ‘I think that’s a yes, Nat.’

‘I think so.’ Natasha easily settled Bruce in her lap and he actually went for his sippy cup, happily
sucking on it as he leaned back against her, looking so comfy. His left hand came up to intertwine in
her flannel shirt, causing Natasha to gently rub the tiny fingers fisted into the material

It was really the perfect idea for sleepy children to get them to drift off without letting them know
you were.
‘Mind if we join you?’ Steve asked, patting Tony’s back as he whined. ‘Both of us, sweeties, I’m not going anywhere. I promise.’ Bringing his hand up to cradle Tony’s crown and lean his head on the child’s silky hair, he reiterated. ‘I promise.’

Unlike so many times before, Tony settled, not fighting against the words, but instead, relishing in them as he gave a contented sigh.

‘Not at all.’ Natasha waved him forward then placed a hand on Bruce’s tummy, rubbing comfortably as he squirmed a little, making him still, as she grabbed the novel off the arm rest.

Finding her place as Steve sat on the other arm rest, leaning against the back, she began to read, velvety tones so tangible and settling after the drama. In his peripheral vision, Clint and Thor snuck off, not wanting to cause any noise to stir Tony up and lose out on a nap he badly needed.

‘Sandy grabbed Thomas’s hand as they ran across the playground together. It wasn’t necessary. They weren’t crossing the road or in a crowd where he could get lost. But she still did it anyway and Thomas loved the sensation. It grounded him to the world around him which was constantly trying to let him go. But Sandy’s hand anchored him, refusing to release him no matter how much the universe tried to rip him from her grasp.’

Bruce watched the pages avidly, giving an absent sip from his special cup now and then, so caught up in a story he had heard so many times. On the other side of the scale, the arm curved around Steve’s neck began to loosen more and more. Until, finally, it slumped to the side and Tony snuffled around his thumb in his sleep, losing the battle even though he had battled valiantly.

After about half an hour, when Bruce showed no signs of nodding off, Natasha finished off a chapter and laid the novel aside, movements so graceful as she then threaded her fingers through Bruce’s curls.

‘How about some milk now, hmm?’ She asked and only then did Steve realise the cup was practically empty.

Bruce made a noise, which indicated he was easy either way, before finally tearing his attention away from the novel, able to be diverted now Natasha had stopped reading. He gazed up, immediately zeroing on his big brother.

Tony was still completely out for the count, thumb now only half in his mouth, eyes shut peacefully, not squinting like he did when caught in the midst of a nightmare. Instead, his whole expression was totally slack, breathing noisily through his mouth. His cheeks were still a little ruddy from his tantrum earlier, but Steve had made sure to wipe his face clean of tears and snot. Even in his sleep, Tony had whined about getting his face cleaned, but luckily, hadn’t woken up, Natasha’s tones and Steve’s rhythmic pats to the backside allowing him to sink back into a deep slumber.

An adoring smile spread across Bruce’s face at seeing his big brother at peace and he made soft cooing noises.

Steve chuckled down at the adorable toddler. ‘Yes, your older brother is napping, baby boy. He was tired, wasn’t he?’

Bruce looked up at Steve from behind his fingers, expression so open and innocent, not attempting to move from his position of laying back on Natasha, not to mention Natasha was still playing with his hair, which was something he enjoyed greatly.

The oldest grinned down at the baby. ‘I’m getting my hug and kiss later too, mind you.’
Shyness immediately overtook the toddler and he squirmed in Natasha’s lap, caused the red-head to rub his tummy, the strong angles of her face, showing off her Russian heritage, soft with fondness as she rested her head to the side on her hand, regarding Bruce with a crooked smile.

For some reason, the action caused Bruce to concentrate intently on Natasha for a moment, craning his head right back to the point it must have hurt his neck a bit.

Natasha looked down at him, shaking her head slightly as she laughed softly, ‘Hi there.’

Blinking thoughtfully, Bruce turned back to Steve, using the hand that was free from his mouth to pat insistently at Natasha’s thigh, giving soft little grunts.

‘Yes, that’s Natasha,’ Steve said, part amusement, part confusion. While it seemed that was what Bruce was indicating, he didn’t think he was quite right.

That assumption proved correct though as Bruce shook his head, a little distressed as he whined.

‘What’s the matter, malysh?’ Natasha asked, frowning with concern. ‘Do you need me to get something for you?’

Again, Bruce shook his head, a little desperate as he tried to sit up, but was too sleep-heavy to do it. Natasha easily reached down, slipping her hands under his armpits, lifting the toddler into a sitting position.

Honeyed brown eyes glanced back, regarding Natasha with such an intensity, to which Natasha quirked her lips back, trying to gather what was in the child’s mind, as Steve knew he was.

However, determination suddenly flooded the intelligent gaze. Turning back to Steve, Bruce pulled his fingers out of his mouth, patted Natasha’s leg again and proclaimed, ‘Sestrichka.’

At first, Steve thought it was some of Bruce’s indistinguishable baby talk. By Natasha’s reaction though, he quickly realised it went so much deeper than that.

Fingers flying up to cover her mouth which was quickly crumbling, she gasped, so soft, trying to make it silent, but after years on the street, Steve could hear it, as well as her trembling breath. She didn’t cry; Natasha hardly ever did, especially around the children, but her eyes glistened, causing her unique green irises to glitter like tiny emeralds.

Just because she didn’t downright shed a tear though didn’t fool Bruce. Within a day of knowing him, Steve knew the observance skills he possessed were uncanny.

The toddler squirmed so he was turned back around and wrapped his little arms as far around Natasha as they would go, leaning his head on her chest, just where her heartbeat was, which was his preferred position with all of them.

‘Shh, sestrichka,’ he murmured. ‘It’s all wight. You should be happy, not sad.’

After not hearing the husky little voice for a full month, the sound immediately brought a lump to Steve’s throat. Managing to detach a limb from Tony and not disturb the boy, he wrapped his arm around Natasha’s trembling shoulders. The girl was helpless to do anything, but keep one shaking hand over her mouth while using the other to clutch Bruce tightly to her, as though afraid he would disappear.

‘She is, Bruce,’ Steve choked out, unable to swallow away the tightness in his chest and heart. He smiled reassuringly through his blurry vision as Bruce looked up at him unsurely. ‘She really is.’
Unlike with most children, that statement didn’t confuse Bruce. He simply nodded in understanding and held Natasha until she could speak again, exactly how she would have done for him.

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Steve knew what people thought. That he didn’t have a family because it wasn’t the traditional type of one. Two parents, siblings by his side, maybe a dog, even a cat.

He’d had something close to the traditional family unit once. He remembered his ma … how she danced, smelled, felt … and always would. While he didn’t remember those important things about his pa, the memory of that old photo would never fade.

But there were these faces. These faces by the names of Clint, Thor, Natasha, Tony and Bruce. They were his world … his life … his soul. While their lives were never going to be a fairytale adventure, if he could wake up to those faces every day, he was finally complete again, having been giving back the pieces of his heart that had been shattered when his ma had to go far too soon. They had taught him how to live again, making him feel just overwhelmed with emotion at the love he had for them, a truly indescribable feeling, unable to be defined with a single word or definition.

These faces were his family and no one could ever tell him any different. Because no one knew better than him what family was and who they were to him. And these faces were, without a single doubt … even through every hardship and nightmare … his family.

Chapter End Notes

Letting you all know, this ‘verse is OPEN FOR PROMPTS! You have a scene you would really like to see? Please let me know and I will do my best to write it.

Note as well to my other prompts: Believe me, they are all still there. I am not writing it in order of getting them, but just when I'm hit with how to write one, I will write it. So, please know, they are all written down and being slowly worked through :).

Comments and kudos will always be greatly appreciated :D! They spur me on, which is why this chapter was brought out so fast :).

End Notes

Comments and kudos are hugely, hugely appreciated :). I would love to know what you guys think of this ‘verse :D.

Peace and Love to you all and so nice to be back :D. Lots of love, you guys :D.
Works inspired by this one:

[Hood Doesn't Make a Family] by [TheGriefPolice]

Please [drop by the archive and comment] to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!