

## Childhood is the Kingdom Where Nobody Dies

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# Childhood is the Kingdom Where Nobody Dies

by [MemoryDragon](#)

## Summary

Seven-year-old Tony Stark wakes up on a Hydra base, lost, afraid, and alone. He has to overcome his fears before it's too late for the Avengers and Captain America.

## Notes

**Disclaimer:** I do not own the Avengers movie-verse, nor do I make any claim to.

**Warnings:** Child abuse, implied child abuse, implied bullying, PTSD, torture (mostly off screen), a child seeing death first hand. All of that as seen through the eyes of a seven-year-old, so proceed carefully. Also, there are teddy bears. Teddy bears are A Thing.

**Rating:** M, for the fact I traumatize little Tony quite a bit.

**Thanks:** Many thanks to narwhale\_callin once again for the beta, even when the first page scarred you.

**Notes:** First of all, take a look at all of those warnings, and look at them carefully. This is not a fun romp of the Avengers taking care of their de-aged team mate. This is an attempt at a realistic portrayal of a child who gets captured by Hydra, and it's not pretty. I'm told the first five hundred words or so are pretty intense. More intense than the rest of the fic, at any rate. If you find it getting to be too much, you can skip to the part with "'Hello?' a voice in the darkness said.' That should get you over the worst of it. Just realize this isn't a happy place for little Tony to be in, and he does get hurt and see the results of the Avengers being tortured. There is also a moment where little Tony watches as an unnamed Hydra goon is killed, and it's rather traumatizing once he realizes what happened. So please take into consideration your own comfort levels before reading this fic. It has a happy ending, and there is cuteness to be had, but it's also not pretty for a good portion of it.

The title of the fic comes from a poem of the same name by Edna St. Vincent Millay, who is an awesome poet if you've never heard of her and want to check her out. This particular poem was far too perfect for this fic to pass up.

Finally, this was supposed to be my Big Bang, but I team fic'ed too hard and the mods have told me it's not Steve/Tony enough for the fest. Which makes me a sad panda, since there will be no pictures of little Tony giving Cap a teddy bear. But it means you get to read this all the sooner, so there's a silver lining. XD Whizzy has told me that though it's too team fic for the BB, it's still pre-slash and therefore post-able to the com, so not all is lost. But yeah, it's another slash fail for me. This should surprise no one. In fact, I'd rather planned on this being completely gen considering Tony spends most of it as a seven-year-old and pedophilia creeps me out, but Cap was being an adorable bastard after Tony grew up again and decided he

wanted pre-slash. And really, you try telling Steve no when he pulls out the puppy dog eyes. It just doesn't happen. So yes, pre-slash in the end. For those of you who haven't been scared away by the warnings, please enjoy the fic!

Edit: Now with an awesome translation in Chinese over [here](#)! Registration is required to view it. Please check it out!

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

*"You are of no use to me in that broken form, worm. Perhaps this one will suit my needs better."*

A bright glow soothing the pain was the last thing Tony Stark remembered after that voice. He fell unconscious before he could wonder if he'd wake up again.

\* \* \*

Tony woke up to hear men yelling above him. This wasn't his bed at home! It was hard and cold, and his hands were held above his head. Rough hands grabbed at him as Tony screamed and kicked at whoever it was. And he saw a dark-haired man with golden eyes and a gold collar around his neck watching impassively.

Where was Mom? Jarvis? Who were these men and how-

Tony stopped screaming as a hand slapped him hard. The shock of the pain made him tear up, but the angry voices were still yelling, and yelling at *him*, even though he couldn't understand them. He knew enough to know they'd hurt him more if he was loud, so he trembled and cried silently, like he would at home when Dad had been drinking. He stopped struggling as well, though the rough hands didn't stop *hurting*.

He looked up at the man whose bruising grip on his arm had yanked him forward, only to find that it wasn't a man at all. It was more of a monster, tall and black, with large metallic eyes and no skin. In his other hand, there was a gold-colored remote. Tony bit back a whimper of fear, trying to pull away from it. Aliens? But this wasn't how alien kidnappings were supposed to go. He was supposed to find some cool technology and use it against them like they did in the movies. But Tony was too scared, and the movies didn't mention that aliens *hurt* people.

He held back a yelp as the alien yanked him forward again down a dark hallway that seemed to go on forever. Finally, the alien pulled open a door and shoved Tony inside. He scrapped his knees and bit back another cry of pain as he hit his head against the wall. The door shut on him, leaving him alone in the dark. It was even scarier in the dark.

Tony hurt all over, and he curled up on the floor where he'd been tossed. He tried to stay quiet, because Dad only hurt him worse if he made noise. Whoever these aliens were, they were probably the same, right? If Tony just stayed quiet, they'd forget he was here and wouldn't hurt him anymore. Except it was dark, and he wanted someone to find him, but he couldn't...

It was too hard. He hurt so bad from where the alien had hit him and from where he knocked his head, and he was so very *scared*. It was hard to stay quiet, and every so often a soft sob escaped him that he couldn't hold back. "Mom..." He cried as quietly as he could. Aliens weren't nearly as cool as the movies made them seem, and they hurt him and he just wanted to go home to Mom and Jarvis. Even Dad didn't hurt him this much when his father had a bit too much to drink.

"Hello?" a voice in the darkness said.

Tony looked up in fear, despite not being able to see anything in the darkness. And that was almost worse. It was so black that he could almost see a monster forming out of it. Tony hid his face behind his knees and focused on being quiet. Aliens didn't have heat-sensing vision, did they? Maybe if he was quiet, they wouldn't find him again.

"Hello?" the voice said again, slightly muffled as if he were talking through a wall. Tony couldn't help the small sound of fear that he made. "Hey, I won't hurt you, I promise. My name is Steve. What's yours?"

The voice sounded hurt too. Tony recognized the slight hesitance in the voice that Tony sometimes used when he tried to convince Mom that he wasn't hurt. Did the aliens hurt the voice too? "Are you with the aliens?" Tony asked, uncertainty shaking in his voice.

"Aliens?" the voice asked, his voice slipping into a familiar accent. Steve was also from New York! He couldn't be one of the aliens. "Oh, you mean the Hydra soldiers. I'm not with them, I promise," Steve assured him.

"Hydra?" Tony asked, lifting his head again and biting back a whimper at the pain the movement caused.

"Did they hurt you?" Steve asked, his voice low and urgent.

What kind of answer did Steve want? Mom only smiled when he said he was fine, while Dad told him if anyone asked, he should say it was an accident. But if it was the aliens that hurt him, would it be okay to tell the truth?

"Hello? Are you still there?" Steve asked.

"I thought Captain America killed Hydra," Tony said instead of answering.

"I thought he did too," Steve said, his voice soft and full of emotion. "I'm sorry, but he didn't get all of them."

Steve sounded really sad as he spoke, and his apology was sincere instead of condescending. Tony still felt mad that Steve would say something like that though. "You're lying! Captain America wouldn't have missed any. Dad said Cap got them all! How do I know you're not with the aliens too?"

"I'm sorry," Steve said again, sounding like he was going to cry now. "Captain America got the leader, but he..."

Tony immediately felt bad, like the times he made Mom cry. Steve didn't sound like one of the bad guys. They spoke in harsh, guttural sounds that Tony couldn't understand. Steve was from New York, so he couldn't be with them. "Maybe they're copy-cats?" Tony said, his words rushing together in his haste to get them out. "There was an article in the paper about that where bad people sometimes copy other bad people, like the girl who was murdered last

week. She was just like someone who died years and years ago. My mom wouldn't let me read the article, but Dad was talking about it to-

Something moved in the darkness, and Tony yelped. He ducked his head again, trying to hide. He wasn't afraid of the dark. Starks weren't afraid of stupid things like that. Dad said so when Tony wanted his nightlight back. He'd spanked Tony so hard that night that Tony had forgotten to be afraid of the dark while he tried to keep from crying because of the pain. But there were aliens, or Hydra, or whatever they were here, and maybe there was something in the darkness that wanted to hurt him more and-

"Are you alright?" Steve said sharply.

"It's dark," Tony said, his voice trembling despite how much he didn't want it to. "I saw something move."

Steve said some very bad things that Mom had once told him never to repeat. "Would you tell me your name?" Steve asked again after he'd calmed down.

"Tony," he replied after a moment's hesitation. Steve had already given his name after all, so maybe he wouldn't want ransom if he knew? He wasn't with the bad guys, but Jarvis always told him to be careful with strangers.

"Tony," Steve repeated in surprise. "I've got a friend named Tony. He's one of the bravest people I've ever met. Do you think you could be brave like my friend Tony?"

"I'm scared," was all Tony said in response.

"I know," Steve said gently. "So am I."

"You're scared too?"

"Yeah, I'm scared too," Steve said, and for a moment there was silence. Dad said never to admit that you were scared, but this man did just that. It made Tony feel a little better, because at least Steve wouldn't tell Dad if they were both scared. "It's okay to be scared," Steve continued. "But that doesn't mean you can't be brave too. And if you can be brave for a few minutes for me, I might be able to help you make it less scary."

Tony considered it before the darkness moved again. "What do I do?" Tony asked desperately.

"I need you to stand up and look for the door you came through," Steve said.

Oh, was *that* all? Tony bit back the sarcasm though, remembering too well what happened the last time Tony had said something like that to Dad. He didn't want Steve to get angry with him and not help any more. "That's where the dark moved," Tony said instead, proud that his voice only quivered a little.

"I know," Steve said soothingly. "But by the door, there might be a light switch, and you'll feel better if you can see, right?"

There was one word Tony latched onto. *Might*. "What if it's not?"

"There's one in this room. There should be one in with you too," Steve said.

"Can't you turn it on instead?" Tony asked, not wanting to get closer to the movement.

There was a sharp gasp on the other side of the wall, and Tony crawled closer to it, closing his eyes so he wouldn't see the darkness move. "Steve? What happened?"

"I'm sorry, Tony," Steve said, his voice filled with pain. "I can't... I can't move right now. You're gonna have to find it yourself. You just have to be brave for a little while. Can you do that for me?"

Someone was hurting Steve, and he was still trying to help Tony. Tony bit his lip, opening his eyes long enough to peer into the darkness. Starks weren't afraid of the dark. "Yeah," Tony said, closing his eyes again. It wasn't so bad if he couldn't see the darkness, right? Tony swallowed down the fear of what might get him regardless of having his eyes closed.

"Do you remember what direction the door was?" Steve asked.

"I think it was that way," Tony said, realizing a second too late how pointless saying it was. It wasn't like Steve would be able to see him even if they were in the same room.

"Good," Steve said. "You're doing good. Hold your hands out in front of you and walk in that direction slowly. Be careful."

Tony stood, hesitating for a moment before he did as Steve said. The darkness felt endless. "I can't find it!" Tony said, panic rising.

"Just keep moving forward," Steve said. "It hasn't been that long. You can do this, Tony."

Biting hard enough on his lip to draw blood, Tony took another step forward. It was only two more steps before he found the door. He could feel the wall, and the ridges where the door was sealed. "I'm at the door," Tony said, feeling a little more confident.

"You're almost there! How tall are you, Tony?" Steve asked

"Three feet, four inches and a half," Tony said, though the half was only if Tony stood on tiptoe. Steve didn't have to know that.

"That's pretty tall," Steve said approvingly.

"I'm seven," Tony said, only sulking a little at Steve's condescending tone.

That got a low chuckle from Steve. "I see. I used to be smaller than that at your age."

"Really? That's *really* short."

"Hey, don't knock it," Steve said. "But I don't think that's tall enough to reach the light switch, so you'll have to find something to stand on."

"Okay," Tony said, keeping one hand on the door as he felt along the wall. There was nothing within reach though. "I have to let go of the door."

"It's okay, just remember where the door is so you can find it again. You can count your steps if you need to. You're doing swell, Tony. Don't give up yet."

"No one says swell anymore," Tony said, then froze. Had he made Steve angry? Would he stop helping Tony find the light switch because he talked back?

But Steve just laughed quietly, his breath hitching slightly in pain. "That's what my friend Tony tells me," Steve said finally.

"It's true," Tony said uncertainly. It didn't sound like Steve was mad. He pressed against the door one last time before moving away carefully. His head still hurt, but he forced himself to keep going, searching the ground for anything he could stand on. "I think I've found a step stool," Tony said, running his hands along the small step.

"That's great! That's... awesome? 'Awesome' sounds like something my Tony would say. That's 'hip' right?"

Tony debated if he should say anything. Steve didn't seem to mind earlier... "Stick to 'swell,' grandpa," Tony said without any of his normal confidence.

"No modern slang, got it," Steve said as Tony dragged the step stool back to the door. "Make sure it's sturdy before you step on it."

Tony rolled his eyes in the darkness, feeling a lot better once he had both the step stool and the door within reach. He wasn't a baby. Step stools were meant to be stood on.

That confidence faded when he heard a gasp of pain on the other side of the wall. "Steve?" He asked, hearing the fear in his voice slip out before he could stop it.

"The light switch is on the right," Steve grit out. "Sorry. I... I may pass out for a bit. I'm..."

"Steve!" Tony yelled, leaving the door to pound on their shared wall. "Steve!"

He didn't get a response, but he kept pounding at the wall until he heard the harsh voices again. They were yelling a lot and... were they hurting Steve more? "Hey, stop hurting him!" Tony yelled, pounding harder. When that didn't work, he went back to the step stool, nearly tripping over it in his haste. He frantically searched for the light switch. He panicked when he couldn't find it, his fingers brushing over the smooth wall as his fear grew. "Steve!" He yelled again, reaching up as far as he could.

His fingers just brushed the tip of the switch. He jumped up, hitting the switch and tumbling to the ground as the room was flooded with light.

His arm hit the floor with a sharp thud, and he felt his eyes tear up again as the pain from it and the light overwhelmed him. Cradling it against his chest, Tony forced himself to breathe and wait for his eyes to adjust. It didn't hurt as bad as when he broke his arm last summer, and Dad told him not to cry them. He hadn't even cried when he busted his lip and needed six



stitches, and Jarvis had said he'd been very brave. He couldn't cry now either, even though he was scared and hurt, and Steve wasn't answering. He couldn't.

Finally the voices next door stopped, and Tony looked around the small room. It was a supply closet, just large enough to hold a few cleaning supplies and Tony, despite the fact it had seemed bigger in the darkness. Nothing that could have moved in the darkness. His cheeks burned as he realized that. He'd been afraid for no reason at all!

Hesitantly, he stood and tried the door. It was locked but... Tony looked over broom in the corner and did a few quick equations in his head. If he angled the broom just right and applied the right amount of pressure, he could break the knob. He'd seen Dad do it once when the door to the bathroom had gotten stuck.

He reached for the broom tentatively, pushing it up at the angle he hoped would work.

\* \* \*

Thirty minutes later, Tony rigged up the shelves to fall on the broom, which should give it the force his seven-year-old body lacked. He was about to take out the final screw when he heard a soft groan from the other side of the wall. "Steve?"

"Hey," Steve said, his voice weaker than before. "Did you get the light on?"

Tony scrambled to the wall, hands splayed out against the faded grey. "I got the lights on. It's just a closet, but if I make the shelves fall down, it'll hit the broom and knock out the door knob. I tried to knock it out myself, but I'm not strong enough, so that's why I'm bringing down the shelves. Are you okay? Because I heard those people yelling again and-"

"Slow down, partner," Steve said, cutting through the torrent of Tony's words. Tony's mouth snapped shut and he remember to breathe at the end of his sentences. Steve didn't sound mad, at least. "I'm... I'm fine. They just took too much blood last time, faster than my body could replace. What were you saying about bringing down the shelves?"

Now *there* was the disapproval Tony heard so often. Rather than explain and have Steve forbid him to do it, Tony went back over to the last screw. "There might be a loud crash," was all he said before he pulled it out and gave the shelves a shove.

"Tony, what are you-"

The resulting crash and dust cloud swallowed up whatever else Steve might have said. Tony ducked his head, hoping nothing too heavy fell on him as he coughed. Thankfully, only a bottle of cleaning solution clipped him on the shoulder.

As the dust settled, Tony looked up to see the mess he created. There were cleaning supplies *everywhere*, which given the amount of dust in here, obviously meant they weren't used too often. But the door knob hung off the handle as the broom lay flat underneath it. "Whoa," Tony said, surprised that his plan actually worked.

"Tony? Are you alright?" Steve's voice held both pain and panic as Tony crawled over the wreckage of the shelves.

"The door knob is yanked out," Tony said cheerfully, pulling out the handle and considering the lock. An easy fix. He sorted through the cleaning supplies until he found a feather duster. He quickly stripped it of the feathers, using the wire inside to push at the lock. He barely contained his shout as the door opened. "I got it open!" he said as he jumped over the shelves to the wall, careful of his bad arm. He'd bumped it enough already. "I can get out!"

"Tony, you have to be careful," Steve said. "There are more soldiers out there. You should just stay where you-"

"I'll pick the lock and get you out too!" Tony said excitedly, bolstered by his success. The thought of Hydra soldiers was long gone as he put the feather duster wire in his pocket. He'd picked all sorts of locks before, when Dad tried to lock him in his room for discipline. As long as it wasn't the closet with the furniture pushed over the door, Tony could get out. And that didn't happen often anyway, because Jarvis had gotten very angry with Dad the last time it happened, saying something about talking to the press.

"No, Tony! Stay where you-"

But Tony wasn't listening. He'd turned on the light and unlocked the door, and the scary men weren't around, so Tony felt like he could do anything.

He pushed open the door and looked around carefully. There were no guards outside, like they didn't think anyone could escape. There was a little red light blinking in the corner of the ceiling, but Tony didn't take much note of it. It was really stupid of them, not to post a guard or something.

To his surprise, Steve's door wasn't even locked! The doorknob turned easily in his hand. "Steve? Steve, your door isn't locked! You can come out and-"

Tony cut himself off with as gasp as he looked inside, seeing Steve - seeing *Captain America* - for the first time. He was held down by bindings cutting deep into his skin, and there were three drips of blood being drawn from his body at an alarming rate. "Cap?" Tony asked, awe mixing with fear in his voice. He'd been talking to Captain America! And Cap was hurt...

"Tony," Steve... *Captain America* said, struggling weakly at the bonds holding him. It caused the blood to run faster through the tubes. "You've got to leave."

Cap stopped struggling as Tony inched forward, fear threatening to overwhelm him. Cap was safety though. And Cap would get them out of here. "I-I can pick the locks," Tony said, his voice only wobbling a little. He blinked back tears because he needed to see to pick the locks. He couldn't be afraid now.

"The alarm is..." Cap started, shaking his head as if to clear it. "The alarm's already gone off. They've got cameras."

"Cameras?" Tony asked. He hadn't seen any in the hallway, but as he glanced around the room he saw another blinking red light. This time, he noticed it was attached to some sort of device with a lens. "I'll g-get you out!" Tony said again, pulling ineffectively at the bonds around Cap's wrist, forgetting he had to pick the lock first in his fear.

"No, Tony," Cap said, shaking his head. "If you want to help me, you have to get out. Find Phil Coulson of..." Steve gasped in pain, but forced himself to continue. Tony immediately stopped tugging at the bonds, fearing he'd hurt Cap. "Phil Coulson of SHIELD. Can you remember that?"

"Phil Coulson of SHIELD," Tony repeated, looking at the bruises along Cap's wrists and neck from where the bonds bit into him. They scared him. "But I can't-" Tony didn't know if he was going to say 'leave Cap' or 'run through a Hydra base by himself'. He was terrified, and he didn't want to do either.

"You have to be brave, son," Steve said, "but you've got to leave now, before they..."

Cap trailed off, his eyes closing. "Cap?" Tony asked, abandoning his thoughts on the bindings to try to shake Cap, but he had even less success moving over 200 pounds of muscle. "Cap!"

"Find Coulson," Cap said, opening his eyes as a loud clatter was heard down the hallway. "Tony, run! You've gotta..."

"I..."

"Run!"

Tony ran, rushing out the door and nearly running into the guards as they screamed in their harsh language. He let out a sharp yelp, then ducked between their legs before they could grab hold of him. Their yelling got louder as he ran, and soon it was followed by loud bangs. That sound Tony remembered all too well from his father's workshop.

They were shooting at him.

Tony ran faster, because he knew his math. He could calculate the force and velocity faster than they could shoot, and he knew the kind of damage a bullet that small could do to him. He'd seen it too, when Obi took him on base, telling him that these bullets were why Dad made weapons. To protect the soldiers, so they could shoot first and better. He'd seen soldiers at the VA hospital that Dad's weapons had failed to protect, and for the first time Tony wondered if he couldn't make them better. He didn't protest the next time someone asked him if he was going to grow up and make weapons like Dad.

When something hit his arm, Tony cried out, but he kept running, turning down a hallway and looking for places to hide. He was very good at that, being the youngest and smallest and smartest in his classes. So when he saw a set of boxes, he hid behind them before the man turned the corner. Loud boots and harsh language rang through the hallway as they ran by, splitting into groups at the next junction.

Tony waited until the sound of their boots was gone before carefully looking over the box. The coast was clear, and he had to keep moving before they came back to search again. He'd learned that the hard way once, with some of the other kids in his class. He looked around, running back to the way he came as quietly as possible, his heart pounding and his arm hurting a lot. Tony bit his lip again, because he couldn't cry, not while the men were still looking for him.

He found a small crawl space close to the ground, but it was covered by a grate. He reached into his pocket for the feather duster wire. His arm hurt, but he could still use it, and he pried the grate off with as much strength as he could muster.

Tony jumped at the clang the grate made when it finally crashed to the ground. People were yelling again, and Tony trembled as he crawled through. He pulled the grate back in place, but it wouldn't stay put. Boots were stomping closer, so Tony leaned it up against the wall as best he could before crawling away.

Tony climbed as far as he could before his arms gave out and he curled up against a curve in the air duct. He couldn't hold it back anymore, and his breath hitched as he clutched at his arm. Captain America was hurt, and Tony didn't know where he was or how to help.

Crying softly, Tony curled up tighter as he tried to stay silent. The scary men were still looking for him, and the thought just made him tremble harder. But he had to be silent, or they'd hear him. Tony was good at being quiet, but his breaths kept hitching no matter how good he was, making small little noises. Tony was too scared.

"Is someone there?" a soft female voice asked.

"N-no!" Tony said, before he could stop himself. "Don't..."

"We won't hurt you little one," the woman said. "It's okay."

"How do I know you're not with them?" Tony asked suspiciously.

"Come a bit closer and see for yourself, kiddo," a male voice said. He sounded like he was in pain, but trying to hide it. "You don't have to come all the way out. Just close enough that you can see."

Tony tried to think of all the tricks they could use to get him out if he got too close, but he was too scared to think of any and they spoke English. Maybe he had wandered far enough away from the bad guys?

He crawled closer to the voices, hesitantly peering out past the grating to see a couple cells. This one had proper iron bars and everything. Inside the cells were two people, separated by more bars. The space was too small for them to get through, but Tony might be able to squeeze through. They both... They were both beat up really bad. Tony saw the blood on the woman's leg and her foot was twisted at an odd angle that made Tony sick when he looked at it. The man's arm hung limply at his side, and he had a lot of cuts and bruises along with a black eye. They sat next to each other on the ground, not quite touching, but not apart either.

Tony pushed the grate out, crawling through the duct on trembling arms into the woman's side of the cell. The blond man smiled at him, a crooked grin that seemed out of place in such a scary place. "Hey, kiddo. How'd you get lost in a Hydra base?"

"I-I don't know," Tony said, trying to hold back the tears. He clutched at his arm, trying to focus on the pain rather than how much he wanted to cry. Dad said big boys don't cry. "I just woke up here and there were men yelling and I couldn't understand them and they put me in the dark and they have Captain America and he's hurt and-"

"Shh," the woman said, reaching out and pulling Tony into a hug. Tony stiffened for a moment, before hiccuping and clinging to her.

Did the guards have cameras in here too? Tony didn't know, but the gentle hands on his back were soothing, and Tony only cried a little. "You won't tell Dad that I cried?" he asked in between hiccups, the thought making him tremble more. "He doesn't like it when I cry."

"Do you see anyone crying, Nat?" the man said as he winked at Tony. "'Cause all I see is a smart kid who's managed to keep from getting captured."

"I'm in a cell now," Tony said with a little snuffle. He refused to cry anymore, because these people seemed nice. Maybe they could tell Dad he did well, and Dad wouldn't be angry?

"How did you hurt your arm, angel moy?" the woman asked, one arm still holding him while her fingers gently probed at the wound. Tony reminded himself he shouldn't cry, but before he could answer, the woman started to speak angrily in another language. Tony flinched away. What if they really were the bad guys?

"Nat?" the man asked, eyes narrowing as he looked at Tony's arm. "They were shooting at you," he said darkly. "Hydra shoots at *kids* now. You grow up hearing they were the scum of the earth, but that's low even for them."

"Are you one of them too?" Tony asked the woman when he'd gotten his courage up. "Because you started talking like them. Only it's different."

"I was speaking in Russian, kotyonok," the woman replied with a small smile. "And you should not repeat what I said. The guards speak German."

"You're Russian?" Tony asked, relaxing a little. Russians were bad too, but at least they hadn't kidnapped him. "Dad says Russians are Communists, and that's bad."

"I defected," the woman said with a smile. "The shoe closet alone was worth the switch. I don't look back."

"Yeah, and now she lives with one of the biggest capitalists in the world. We both do," the man said.

"Oh." That sounded alright. As long as she wasn't a communist anymore.

"It looks like it was a graze," the woman murmured as her fingers brushed over his arm. Tony flinched, but didn't cry out. She smiled approvingly at him. "And you are strong. You'll live."

"So this is Natasha, and I'm Clint. What's your name, champ?" the man - Clint - said. He ruffled Tony's hair through the bars.

"I'm Tony," Tony said, watching them both trade glances. "I'm seven," he added, because he didn't want them to think he was younger just because he'd been crying.

"We've got a friend named Tony," Clint said. "Though I think you're smarter than him, since you're not captured. I'm not letting him live this one down."

"Captain America said he knew someone named Tony too," Tony said.

"Yup," Clint said with a smile. "We're all on the same team. You a fan of Cap?"

"Dad says he's the best!" Tony stated. Besides, everyone knew that.

"And what do you think, little one?" Natasha asked.

Tony ducked his head shyly. "I think he's the best too," he said. But thinking about Cap made him remember what he'd been running from. "They were hurting him though. They were hurting him bad."

"Don't worry about Cap," Clint said. "He *is* the best. And he always beats Hydra too, right?"

"Yeah," Tony said, rubbing his nose as Natasha snorted. Cap always defeated the bad guys. He had to.

"But now we've got to get you out of here," Clint continued. "It's not safe for a kid around here."

"Are there cameras?" Tony asked, looking for the blinking red lights. He hadn't seen any earlier, but he wasn't very good at recognizing them in the dimmer lights.

"No," Natasha snorted. "They are old-fashioned and underestimate us. Even their torture could use some work. I've seen worse in Africa. All the cameras are out there." She pointed outside the bars and into the hallway. "Stupid," she said, disgust in her voice. "Plausible deniability is one thing, but not keeping an eye on us when no one is in here is idiotic."

"Don't knock it," Clint said. "I'll take stupid villains over smart ones any day, even if it means admitting being caught by them in the first place."

"Do you know your way around the vents?" Natasha asked.

When Tony shook his head, Clint gestured to the right. "That's north. You want to go east. Can you tell me which direction that is?"

"I'm not three," Tony said, pointing behind them.

"Watch it, kid. You get much sharper and you'll cut yourself." Tony scowled. He hated being patronized, but Clint went on. "Head east, 'cause the bad guys are stupid and that section isn't

well guarded. If you can't do that, then hide where they can't find you. Look for cameras and run by when no one else is looking."

"Find some place safe," Natasha said. "Only get out of the building if there's no one around, kotyonok. If you can, find Coulson."

"That's what Captain America said!" Tony exclaimed, only to be shushed by Natasha for being too loud. Tony looked down shamefully, but she pat his hair soothingly instead of hitting him, so maybe it hadn't been too bad.

"You've got a pretty good memory, kiddo," Clint said. "Try and remember this for me as well. Tell Coulson that Banner and Thor are being controlled by a collar around their neck. Got that?"

"Banner and Thor?" Tony asked, less checking to see if he got it right, because he could remember two names easily. He was curious though, why those two people got collars when the others didn't.

"They're the biggest threat," Clint explained, reading Tony's question even if he hadn't asked it out loud. "And they're useful mindless, unlike us. With those collars, they wouldn't actually be able to get information out of me and Natasha, which is what they're keeping us around for."

"The guards will be making their rounds soon," Natasha warned. "This isn't a game, little one. You could get yourself killed, so don't take chances."

Tony felt his eyes go wide at that, and he looked down. "I'm scared."

"Good," Natasha said, but she hugged him again. "Remember that. You have to be careful. But you also have to be brave, angel moy, or they'll kill you as well."

"Bright and cheery as always, Natasha," Clint said, rolling his eyes. Then he winced as Natasha pinched his good arm.

"I'm Russian. We learned not to sugar coat such things, as it only leads to more death," she replied easily. "Can you be brave, kotyonok?"

Tony looked up and nodded, even if he didn't know if he could be. Captain America needed help and was counting on him. "But what about you guys?" he asked, biting down on his rising panic. "You'll come with me? I can open the lock."

Natasha and Clint traded glances. "Can you, kid? Despite the medieval bars, the lock is electronic with a keypad," Clint asked.

"A distraction would work," Natasha said. "I can-"

"Both of us. He's small, and we're too beat up to follow," Clint cut her off. They spoke with their eyes for a long time, and Tony looked between them with growing confusion before Natasha gave him a curt nod.

"Kay, work your magic, kid," Clint said skeptically. "But you hide immediately if we tell you to. No arguments."

"Okay," Tony said, standing up and slipping through the bars. It was a really tight squeeze, but Tony was small for his age and he didn't always get to eat when he was at boarding school if too many of the bullies were around, so he managed.

The lock was too high for him to reach, but there was a box of tools not too far away. Some of them were covered in red, and Tony quickly closed it, feeling like he wanted to throw up. He missed Natasha's hug, but the compassion in her eyes and the encouragement in Clint's helped him swallow down the bile.

He looked for cameras, but they were pointed away from the box, and Tony was able to shove it over to the lock when he put his full body weight behind it. Tony climbed on top of it, and pulled at the lock's interface. That was easy to rip off, revealing the wires underneath. He set to work hot-wiring the door.

Clint whistled. "You actually seem to know what you're doing," he said, glancing down the hall.

"I've never seen one like this before," Tony admitted. Dad had the most advanced locks in the world, but they didn't come close to the wiring on this. Still, where the wires went to didn't change no matter how advanced it was. Tony just had to find the right ones.

"Another thing they've got in common," Natasha said quietly, a thoughtful expression on her face. "The resemblance is too strong."

"If you're gonna do this kid, make it quick," Clint said. "The guards will be here soon."

Tony crossed a red and yellow wire, biting back a yelp of pain as it shocked him. He couldn't afford to make that much noise! He bit his lip, making it bleed again, as he kept going.

"Kid, are you alr-"

The bars of Natasha's cell slid up, retreating into the ceiling. He pushed the box over to Clint's cell, ignoring the surprised looks. He climbed up on the box again, preparing to start on the next lock.

Natasha's hands stopped him though, pulling him away from the interface. She was standing, not babying her bad leg at all. That had to hurt. "I have to-" Tony started.

"I saw which wires you used," Natasha said, pulling the interface off for him. "You need to start getting away. Go back through the vents."

"You're not coming with me?" Tony asked, fear making him freeze. Natasha didn't look up from the wires as she started pulling them out just as Tony had, but he could see the tension in her body.

"You'll be safer with out us, little one," she said, pausing long enough to pet his hair once. "You remember which direction to go?"



"East," Tony said, tugging at her belt.

He looked up as Clint ruffled his hair with his good hand from the other side of the bars. "You can do this, champ. You just gotta be brave. We'll create a distraction for you."

"You'll get hurt more," Tony said miserably.

"Only if we get caught again," Natasha said, her lips quirking in the barest hint of a smile.

"You'll save Cap?" Tony asked, because if they were going to save Cap, then Tony could understand. If Tony could find a way out, then they could follow! It sounded like a good plan, but Tony was still terrified of having to do it by himself.

"We'll save Cap," Clint reassured him. "Now scram, kid. Get out of here and find Coulson."

"Be brave just a little while longer, little one," Natasha said.

Tony licked his lip, trying to wash away the blood that was gathering there, then nodded. He took off back towards the vent that was low to the ground, pulling at the grating and resetting it once he was inside.

"So about this not getting caught thing," he heard Clint say.

"We're a distraction," Natasha replied. "How fast can you move?"

"I was afraid you'd say that. Well, let's go make some noise."

He heard the cell open and then footsteps fading to nothing. They wouldn't lie to him, would they? They wouldn't get caught just so Tony could get away?

He nearly crawled back out again, but a loud blaring noise came through the walls. Tony had to cover his ears in pain. The sound of boots started to thunder through the hallway, so Tony tried to crawl away as fast as he could, taking the turns as they came and not caring about the direction.

It wasn't long before he was completely lost. Tony panicked, not knowing which way was east anymore. He wanted to go home. He wanted Jarvis. He wanted-

The alarm shut off abruptly, and the silence was nearly deafening. Tony could only make out his own pounding heart.

"Hello, little boy." Tony jumped at the voice with the heavy accent, looking around and seeing no one. It must have come from an intercom in the hall. Dad had things like that in Stark Industries.

"You have caused us no end of trouble," the voice continued, deep and old-sounding. "But if you come out now, we won't hurt you. I promise we'll take you home."

Tony considered it. He wanted to go home so badly, but if he went out now... Would anyone believe him if he said Captain America was in trouble? Dad wouldn't even believe Tony had

actually seen him. Who would help Cap then?

Besides, would they really take him home? They were Hydra soldiers, and that meant they were bad guys. They were probably lying to get him to come out. Maybe other seven-year-olds would fall for that, but Tony was smarter.

"We have your friends here," the voice said. "The Black Widow and Hawkeye. Say hello to them."

There was silence, then a few harsh words in German and a sharp cry that sounded like... That sounded like Clint. "I would hate for anything to happen to them, ja?" the man said, and Tony started to tremble. "That would make me quite sad, to see them hurt. Even Captain America wouldn't hold up against my soldiers. They are very good at what they do."

They were going to hurt Captain America! Tony bumped his head in his surprise. He couldn't... He had to go east. Find Coulson. That's what Clint told him.

"You have fifteen minutes, boy. Come out by then, or I will kill one of the spies. I only need information from one of them, after all."

He was going to... Tony climbed through the vents frantically. He had to find Coulson! If he didn't, the others would die, and... and...

Tony scraped his knee on the vent floor, but he kept going. Finally, he found a grating into the hallway, and he pushed it open, tumbling out in his haste. There was no one in the hall, and no cameras, so Tony quickly ran in one of the rooms.

Unfortunately, he also ran into a giant green monster with glowing yellow eyes.

Tony yelped, scrambling back as the monster growled, the collar around his neck gleaming. A man with a remote like the one Tony had seen when he first woke up was shouting and pointing at him, and Tony only had a few seconds to run. He dashed over to the shouting man, running behind him as the monster roared and swiped at him.

The man screamed and there was a sickening crunch. Tony turned around to see him sliding down the wall, his eyes wide in fear and unmoving. For a moment, all Tony could do was stare back, not quite comprehending what that blank stare meant.

The monster roared again, and Tony could only duck and run for cover. He hid under a nearby desk, only to find it lifted in the air and tossed aside by the monster.

He ran away again, realizing too late he was going back to the man with wide eyes. But there was the remote on the floor next to him that was the same color as the monster's eyes. Tony grabbed it just as a large hand wrapped around his middle. "Stop!" Tony yelled. He pressed the biggest button he could find and the monster roared, stumbling back as electricity jumped from around the monster's neck. The monster dropped him to the ground, and Tony's foot hurt with the impact when he fell.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" Tony yelled, smashing at the button again to turn it off. The monster stopped roaring in pain as the electricity stopped. It glared at Tony. "I'm sorry. I'm really sorry," Tony said, looking down at the buttons.

"I don't know which one to push," he said, feeling tears form in his eyes. The monster wasn't trying to hurt him, but he couldn't tell if that was because he had the remote or because he needed orders. "Please, they're going to hurt Clint and Natasha and Cap. You have to help them!"

The monster just stared at him, growling softly. "Please," Tony pleaded, pressing other buttons on the remote. "How do I make it do what I say?!"

He pushed at the buttons, careful to stay away from the one that hurt the monster. "You have to help them! They're gonna die if I don't find Coulson. Please!" he repeated, only just hearing the click as he pressed a small button on the left.

Tony looked up to see the gold fading from the monster's eyes, and they were turning green like the rest of him. The collar around the monster's neck opened, and one big green hand crushed the machine like it was a fly.

"Oops," Tony said, clutching at the now useless remote.

The monster roared, and Tony had to cover his ears as what felt like a gust of wind gusted through the room. Tony tried to scramble back, but a hand around his middle kept him from moving, and he opened his eyes. He was lifted off the ground and brought face to face with the monster. Tony gulped. "Are you gonna eat me?" he asked. "I'm sorry I hurt you, but if you're gonna eat me, you should know I don't-"

"Puny runt," the monster said with a snort that ruffled Tony's hair. "No meat on bones. Taste bad."

"I was just about to say that, but I'm not a runt!" Tony said, kicking at the air as he tried to wiggle free. He stopped when the monster growled again. He didn't look at the man on the ground, because the eyes scared Tony. Why didn't the man move?

The monster grunted, his other hand coming up to wipe away the tears on Tony's cheek. It was surprisingly gentle. "Why Runt cry?"

"Because - Because they're gonna kill Natasha and Clint. And they're hurting Cap because I wasn't good. I couldn't find Coulson, and I wasn't good enough, and now everyone's getting hurt!" Tony babbled, trembling when he closed his eyes only to see the man's wide ones staring back at him.

The monster roared in rage, but he didn't squeeze tighter. "Please," Tony repeated. "You gotta help them."

The monster put Tony down and started to walk away. Tony had lost his chance to control the monster, but he couldn't fail again! He spared a glance back at the man who still hadn't moved, shivering. He didn't know if Tony could do anything for that person, but maybe he

could convince the monster to help the others. And the in the back of his mind, Tony already knew there wasn't anything to be done for the staring man, but he pushed that thought away for later. "Please!" he cried, running after it, tugging on one of its massive fingers. "Please, you have to-"

The monster turned and roared in Tony's face, but Tony held his ground. It didn't stop him from trembling, but he didn't move back. "You've gotta help them," he said, his voice only trembling a little. "Please."

"Hulk help," the monster growled. "Iron Runt stay."

Tony blinked, then smiled widely. "So you're gonna help? You're not really mean, are you? Your name is Hulk? You're pretty awesome now that you're not scary!"

The Hulk looked down and snorted, but Tony thought he looked amused. "Tin man not change," Hulk said, and Tony had no idea what he was talking about, but Hulk was going to help and Tony wanted to be friends.

But the Hulk stopped again and growled, moving in front of Tony protectively. Tony peeked around the big green leg to see a man wearing some really awesome armor and long blond hair. He even had a *cape*. Not even Captain America had a cape. How awesome was that? Except his eyes were glowing yellow and there was a collar around his neck, along with a really heavy-looking hammer in his hands.

"Is he mind-controlled too? Like you were?" Tony asked, looking down at the remote he still held. He pressed a few buttons, but nothing happened. Maybe the remotes were only connected to one collar? Tony thought that was really inefficient. He could make one that could switch between frequencies to talk to all of them. He was not impressed at all with Hydra's technology.

Hulk just smirked, roaring at the man. "This will be fun," he said, before launching himself at the man with the hammer. They both went right through the wall, leaving a gaping hole in the brick.

"Whoa," Tony said, stepping around the bricks carefully. "*Awesome*."

Hulk and the man were going at it, trading punches and growls. Hulk didn't hold back, looking almost gleeful while beating the other man up. But neither of them were winning, and they still had to save Clint and the others. Maybe if he could find the remote controlling this man, he would help too?

Tony stayed far away from the fight, looking fearfully at a crack that followed him along the wall as Hulk was thrown into it. He watched while Hulk leaped back into the fight with an earth shattering roar, relief spreading through Tony. He didn't want his new friend to be hurt, even if that head butt Hulk gave the blond man looked pretty painful.

Tony scrambled over to the desks, looking for the remote. He didn't find one. He could fix the remote in his hand if there was time, but there wasn't. Tony jumped at the Hulk's roar, looking over to see a very smug green smirk as Hulk sat on the man.

"Goldilocks stupid with collar," Hulk said as the man tried to get him off. Hulk just roared and hit him again.

Tony looked at the collar. There was a glowing yellow button on the front that might disable it, but Hulk was occupied holding the man down. The man still looked plenty dangerous too, and Tony would have to get close to take it off. As Hulk gave a grunt of pain when a kick hit his shin, Tony swallowed and dashed forward. He climbed around Hulk's green limbs and reached for the man's neck.

The collar reacted, shocking Tony and Hulk painfully. Tony cried out as Hulk roared, but he still reached forward as he pressed the button. There was a soft click before Tony blanked out, mercifully slipping into unconsciousness.

\* \* \*

Tony woke up in a warm embrace that made Tony think of home. It was like he'd always imagined Dad's hugs would feel like, safe and inviting, with pride in his eyes for once, instead of being disappointed. It couldn't have been Jarvis, because the arms were much stronger and younger. He hurt all over, but the hug felt nice.

Tony opened his eyes to see the man from earlier, looking down at Tony with the gold gone from his eyes. "Our young warrior is stirring," the man said, his frown deepening when Tony whimpered from the pain. "I am sorry, little one. You were hurt because I..."

"Goldilocks still stupid," Hulk growled, and the man bowed his head.

"Aye, that may be true. Certainly too proud to see the trap before us, and I should have learned that lesson twice over," the man said. He looked at Tony again, who just curled up against the warm arms. "I am Thor Odinson, little warrior. I would that I could take your injuries from you, but I can only lay my life at your feet and ask for your forgiveness."

"It hurts," Tony said, not entirely following Thor's odd speech.

"We must take you to the human healers. They will-"

"No!" Tony said, pushing away from the man and biting his lip against the pain. "You have to save Clint and Natasha! And Cap! They're gonna kill Clint and Natasha because I wouldn't come out, and they're hurting Captain America. You have to help them!"

One of Thor's massive hands wiped away the tears on Tony's cheek as he hiccuped, not caring anymore what Dad would say if he saw. He couldn't let anyone else get hurt because of him. When he closed his eyes, he could still see the man from earlier that Hulk had thrown against the wall. That man's eyes still followed him. "You are indeed a brave and honorable warrior for one so small," Thor told him, pride in his eyes that warmed Tony to the core. It wasn't Dad, but it was like Jarvis or Mom sometimes, and Tony soaked in as much of the emotion as he could. "I wish I had half the bravery you show when I was your age. I will grant you this request if it is within my power, gladly."

"Runt stay this time," Hulk grunted.

Before Tony could protest being left alone again, Thor shook his head. "Nay, shield brother. The child is safer with us than on his own."

Hulk snorted, but didn't argue, starting to prod down the hallway. "I can walk," Tony said, because if Thor was going to save the others, he would need to use his hands.

Thor set him down gingerly, and it *hurt*, but not as badly as when he'd been pushed against the desk, so Tony hid it. He was good at hiding. Though he did miss Thor's hug.

They walked through the hallways as Tony wondered how much of the fifteen minutes they had left. What if it had passed while he'd been knocked out? Were they-

Natasha dropped down from the ceiling in front of them, swaying on her feet before she regained her balance. "Natasha!" Tony cried, running up and hugging her tightly. "They said they were going to kill you and they were hurting Clint, and there was a man who didn't move and won't close his eyes."

"Shh," Natasha said. "You were supposed to run away."

"I found Hulk instead," Tony said, his panic giving way to a little smugness.

It earned him a low chuckle and a pat on the head. "Good work, kotyonok."

"You do not look well, Lady Natasha," Thor said, moving to support her. She leaned on him, taking the weight off her bad leg.

"Been better," Natasha said, shaking her head. "Took out their com systems and stopped the needles from digging into the Captain. He'll be out once he gets his strength back. Hawkeye is still captured. Iron Man's status is unknown."

"Then let us end this," Thor said as Hulk growled in agreement.

Natasha was about to say something when a group of angry German voices were heard down the hallway. Before Tony could look, Natasha curled around him, pushing him down as gun shots rang out. Tony cried out, but he didn't struggle as an arm wrapped around him and picked him up.

Natasha ran, carrying him as he clung to her, the deafening shots sounding out around them. His ears were ringing, but Natasha kept going even as she kicked a gun out of the hand of someone who got too close.

Suddenly, Natasha stopped running. Tony looked up when the silence rang through his ears even worse than the noise, and it took him a moment before a familiar German voice started to make sense. "-surrounded, Black Widow. I think this time, you shall not evade recapture so easily. Surrender."

"Fat chance," Natasha said, putting Tony down and shoving him behind her.

"Do not worry, we won't harm the child," the man said smugly. Tony peered at him from behind Natasha. He looked older, bald and wearing a monocle with some sort of weird armor

on his arm. He also had a sword, which seemed pretty random to Tony when everyone else had guns. "At first, we punished the Asgardian for his trickery, but I've since seen this for the gift it is. We will raise the little genius as a scientist for Hydra."

"I wouldn't ever join you! You're the bad guys!" Tony yelled. He started to step forward to yell at him properly, but Natasha pushed him back, sparing him a small glare to tell him to stay put.

"If you're not going to hurt him, how are you going to persuade him?" Natasha asked suspiciously, leaning off her bad leg as if she couldn't put her full weight on it any more. Her posture was screaming that she was hurt, which was weird, because Natasha was even better at hiding hurt than Tony was.

The man chuckled, though Tony didn't see anything funny about it. "We can be quite persuasive, I assure you. Before Schmidt went off on his fool's errand to find the Tesseract, he was looking into other formulas for the super serum. He funded research on the ZEMO chemical I developed. The chemical didn't work as well as planned, but it can be very useful for brainwashing. Unlike the collars, it leaves the intelligence intact."

"I don't want to," Tony said, fear running through his voice.

"We won't let them, angel moy," Natasha said calmly.

"And what can you do to stop us? You are wounded and surrounded. Even the legendary Black Widow cannot get the child out of this," the man said.

"I don't have to," Natasha said as a large green Hulk burst through the ranks, followed by a bolt of lightning. She stood up straight again, shaking her head. "Just have to stall long enough for the rest of the team to get here. Thank you for cooperating while giving me information."

"Wow," Tony said, watching Hulk toss the soldiers aside as Thor threw his hammer at them.

"Come on, little one," Natasha said, grabbing his hand. She was limping more now as they ran, and Tony tightened his grip on her hand in worry.

Even with Thor and Hulk fighting, they were surrounded again quickly enough. Natasha punched the first one down, but the monocle man grabbed Tony while she was fighting. "Help!" Tony screamed as he kicked at the man desperately, trying to bite him. But he was being held up by the armored arm and it started to glow with a scary, intense light. "You will stop fighting!" the man demanded.

The silence that fell was only interrupted by Hulk's growl. "Let him go, Strucker," Natasha said as she took a step forward. "We'll come quietly if-"

Tony screamed as his arm was twisted back, pain flooding through him. Natasha stopped moving and she held out a hand in front of Hulk as he roared.

Tony didn't want the zemo-whatever. He didn't want to be a bad guy. He was scared, and the others couldn't help without hurting him. His lip trembled, but Tony didn't cry. Bullies liked it when you cried, and Dad hated it.

The man shouted in German to the soldiers, and they started to surround his friends again. "No!" Tony shouted, kicking and punching as hard as he could. He wasn't let go, but he heard the man swear as Tony's foot came in contact with his leg. "Let me go! Let me-"

The man cried out and dropped Tony, a loud metallic clang ringing through the air. Tony was grabbed again before he could scramble away, but as he started to struggle, a voice in his ear said, "Easy kid. We're getting you out of here."

"Clint!" Tony said, hugging the man who carried him with one arm. "You're alive!"

"I'm not the only one," Clint said, and Tony looked up to see Cap catch his shield.

"Stand down, Baron Strucker," Cap commanded. Tony's mouth formed a small 'o'. "You're the one surrounded now, and you've just lost your advantage."

The monocle man shouted again and fighting resumed, but this time Clint held Tony tightly, and Hulk stood in front of them, tossing aside anyone who got too close with a loud crack that made Tony flinch. Suddenly, all Tony could see was that man's wide eyes staring back at him - unmoving because he couldn't anymore. Because he was- "You don't have to watch, kiddo," Clint said over the clamor. He knelt down, setting Tony in his lap to free his good hand up to turn Tony's head away.

"The others-" Tony started, then cried out as another shot went off too close. He buried his head against Clint's shoulder.

"They'll be okay now," Clint said, hugging him tightly as he shielded Tony from the fight. "Just be brave a bit longer, okay? Then we'll get you home, I promise."

The sounds of fighting finally died down, and Tony peeked over Clint's shoulder to see Cap's knock-out blow to monocle man. All the other soldiers had been taken care of by his new friends. "Is it over?" Tony asked, just as more footsteps came running down the hallway. He ducked against Clint's shoulder again as Hulk roared.

Clint relaxed, however, as the footsteps came to a halt. "'Bout time you got your ass here," Clint said.

Tony looked up to see lots of people in black suits surrounding them. Natasha swayed on her feet, letting one of them support her weight before she collapsed. The man helping her stand frowned. "Language, Hawkeye. What's a kid doing on a Hydra base?"

"Who's he?" Tony asked suspiciously.

"That's who I told you to find," Cap said, kneeling down beside them.

"I found Hulk first," Tony said, moving away from Clint. He didn't want anyone to think he was scared now that everything was over, especially not if they were going to talk to his dad.



Cap looked really tired, like he was only just a little more steady on his feet than Natasha was, but he looked Tony over for injuries. Clint leaned back against the wall, closing his eyes tiredly. Only Thor and Hulk were in good shape. Tony swallowed hard.

But Cap smiled weakly, ruffling Tony's hair. "You did. You were very brave, Tony. Without you, we'd still be captured. Thank you."

Tony felt his eyes go wide as Cap spoke. He looked down. "I didn't... and I was scared and..." And someone died, just like the Hydra soldiers still in the room, because of Tony, but he couldn't tell Cap that.

"You did save us, and you were very brave, especially if you were that scared," Cap said, pulling off the cowl so Tony could see his face. Steve's face. "You did a good job. I'm sorry we couldn't help you sooner."

Tony bit his lip, trying to keep back the tears. Like Thor, Cap looked *proud*, but from Cap it meant more than it would from even Jarvis. "Would you... Would you tell Dad that? You're Captain America, so he'll believe you. He likes you. So if you tell him that, maybe he'll like me more? Then he won't yell and-" Tony snapped his mouth shut. He wasn't allowed to talk about that.

Hulk growled and Cap's eyes hardened. Tony didn't dare look around to see the other's expressions. He'd said too much, and now they didn't like him anymore and-

He was pulled into a tight hug, Steve's arms wrapping around him comfortably. "I'll tell him," Cap promised as Tony's small fingers fisted in the big white star on his chest. "And I'll make sure he doesn't yell, or anything else, alright?"

Tony nodded against Steve's shoulders. Suddenly, it was all just too much. Everything hurt, and people were dead, and he was scared because Dad would yell anyway, after everyone was gone. He didn't want Steve to leave. The first sob that shook Tony was hard, and it hurt even more than the shock had. He couldn't stop the second or the third, and soon Tony lost track completely as he cried himself out against Captain America's shoulder.

\* \* \*

He heard the sickening crack and saw the man's eyes wide in fear. Tony reached out to shake him, but the man just stared blankly up at him. Tony tried to close his eyes, to not see, but the man's face reflected back at him, fracturing into millions of blank stares like a broken mirror. Tony screamed, but the eyes wouldn't go away.

"He's having a nightmare!"

"Hold him still."

Cap? Tony looked around wildly, but Cap was strapped to the chair again, blood dripping away as he stared with the same wide eyes. No. No, Cap couldn't die. Was that Tony's fault too? Cap couldn't-

"Sleep without bad dreams, angel moy."

There was a pinch on his neck, and the dream faded. Tony slipped into darkness, this time the fear of it being overwhelmed by the relief that he'd no longer have to see those eyes.

Tony woke up again some time later, his head foggy as he tried to make out the soft voices speaking around him.

"-very good at hiding. He's also good at hiding pain. There could be a lot of reasons for that, but given what he's said-"

"He's not going back to his father."

"Captain, there may not be much we can do. Social Services-"

"You're an organization of spies! If you can't-"

"Steve, Phil is right. We may not be able to do much."

That was Natasha. And Steve was here too? Then meeting Captain America wasn't a dream! And Steve sounded really angry. "You're acting like this is an option. It's not."

"Steve-"

There was a very loud growl that Tony recognized as Hulk. "Are you really going to argue with the Hulk?" Steve asked conversationally. "He's been awfully protective of the little guy. He won't even change back into Dr. Banner."

A man whose voice Tony didn't recognize sighed. "Fine, get me a name and I'll see what I can do. But we can't save every abused child, Captain. As much as I'd like to, that's not what SHIELD is for."

Tony felt a large hand running through his hair. He wanted to curl around it, since it was nice and warm, but his body still felt heavy. "I know, Phil. I know. Just... I want to save this one. We wouldn't have gotten out of here without him. It's the least we can do," Steve said, weariness in his voice.

"We'll do what we can, Steve," the man promised.

"Any luck finding out who the kid is?" Clint asked.

"He doesn't fit the description of any missing persons," the unknown man said. "Or any kid geniuses, and I've had the team scouring the country's small town newspapers for any matches on that."

"A first I thought he might be a clone. Maybe even a illegitimate child, no matter how careful he is," Natasha said thoughtfully. "The resemblance is uncanny, and this little one is too much like..."

"Any news on Iron Man yet?" Steve asked quietly.

"The security is encoded, and since Hydra was just moving into this base, the cameras are a hit and miss anyway. Without Iron Man's help, it's taking longer than normal to crack the code. But we'll find him. Thor and my agents are still searching."

"Check the perimeter too, in case they needed to dump the body."

"Captain, that's-"

"A possibility," Steve said darkly, a hint of grief in his voice. "We haven't been able to find Tony anywhere else, and Hydra might have gotten too rough."

A silence fell as Tony thought that over. They were looking for Tony? But Tony was right here! Maybe they were talking about the other Tony? Steve said he'd had a friend named that.

Hulk snorted as Tony managed to open his eyes. "Iron Runt awake."

"I'm not a runt," Tony said, attempting to rub his eyes. Steve helped him sit up and drink some water. Tony looked around to find Clint and Natasha in makeshift beds like him, and Clint's arm in some kind of sling. Natasha looked pale, but she smiled at him. Hulk sat on the floor with his arms crossed over his chest next to Tony's 'bed' made out of pillows and blankets on a few boxes. He glared at anyone who got too close to Tony.

Steve, still in his Captain America uniform, had his cowl off and was sitting off to the side. A man in a suit stood not far from him, and Tony tensed.

"That's just Coulson, remember?" Clint said. "He's a good guy."

Tony nodded, but he didn't relax. Suits meant he was someone important, usually one of Dad's friends from work. And if Tony didn't behave, then Dad would get angry.

Natasha and Clint shared a glance, but Coulson kept a pleasant smile on his face, stepping away from the bed without looking like he was moving away from Tony on purpose. There didn't seem to be anything special about the bland man, but the others said he was a good guy. Maybe he had secret super powers? "How are you feeling?" Coulson asked.

"Head feels fuzzy," Tony said, not mentioning that he hurt all over, because that might sound like he was a baby, and Dad would hear about it.

"That would be the sedative we gave you. It was a small dose, so don't worry. It should go away soon," Coulson said.

"Tony," Steve said, smiling down at him. "I'm glad you're feeling better."

Tony looked down, not able to meet Cap's eyes. They had to have found out about that man who died by now, and even if not, Tony had acted like a baby, crying in front of everyone like that.

"Tony?" Steve asked, but Tony still didn't look up.

"Hey, kiddo," Clint said, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. "When you were going through the vents, did you see anyone else captured like us?"

It was a change of subject that Tony latched onto. He hadn't seen anyone else while going through the vents, but he still remembered the voice in his head when he woke up and the other man with the collar. "There was someone. He had a collar like Thor and Hulk. He was there when I woke up."

Tony hadn't noticed it before then, but the tension in the room lifted, and Steve let out a breath of sharp relief. "Then he's still here. If they had a collar on him, that's why he wouldn't have gotten back to us yet."

"Why would they use a collar?" Natasha asked, shaking her head. "He'd be useless to them like that, unless they meant to prep him with that chemical Strucker spoke of."

"We can ask the prisoners once they start talking," Coulson said. "Right now we need to-"

"Sir! The crews have found a wall that-"

Tony went tense again as another man in a suit walked in. Coulson's eyes slid over him, then everyone else, before he started to take off his suit jacket. "Take off your suit if you're coming in here," he told the other man calmly.

The new guy blinked. "Sir?"

"Your tie too, please," Coulson said, tugging his own off in a single, efficient motion. He unbuttoned the top few buttons of his shirt before putting his hands in his pockets. He looked more casual like that, and despite the fact that Tony knew he was still a suit, he didn't feel as scared when Coulson took a step towards him.

The other man just stood there, bewildered. "Sir, are you-"

"I gave you an order, Agent. Follow it," Coulson said, waiting patiently.

Immediately, the man started to strip, almost sweating under Coulson's steady gaze.

"What's going on?" Steve asked, looking just as baffled.

Clint just grinned, giving Steve a thumbs-up with his good hand. "Just trust him, Cap. It's easier that way."

When the suit jackets were off, Tony felt better, though he couldn't have said why. And though Coulson never once looked his way after that sweeping glance around the room, Tony thought he knew anyway.

"You were saying, Agent Moore?" Coulson asked, looking completely calm. Tony wondered if that was his super-power. It seemed pretty awesome.

Nonplussed, the man continued, "There's a wall down on the south side that the crews think lead to a secret passage. We're looking for a way to open it now, but Thor wants to just knock

it down."

"Do it. We may not have time to find the switch. Contact me if there's any news," Coulson said. The man nodded, then picked up his jacket and tie and left.

"Do you think he's on the other side?" Steve asked.

"We can hope."

Tony looked around at his new friends but didn't meet their eyes. It was good that they'd find this other Tony. Maybe then they'd forget about all the crying he'd done and then wouldn't tell Dad.

"You're awfully quiet, little one," Natasha said. "What are you thinking about?"

Tony looked up briefly, then back down. "Dad's gonna be mad," he said.

Steve's expression turned stony as the Hulk roared, but Clint just grinned. "Nah, we won't let him, okay kid? We got your back. And if all else fails, Cap'll tell him, right? Your Dad will listen to Cap."

That made Tony feel a little better, but when he closed his eyes, the dead face of that man stared back at him.

"Tony?" Steve asked, moving closer. "You're trembling."

"He's dead," Tony said, panicked.

"Your dad?"

"The man with Hulk's remote." Tony felt the words tumble out of him no matter how he tried to keep them back. "I was trying to hide, but Hulk hit him instead of me. But it wasn't Hulk's fault, because he was being controlled, so it had to be my fault for trying to hide. I ran past him and he got killed and I keep seeing his eyes and he won't move-"

"Oh, Tony." Steve pulled him off the bed and into a tight hug. "Slow down, Tony. Breathe. It's okay."

"But he's dead!" Tony yelled, feeling tears welling up again.

"And that's not your fault." It was Coulson who spoke this time, sitting on the edge of the bed and rubbing Tony's back as Steve held him.

"But-"

"You were right to try to hide. It wasn't your fault this man didn't do the same," Coulson said soothingly. Everything he said sounded reasonable, like it was the natural conclusion to come to. "It wasn't your fault."

"Then why won't his eyes go away?" Tony asked.

"They won't, not for a while," Coulson said, and Tony could hear the regret for that in his voice. "But it will get better. We'll have someone help you through that."

"Hulk sorry," Hulk said glumly.

Tony sniffled and shook his head. "It's not your fault."

"Or yours, Kotyonok," Natasha said. She was leaning against Clint, who had moved over to her bed. "But you're strong. You'll make it."

They didn't blame him and they weren't yelling. Tony clutched at Steve's uniform, feeling Steve's arms tighten around him. He heard words like 'psychologist' and 'trauma' being said around him, but Tony cried silently in relief that they weren't blaming him instead of paying attention. Steve wouldn't let them do anything bad, and Tony felt safe even if he wasn't at home.

There was a soft beeping noise, and Coulson got up and left for a while after looking down at a small device. The others stayed though, and Steve never let go of Tony.

When the tears finally stopped, Tony leaned against Cap's chest and tried not to think about those eyes. His new friends didn't blame him even if the eyes did, and they were adults. Was it really not his fault?

Coulson came in again, sans suit, his mouth set in a firm line. "There's a complication."

"Has Iron Man been found?" Steve said, tensing.

"Iron Man is still MIA," Coulson said, shaking his head. "We found someone else with a collar though."

"Yeah, who's that?" Clint asked. He moved towards Hulk after a small nod from Coulson.

"Loki," Coulson said simply.

Hulk roared furiously as Clint put a hand on the big, green shoulder. There was nothing calm about Clint either though, and Tony was surprised by the anger in Clint's eyes. It scared him a little. "That son of a bitch is-"

"Language, Clint," Steve said warningly, with a glance down at Tony. Tony could have told him not to bother. Dad said worse things all the time that Jarvis said he wasn't allowed to repeat.

"He's contained by the collar right now," Coulson said. He looked up sharply at Clint's bark of laughter.

"Serves the bastard right, being the one under mind control this time," Clint grit out. Hulk rumbled in agreement.

"How did Hydra get a hold of Loki?" Natasha asked. She ran a hand down Clint's back, to ground him like Coulson had done for Tony earlier. He wondered who Loki was. He'd heard

of someone named that in a book he'd found in Obie's library once, but it was the same one that talked about Thor and he hadn't paid that much attention to it after reading about the God of Thunder.

"No idea," Coulson said. "But the security codes have been cracked, and they show Iron Man being brought in to the secret passage. He didn't come out."

"So there's a chance Loki knows something," Steve said. "And we have to take the collar off if we want to find out."

"Exactly, Captain. Like I said, a complication. Loki seems to have a higher functioning power even with the collar on, but he won't speak to us even with the command," Coulson said.

There was silence for a few moments as the group took that in, and Tony decided that Loki must be a bad guy. Everyone looked pretty angry at him, at any rate. He wondered why Loki would have a collar if he was evil too? Maybe he was bad, but didn't work with these bad guys.

"Romanov, Barton, you stay here," Coulson said.

"You're not benching me this time, Sir, I've-"

"You need information. I'm the best interrogator that you-"

"Agent Coulson is right. You're both wounded," Steve said. He made to stand, but Tony clutched at his uniform. Steve looked down at him with a soft expression, but didn't try to move again.

"If we need you, we'll call," Coulson said with a sigh. "And we might, so don't think you're benched just yet. Captain, if you and Dr. Banner would mind accompanying me?"

Steve hugged Tony tightly for a moment, looking torn, and Hulk growled. "Iron Runt safer with us," Hulk said.

"That might not be a bad idea," Coulson said thoughtfully. There was a loud round of protests at that, which Coulson silenced with a single look. (Totally a super-power. An *awesome* super-power.) He sat down on the bed again, looking directly at Tony, who rubbed at his eyes to erase his tears. "This will be dangerous. Loki could have any number of tricks to get free once we take the collar off. But if he was there when you woke up, he might be able to explain a few things about you as well."

"He doesn't need to be there for us to ask the questions," Steve said, watching Coulson for a hint, but the man gave him none.

Tony looked back and forth between them, watching the battle of wills. "I have a suspicion that's far-fetched, even for Loki," Coulson said finally. "It's easiest to confirm with Tony there and might solve a few things as well. It may also be our best bet to find Iron Man. If I'm right, this Tony will need to be there."

Steve nodded grudgingly, misgivings clear in his eyes. "And if Loki breaks free? What then?"

Coulson turned to Tony then, his voice serious, but not condescending. He was treating Tony like an adult, and Tony liked that. "If that happens, I want you to promise that you'll run back here immediately, Tony. Romanov and Barton will get you out. Do you understand?"

Tony started to tremble, though he nodded. He didn't want to meet Loki, not if he was as bad as everyone else thought. "You're very brave, Tony, but you don't have to go if you don't want to," Steve said immediately. "No one will force you."

"But it would help find your friend, right?" Tony asked, his voice weaker than he wanted to admit.

"It would," Coulson said. "But the Captain's right. You don't have to go if you don't want to. If we need you later on, we'll cross that bridge when we get there."

If he was scared to go, was what Coulson meant. And Tony was scared, and he hurt a lot. Would Dad yell at him for staying? But Coulson was saying it was alright if he stayed, and the others didn't want him to go.

It would help find Captain America's friend and the person with Tony's name if he went. He wanted to help Steve. In the end, Tony swallowed and nodded.

"If the kid's going, so am I," Clint said, his eyes hard.

"Barton, you-"

"You need someone to get Tony out, and all of your heavy hitters to keep Loki occupied. I'm going."

"I'll keep an escape route open," Natasha said in agreement.

"I do have other agents to do this," Coulson said with a sigh as he rubbed his temples. "Clint, Natasha... You're both wounded."

"And we'd still be better than any other agent you assign," Natasha said.

"There is such a thing as taking a commendable work ethic too far," Coulson said, a hint of a grudging smile on his lips. "I expect to see this enthusiasm on your paperwork as well."

Clint groaned, but Natasha just nodded. Tony was watching the scene unfold, so he didn't even notice the pair of strong arms wrapping around him until he was neatly balanced on Steve's hip. "I can walk," Tony said indignantly, flushing when he realized he shouldn't talk to Captain America like that.

"Sure you can, son," Steve said in his Captain America voice. "But I need you to humor me this time, alright?"

Only because Cap was asking. That and it would probably hurt more to walk. Tony nodded, and hugged Steve's neck as they started moving. Not that he thought Steve would let him fall, but it felt safe. Steve wouldn't let anyone hurt him, especially not with Hulk trailing behind them, growling moodily. He snorted when Tony waved at him. Hulk kept growling at the



people in suits that they passed, and Tony felt a little better when the suits took a small step back. Hulk was *awesome*.

They came to an open area with several machines and suits surrounding the man with the collar Tony had seen when he'd first woken up. Tony saw Clint tense at the sight, standing in front of Steve and Tony protectively. Steve put a brief hand on Clint's shoulder before setting Tony down, which seemed to help relax him.

Thor was watching the collared man with an expression Tony couldn't read in his thunderous eyes. He came to greet them, a smile breaking out on his face as he caught sight of Tony. "The little warrior is well," he said warmly. Tony felt like he should be bristling at this statement, but Thor didn't sound patronizing. In fact, he sounded like he meant it.

"I'm not little," Tony still said, only a little sulky.

"Three feet, four inches and a half, right?" Steve said.

"Right," Tony said, crossing his arms as Steve pat him on the head.

"We really doing this?" Clint asked warily. "We don't have the equipment to handle a Norse god here."

"Puny god," Hulk growled menacingly.

"I think we've got enough equipment to make sure he behaves," Coulson said with a small smile as he looked over at the Hulk. "Sitwell, unlock the collar."

All the people in suits tensed at this order, and Clint's good hand curled into a fist as Thor gripped his hammer. Even Steve tensed, moving Tony behind him as he slid his shield on his arm.

Tony watched as the collar powered down, the button in the center of the man's neck glowing fainter. The man's hand reached up to crush the collar, letting it fall to pieces on the floor. Hulk roared before he could do much else though, and the man flinched. "I see you've brought the monster to keep me at bay. How flattering."

"Brother, you would do well to hold your tongue," Thor said angrily.

"And no gag to make sure of it this time?" Loki said with a twisted smile as Thor winced. "At least these Hydra cretins have been disposed of. They were particularly tiresome."

"Those 'cretins' still managed to trap you, so they must not have been half bad," Steve said.

Loki looked their way, and Tony hid behind Steve, clinging to his leg. Loki wasn't looking at Steve though, but lower. At Tony. "Touché, Captain. Tell me, how has this time period been treating you? Do you still look at ice and wonder if it might have been better if they'd just left you there?"

Steve nearly took a step back, bumping into Tony. "Tell us where Iron Man is!" Clint shouted, stepping between Steve and Loki again.

"Still so angry, Hawkeye? I could remove that anger from you. Remember the peace you felt while under my control?" Loki asked. Tony risked a glance up to see that Clint was trembling. "Would you like me to give you that peace again? To never have to make another decision by yourself? To make you kill your precious little team and not feel-"

"*That's enough!*," Steve said over Hulk's roar. Loki flinched again as Hulk stepped forward, hiding Clint from view with a menacing growl. "Tell us where Iron Man is, Loki, or we'll find something else to gag you with," Steve said.

"We've found more collars and remotes," Coulson said helpfully. He was smiling pleasantly, but it looked strained. The next part came out more as a threat. "Along with a few other things that I don't know what they do. I'm sure we can figure that out together. You know how I like to test things."

"Always so resourceful," Loki said, his eyes narrowing at Coulson. "I should have finished the job when I killed you the first time."

Thor tensed, pointing his hammer at Loki. "Loki, you will not threaten these-"

"I'm surprised you even have to ask about Iron Man," Loki said, cutting over Thor with a bored tone. "The world's prodigal son is in this very room."

"What?" Steve asked, looking around in confusion. Tony looked around too, but he only saw his friends and the men in suits. Even the Hydra soldiers had been taken away.

"Brother, what trickery is this?" Thor asked.

"Ask the boy his full name," Loki said with a wicked smile.

All eyes moved to Tony where he was still hiding behind Steve's legs. He bit his lip, remembering too late it was still healing from the last time. "Tony?" Steve asked, and Tony took a step away.

"He is a clone then," Coulson said thoughtfully. "But where is-"

"Not a clone, mortal. Ask him who his father is," Loki said with a malicious tone, looking at Steve. "Or don't you want to find out what your friend did to his only son?"

"I'm sorry," Tony said, looking at his shoes as Steve recoiled from Loki's words. "Dad's been looking for you, and I should have told you, and Dad will be angry, and-"

"Tony, what's your last name?" Steve asked, almost pleading for Tony to deny it.

"I'm Anthony Stark," Tony said, not looking up. He hadn't wanted to tell Steve, because then Steve would want to see Dad. And what if Steve ignored him too after that? What if now that Steve knew who he was, he'd know to be disappointed too?

"Wait, what? How is that possible?" Clint asked, sounding shaken. "That's not Tony Stark!" Tony flinched at Clint's denial, blinking away the tears as his new friends took in the truth.

"It is," Loki confirmed as Hulk said "Iron Runt. Smells the same."

"What's the matter, Captain?" Loki asked viciously. "Are the signs of neglect and abuse not obvious enough for you, or are you still in denial?"

Tony looked up at the loud clang, seeing the shield flying back as Steve caught it. There was a dent in the metal just beside Loki's head. The dark man didn't look intimidated. "Change Tony back!" Clint growled.

"Now you *ask* me to commit murder," Loki said, shaking his head. "I believe that's what you mortals call mixed signals. I saved him. You could show a little gratitude."

"What do you mean?" Coulson asked.

"He was on the verge of death when I changed him to this form. Hydra had gotten a little too rough with their toys, and they commanded me to save their golden goose. That child is the result. I thought the form fitting," Loki explained, glancing down at Tony with a pitying glance. "Changing him back would put him back at that moment of death. He was of far more use to me alive, but now it'd be a mercy to put him out of his misery, don't you think?"

Tony didn't understand. They were talking about him and his name was important, and Steve was ignoring him now, just like Dad. Clint didn't want him any more either. Tony jumped at the sound of thunder, and he nearly ran into Coulson who was suddenly behind him.

"Easy there," Coulson said, kneeling down beside Tony. "Yu, fit Loki with another collar. There's things I'd like to discuss with the team so we can't spare the guards."

"On it, Sir," one of the men in suits said.

Loki didn't fight as the collar was slipped on. Instead, he stared right at Tony. "They don't want you, little brat," he said with a smirk. "But I suppose that's par course for you. You're always the root of people's problems. You know who to come to if you want to be needed again. I know far too..."

The collar turned gold, and Tony turned and ran. Or he tried to, but Coulson grabbed him before he could get away. "Let me go!" Tony cried, kicking at Coulson's legs. "He's right, you don't want me. You want this other Tony, so let me go!"

Coulson sighed, quickly immobilizing Tony's feet and arms. "I shouldn't be surprised that you're a handful in any form," the man said.

Tony bit down on Coulson's hand, and the agent was surprised enough to loosen his grip. One more good kick and Tony was free. He didn't get very far, as Hulk grabbed him by the back of his shirt and held him up with a snort.

"I've seen you take down ten men without getting a scratch, Sir," Clint said with a weak smirk to Coulson, only just managing to take his eyes off Loki. "And you just got surprised by a five-year-old."

"I'm seven!" Tony said, dangling from Hulk's grip as he sniffled.

"Seven-year-old," Clint corrected as Coulson glared. "Still not letting you live that one down, Sir."

"A seven-year-old Tony Stark," Coulson added in his defense, rubbing his hand. "Because he never did like making life easy on me."

"Are we sure it's really him?" Steve asked, looking between Coulson and where Tony hung from the Hulk's hand with a lost expression. Tony looked down, unwilling to see the disappointment he knew would come.

Hulk, for his part, just growled at anyone who tried to get near Tony. "Iron Runt the same," he said gruffly.

"The DNA matches. We ran a few tests on Romanov's suggestion," Coulson said, shaking his head. "She assumed it was a Hydra clone, but if Loki's magic was involved, this was a possibility. I thought with Tony here, we could resolve this quickly, but I didn't think..."

There was silence for a moment, and Tony could hold back the tears anymore. "You don't want me, so let me go!" he repeated.

"Hulk likes Iron Runt," Hulk said simply.

"We want you here too, Tony," Steve said after a moment. Tony could hear that he wasn't happy though.

Hulk growled as Steve got closer. "You make Iron Runt cry." At least Tony still had one friend here. And having a big green monster as a friend was pretty awesome.

"I know," Steve said, stopping beside them. He put a hand on Hulk's arm. "And I'm sorry. We never meant to hurt you, Tony."

"I'm not hurt," Tony snapped. "I'm fine."

"Yup, that's Stark," Clint said, earning a glare from Coulson.

"Loki was wrong," Thor said as he came up to join them. "We want our shield brother here no matter what guise he takes."

"What Thor is trying to say is that you're our friend no matter who else we're looking for," Steve said.

Tony felt now familiar arms wrapping around him as the Hulk let him go, and he was suddenly being hugged by Captain America. "So you're not disappointed I'm Tony Stark?" Tony asked tearfully as he finally looked up.

Steve's face got a pinched look, and he took a deep breath before answering. "I... I'm not disappointed in you, Tony. Not after..."

Steve wasn't disappointed. Tony wasn't sure why Steve looked so wounded, but Captain America didn't lie, right? "Are you okay?" Tony asked, rubbing his nose with his sleeve.

Steve hugged him tighter. "I just need some time to think about things," Steve replied, not answering Tony's question. "But I'm glad you're okay, Tony."

Tony wrapped his arms around Steve's neck, feeling small and useless. Loki's words about being the cause of the problem ran through his head. "I'm sorry," Tony said, sniffing again.

"This was never your fault, kiddo," Clint said.

"And we would still be held captive if not for your bravery," Thor added. Hulk just grunted, making his opinion known without words.

"So you've nothing to be sorry about, angel moy," Natasha said.

The others all looked over at that. "You're still supposed to be securing the escape route," Coulson said without surprise.

"It was boring. Besides, I tapped the comms and knew when you put Loki under," Natasha said with a shrug.

Coulson didn't bother responding. He herded them into a nearby room with a makeshift table formed out of a few desks. Both Natasha and Clint sank down into the folding chairs while the others took up spaces around the room. Steve didn't put Tony down, and Tony didn't mind so much this time. Steve was warm and solid. Comforting. He wasn't disappointed in Tony. Maybe he'd tell Dad that Tony wasn't a baby, so Tony could cling to him a little while longer.

Hulk, on the other hand, couldn't fit through the door. He growled, pulling his hand back to punch the whole wall out, when Coulson put a hand on his arm. "Do you mind changing back to Dr. Banner? There are a few things we have to discuss."

"Iron Runt crying," Hulk said.

"Am not," Tony said, sniffing and rubbing his eyes. Hulk was not impressed.

"Bruce can make sure Tony doesn't have a reason to cry again," Clint said with a cocky grin. "We'll all try, alright, big guy? Just let Bruce out for a little while. You can come back out if Tony needs protecting, but we need Bruce to make sure Tony's alright."

Hulk closed his eyes and started to... shrink? Tony crawled up on Steve's shoulder to get a better look, ignoring Steve's warning to be careful. Hulk *was* shrinking and his skin was turning pink. Within seconds, there was no longer an angry green monster, but a mid-sized, scruffy-looking man that nearly collapsed against Coulson as he tried to hold his pants up. "*Awesome*," Tony said, remembering not to bounce with excitement while he was still in Steve's lap just in time. "Can you turn into Hulk whenever you want? How come you're green? Where did all the mass come from? Is your name Hulk too?"

The man groaned, gratefully accepting the belt Coulson pressed into his hands. "Why is there a pint-sized Tony Stark? And I wish you wouldn't come so close to the Other Guy." The latter was aimed towards Coulson, who raised an eyebrow as he handed the man a new shirt.

Coulson helped the man sit in one of the chairs after he was decently clothed. He looked just as tired as Natasha and Clint.

"Loki turned Stark into a child to keep him from dying," Coulson explained, passing a protein bar once the man was seated. Where Coulson was getting all of these things was a mystery to Tony, and he wondered if it was another super-power.

The man blinked, taking a bite of the bar as he looked Tony over. "Can you turn into Hulk whenever you want?" Tony asked again, feeling braver now that he was curious. Steve's hand rubbing his back helped.

"Only when I'm angry," the man said. After a beat, he added, "Which is always. But I don't like... Anyway, I'm Bruce. We're good friends when you're older."

"So I'm really this other Tony?" Tony asked, toying with his bloody lip. It hurt, but it kept him from thinking about how the others wanted their friend back instead of having him around. He thought back to what Steve and the others had said. He was friends with Captain America? And they kept calling him brave... "If I'm friends with all of you and I'm brave, does that mean Dad's proud of me now?" Tony asked. He rushed on when Steve got that pinched look again. "Am I in the future? What year is it? How old am I? Do I make you things like Dad does? My designs aren't very good, but I can make a robot if you want one! I'm trying to make a dog, because Jarvis is allergic and he likes animals, but Dad says I should make things people need and he-"

Tony stopped short. Bad subject. Before he could come up with something else to ramble about though, Natasha spoke up, "You do make us things. You made these bracelets on my wrist that stun people. I think they're a pretty good design."

"Seriously, you make us all really cool stuff," Clint said with a wink. "Though I think a dog would be cool too. Wouldn't you like a dog, Phil?"

"As long as it's well behaved," Coulson replied.

He made lots of things for his friends! That was good, wasn't it? Dad would like that, that he was being useful. And maybe he could make a robot dog too when Dad wasn't looking, so that Clint and Coulson could see it.

"You do a lot more than just make things for us," Steve said, his voice soft. He smiled at Tony, looking a little better than he had earlier. "You're also Iron Man, one of our teammates. You pilot a big suit of armor and help us fight."

Tony felt his eyes widen. He helped them fight? "So I'm a hero like you? Does that mean Dad will like me? He always talks about you and how proud he was to be your friend, so if I'm just like you, he'll like me too, right?"

"Oh, Tony," Steve said, hugging him tightly. "Why didn't you ever... I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

Tony looked around as Steve's shoulders shook, wondering what he'd done wrong. He had to have done something if he'd made Steve upset. The others were looking away though, except

for Bruce who looked really angry. Tony thought that maybe his eyes looked a little green.

Thor finally looked up, coming over and kneeling so that he looked Tony in the eyes. "I know not of your father, Tony Stark, but I know that it is a great honor for me to fight alongside all of you. I am proud to call you shield brother. I think the others would agree."

There were murmurs of assent from everyone in the room, and it took Tony a few seconds to parse through Thor's words, but he felt really happy when he got the gist. If all these heroes were proud of him, Dad would have to be.

"Now that we've sorted Tony's emotional needs, we have to decide what to do with him," Coulson said, shifting the focus of the meeting.

"We need Iron Man," Natasha said. Tony could feel Steve tense. "I know I've voted against him in the past, but he's too valuable an asset to lose. He's one of our heavy hitters and aerial support. Not to mention he's good at thinking on his feet. The Avengers need Tony Stark the way he was."

"That could kill him," Steve said, and Tony could feel his anger. "You heard what Loki said. He changed him to keep Tony from dying."

"We don't know that's true," Clint said. "Loki lies. Also, Hydra's got crappy facilities here. This wasn't ever intended to be a base of operations for them, but we ended up messing with their plans. In a proper hospital, we could do something to save him. Besides, we could try other ways to get him back other than to ask Loki."

"Or we could let him grow up normally and not let him die," Steve said, pulling Tony closer. Tony, for his part, pieced together what the others said. They wanted the other Tony back, but that might kill him? Tony bit down on his fear. Captain America wouldn't let that happen.

Natasha's eyes narrowed. "And what about the team?"

"We could bring in War Machine--"

"Not the same as Stark. Colonel Rhodes is good at what he does, but we'd still be missing Stark's technical expertise and War Machine will only be top of the line for so long," Natasha argued.

"We'd make do," Steve said stubbornly.

"Captain, who would take care of him?" Phil said, trying to be reasonable. Wouldn't Mom or Dad be doing that? Or, well, Jarvis.

When Tony opened his mouth to ask, Steve was already speaking. "We could." Steve realized that was a mistake though, and hastily backed down. "Or Ms. Potts? We could figure something out if she doesn't want to. Look, I'm not saying it would be easy, but--"

"And what happens when Tony becomes a target because he's seen with the Avengers?" Clint asked, though he was a lot gentler than Natasha when he spoke. "What if people find out who he is? Hydra's not the only people with brainwashing, Steve, and children are easier targets."

"We'll protect him!" Steve said.

"Now you're just being selfish, Captain," Natasha said, her eyes hard. "You want to make up for not being there while you were still in the ice. Tony won't thank you for that."

"It's better than letting him die just because-"

"Enough!" Coulson said, bringing them to order. Tony ducked his head against Steve's shoulder, wondering if what Thor had said was really true. The others didn't seem to want him here.

Steve glared resentfully at Coulson, but he didn't argue further and Tony felt the fear sink in. "Thor, your thoughts?" Coulson asked.

Thor stroked his hammer thoughtfully. "My brother knows far more about magic than I, but I could make inquiries. My mother is also well-versed in magic. I, however, have no preference to which form my shield brother takes. What we do not know, however, is how permanent the spell is. It may not be wise to leave him thus and have him change back unexpectedly."

"We could figure something-"

"Dr. Banner?" Coulson said, leveling Steve with stern look. It softened when Steve looked down, and Coulson closed his eyes a moment.

"I think we're the wrong people to make this decision," Bruce said softly. He looked at Tony as he spoke, offering a small smile. "I'll admit, I'd miss big Tony. But I wouldn't mind getting to know you either. What do you want, Tony? It's not like you to be so quiet, especially when it's about you."

Tony looked down. Dad had taken him to a few board meetings, and he'd learned the hard way to stay quiet while the adults talked. It was unnerving to have everyone's attention focused on him. It was like the press conferences Mom made him do after he'd done something really smart and wanted to show him off, but Tony hated them. He didn't understand half of what they were talking about either, though he knew it was about him and the other Tony. And he should know, because the words weren't that hard and Tony could talk about things college level professors had a hard time keeping up with.

"I'm scared," Tony said, which wasn't what he'd meant to say at all, and he couldn't tell by the softening of everyone's expressions if it was the right response or not. "I-I'm sorry. I didn't mean-"

"It's okay to say you're scared," Bruce said. "And no one here will tell your parents anything but the truth, which is how brave you are in spite of that."

Tony didn't feel very brave. He felt scared and hurt. He was confused too, even though he knew Steve wouldn't let anyone hurt him.



Coulson looked over the group before smiling at Tony. It wasn't the bland smile from earlier, but a small thing that Tony liked better. "You don't have to make any decisions now. And we'll explain what will happen both ways if you want. But why don't we head home for now, since we know the location of our missing Avenger? We'll let SHIELD take care of things here."

There was a tense moment before everyone nodded, and Steve stood up, carrying Tony out with him. Tony could *walk*, but... Steve looked really unhappy, so Tony didn't mention it. "Are you alright?" Tony asked instead, hugging him tightly.

For a moment, Steve looked lost. "I wish I knew how to talk to your older self like this," he muttered, before shaking his head. Then he smiled weakly at Tony. "I'll be okay. Don't worry about me though. I promise I won't let anyone force you into a decision. Do you trust me?"

Tony nodded. There was never any question of trust. "Of course! You're Captain America!"

Steve looked away, tightening his grip around Tony. "I wonder when you lost that. I wish I could have stopped..." Steve said sadly, before changing the subject. "Come on. I know it's not his specialty, but maybe Dr. Banner can help with that robot you wanted to build. We can also talk to Ms. Potts and Colonel Rhodes, since I'm sure they're worried about you."

\* \* \*

Tony fell asleep curled up next to Bruce on the Quinjet after two hours of excitedly talking about both the plane's engine and the robot he wanted to make. Bruce, it turned out, was just as awesome as Hulk.

He woke up in a big bed, covered by blankets and wrapped around a teddy bear wearing red, white and blue that held Cap's shield. He hid his face in its fur, not wanting to wake up again because it still hurt.

"Looks like someone's finally awake," a female voice that wasn't Natasha said. Tony looked up to see a woman with strawberry-blond hair and a harried smile. He recognized her from the short video conference on the Quinjet updating her on Tony's condition. She seemed nice enough, and she held a green teddy bear with torn pants and one with a cape and hammer. Tony looked around and saw one with a bow and arrow, and one that had red hair and Natasha's belt. "These are neat!" he said, ignoring how much his shoulder hurt to take the offered Hulk-teddy and hug it carefully against him.

"Do you like them?" the woman asked, smiling as she handed him a glass of water and a pill. Ms. Potts. That's what the others had called her. Tony made a face at the pill, not wanting to swallow it. He didn't like medicine. "You take the medicine, and you can keep all of them."

"Pepper, you would make the worst parent ever," another voice said. Tony looked over to see a dark-skinned man in casual clothes. He stiffened at the presence of someone he didn't know, unsure of how to act. "Bargaining? Really? He'll be using that against you before you can blink."

"You sound like you're talking from experience," Ms. Potts said wryly.

The man winced. "The less said about MIT, the better."

Tony looked over the teddy bears, wishing he could keep them. Dad would say they were too childish though, and he didn't want the teddy bears to be torn apart if Dad was drinking. He set the Hulk-Teddy aside and gave Cap-Teddy one more hug before putting it down with the others. He missed the soft fur and comforting warmth already. "No, thank you," he said, looking down. "Teddy bears are for kids. I'll take the medicine."

The adults exchanged glances as Ms. Potts handed over the pill. Tony swallowed it dry like he did when he couldn't chance turning on the water facet that squeaked in the middle of the night. He knew well enough where Jarvis stored the pills to make the hurt go away, and there were a lot of times Tony couldn't tell anyone he was hurt. He drank the water next, his throat loosening as the water soothed it. "Where are Cap and Hulk? And the others?" Tony asked anxiously, not liking being away from the only people he knew. It seemed like the others trusted Ms. Potts, but he really wanted the others.

"They're not allowed to come visit you until they've managed at least five hours of sleep," Ms. Potts said apologetically. "They all needed the sleep, and we promised to look after you in the mean time. You won't remember me, but I'm Virginia Potts, your CEO at Stark Industries. And this is Colonel James Rhodes, who is a very old friend of yours when you're older. You can call me Pepper if you want."

"You call me Rhodey," the man said with a kind smile. "You don't get a choice in that. Hearing you call me James is just awkward, and there's enough strangeness about this situation as it is."

Pepper was the CEO of Stark Industries? Tony felt his throat constrict again. "Tony? Tony, baby, what's wrong?" Pepper asked, moving closer to hug him. "Rhodey, he's trembling! Did the doctor say anything else was wrong?"

"I was there that night on the roof," Rhodey said without answering her question. "That was not weird. How quickly you've gone from ex-girlfriend to mothering? That's not just weird, that's freaky." It earned him a glare from Pepper, and Rhodey held his hands up in surrender. "Hey, you're the one still wearing the necklace he gave you on New Years despite the fact you've broken up."

"Rhodey, this isn't the time to-"

Tony had to grow up and stop trembling. It was bad enough Dad had given the company to someone else. Dad was going to be so angry if he came in and saw Tony like this. Disappointed wouldn't even begin to cover it. "Did I do something wrong?" Tony asked, wondering what his older self had done. It was his one, hated constant in life, that he had to stop being childish so he could take over the company one day. Tony had to be good enough for Dad. To keep trying, even though he didn't want the company, not really. But maybe if he did a good job, Dad would finally be proud of him.

"Of course not, sweetheart," Pepper said.

"Seriously creepy, Pep." This time, Rhodey sighed at Pepper's glare, rubbing his temples. "Sorry, I'm not helping, I know. This is just not something I'd ever been prepared to deal with."

"I know," she said, her expression softening. Then she looked back to Tony. "You haven't done anything wrong, Tony. What makes you think that?"

"Dad made you CEO, didn't he? Instead of me?" Tony asked, trying to suppress the tears and panic. "Did I do something wrong?"

It wasn't Pepper who answered, but Rhodey. "You did nothing wrong, Tony." His voice was surprisingly serious now, getting that same sort of pinched look the others got when Tony mentioned Dad. "In fact, you did better than your dad with the company. *You* made Pepper CEO, not him, because you knew she'd be good for the company while freeing you up to do other things. It was a good decision."

"Dad isn't mad at me then?" Tony asked.

They shared another glance. "Do you think we should wait for-" Rhodey started, looking uncomfortable.

"Do you think at seven he's any different when he wants to know something? He won't stop until he's dragged it out of us," Pepper said.

"Some things never change," he said. Rhodey looked down at Tony with a sad smile, full of a melancholy sort of fondness, then nodded at Pepper.

She took a deep breath before continuing. "Tony, sweetheart, you know you're supposed to be older in this time, right?"

"Yeah," Tony said, feeling a little calmer as Pepper stroked his hair.

"Rhodey, I can't..." Pepper said, her voice sounding choked.

"Your dad's not around anymore, Tone," Rhodey said. "I'm sorry, but he's been gone a long time. Him and your mom."

Tony blinked. Then he blinked again, suddenly finding it hard to see. "They're dead," he said, not bothering with the dance the adults were trying to play. He was smart enough to read between the lines, and he knew the best way to take a band-aid off was to rip it. Other kids might not know about death, but Dad made weapons. Tony heard all about what death was like when Dad started drinking to try to forget it.

"Yeah," Rhodey said, wiping away some of the wetness in Tony's eyes with gentle hands. Tony didn't feel like he was crying though, despite the evidence on Rhodey's fingers. "They are."

Tony sat there feeling much calmer than he felt like he should on hearing about the deaths of his parents. He should ask what happened to them, but his normal curiosity was dulled. He

didn't want to know. But there was one thing he did need to know, and panic started to replace the calm. "What about Jarvis?"

"Do you have need of me, young sir?"

Tony jumped at the sound of the voice, his eyes widening. "Who's there?" he asked, hands curling around the Captain America-Teddy. He didn't remember picking it up again, but the soft fur was comforting.

"That's JARVIS," Rhodey replied. "The real Jarvis died a while back, but you made an Artificial Intelligence in his honor. You can talk to him, if you like."

"Jarvis?" Tony asked, his voice wobbling as this time he felt the tears. He didn't wait for the AI to answer. "I want the real Jarvis. I want Mom."

"I know, baby," Pepper said, rocking him against her. He held on to Cap-Teddy and cried quietly. Dad would... Dad would get angry. Except he couldn't get angry now, because he was dead. Tony would never see him again. So it really didn't matter if Tony cried now, did it? Unless Rhodey got mad too like Dad did, but Rhodey wasn't saying anything and it hurt too much for Tony to care. Not hurting like the aches in his body, but this was worse. He'd rather be beat up by Devin and Brad from boarding school a thousand times over than feel like this. Did Mom and Dad have those same wide eyes as that man? Did Jarvis? He didn't want Jarvis to look like that, not ever.

It was too much. Tony didn't want it. He wanted Jarvis.

Pepper continued to rock him back and forth as he clutched at the Cap-Teddy. She made soothing noises as he cried, sometimes speaking to Rhodey in a low voice. Pepper was soft and warm, hugging him like Jarvis would sometimes when no one else was looking. But she wasn't Jarvis, because Jarvis smelled like the wood stove and peppermints that he always kept on hand to cheer Tony up. He wanted to push her away and find Jarvis. The real Jarvis, not the scary voice in the room.

Tony didn't know how long he cried, but it felt like a long time. He was tired, even though he'd just woken up. He wanted Jarvis to tuck him in, but Pepper was still holding him tightly.

"He sleeping?" Rhodey asked quietly.

"I think so," Pepper responded in a low whisper. Tony didn't try to correct them. He wanted it all to go away.

"When I get my hands on Loki-"

"Shh, don't wake him."

They were quiet for a moment, almost long enough for Tony to actually doze off, but Pepper spoke again. "If he wants to stay this way, are we really doing this?" she asked. "Neither of us know the first thing about parenting and this is *not* part of my job description."

Rhodey sighed, and Tony felt the bed dip as he moved closer to them. "You're the one who vetoed adoption. To be honest, I wouldn't want to trust him with anyone else either. It won't exactly be a normal life, but when has Tony ever been normal? And no matter how we screw up, it'll still be a hell of a lot better than he had back then. Tony might have a choice, but was there really ever one for us?"

"No," Pepper said, and Tony felt a soft kiss on his forehead. "I couldn't... I can't give him to a stranger, Rhodey. It's got to be us. But God, I *miss* him..."

That was the last thing Tony heard before he drifted back to sleep.

He woke up a few hours later, still wrapped up in Pepper's arms. He was clutching the Cap-Teddy against his chest, so he set it back down when he pushed away from her.

"You can keep it, you know," Pepper said with a tired smile.

"I'm not a baby. I don't need it," Tony said blankly. He wanted it. He wanted Dad's approval too.

"You're not a baby, no," Pepper said. "But these teddy bears are for everyone, not just babies. I've even got one."

She held the Cap-Teddy out for him to take, but Tony just looked at it. He didn't want a teddy bear or Pepper. He wanted Jarvis or Mom.

Pepper sighed, setting it down. "I'm going to tell you about what happens next, alright?"

Tony nodded slowly, running his fingers along the stitches in the comforter. His body still hurt a lot, but not as much as before. The other pain was worse, but he couldn't cry again, not with Pepper here.

Tony rubbed his eyes and tried not to fidget as Pepper started to explain. "You have a choice, Tony. You can either stay the way you are now, or you can be a grown-up again. If you decide to stay like this..." Pepper paused, closing her eyes as she took a deep breath. "If you stay like this, you'll spend half the year with Rhodey, who promised to show you the jet engines where he works. The other half when Rhodey is deployed, you'll live with me and the company. When you're old enough and if you want the company back, you can be CEO again."

"What about Cap and the others?" Tony asked, his eyes downcast. The promise of looking at a jet engine wasn't enough to cheer him up, though it should have. Tony wondered if there was something wrong with him.

"They all live here in Stark Tower," Pepper said with a small smile. "I assume they'll be the worst set of Aunt and Uncles imaginable and spoil you rotten while you're here with me. They'll probably make excuses to see you in Malibu with Rhodey too."

Tony looked down at the teddy bears, half reaching out to Cap-Teddy before letting his arm drop. That didn't sound too bad. Except it still felt awful, since Jarvis wouldn't be there too.

He'd never see Mom again, and he'd never be good enough for Dad. All he'd ever wanted was to be good enough.

Pepper reached out and took the Natasha-Teddy, hugging both it and Tony tightly. "We'd make sure you were taken care of, Tony. And it'll be hard at first, sweetheart, but everyone will agree if that's what you want."

Tony watched her hug the bear, biting his still healing lip. He looked back at Hulk-Teddy and Cap-Teddy, wishing he could hug them too. But then he'd never be good enough for Dad.

Pepper took no notice of Tony's struggles and continued on. "If you decide to go back to normal, it may still be a while before we find a way to do that. Thor's mother might be able to change you back, or maybe one of the human magic users could help. We'd have a full medical team on site and Coulson and Natasha have been grilling the remaining Hydra soldiers to find out the full extent of your injuries. Then... hopefully, things would go back to normal."

"You want things to go back to normal?" Tony asked, already seeing the answer in her eyes.

"Oh, Tony," Pepper hugged both him and the teddy bear tighter. "Sweetheart, I can't say I don't miss the old you. I..." She paused to wipe away some of the tears in her eyes.

Tony didn't like seeing Pepper cry. Pretty girls shouldn't have to cry, and this was Tony's fault. He looked again at how she clutched at the Natasha-Teddy, and he gingerly picked up the Cap-Teddy and Hulk-Teddy, cradling both of them against him. If Pepper didn't mind, maybe it wasn't so bad? And maybe she'd stop crying if she saw him take it, since she seemed to want him to like the teddy bears.

"It's not your fault, sweetheart," Pepper said softly. She tilted his head up so that he looked at her. "It really isn't, I promise you. And Rhodey and I will love you no matter what you choose, Tony. You'll always be our Tony. Nothing will change that."

Tony didn't meet her eyes, looking down again when she let him and curling around the teddy bears in his arms. He heard her sigh, and she pressed a kiss to his forehead.

There was a soft knock on the door, but Tony didn't look up. "You're still supposed to be in bed," Pepper said to the newcomer disapprovingly.

"It was either here or the punching bags."

Tony did look up at the voice this time, his eyes going wide. "Cap!"

"Hey, buddy. How are you doing?" Steve said as he walked in the door. He was wearing a plaid button up shirt and pants, and Tony almost didn't recognize him without the uniform. Steve's eyes widened at the teddy bears. "Are those...?"

"Happy's idea," Pepper said with an amused smile. "There's even one for..." she paused, swallowing. "I didn't think it would be a good idea to include the Iron Man one right now. I can't..."

Tony, for his part, was mortified that Steve had seen him with the teddy bears. He tried setting it down while Steve was placating Pepper so that no one would notice. Unfortunately, his stealth wasn't sufficient enough, because Steve caught him in the act. He glanced at Pepper, an unspoken question in his eyes.

"Tony says teddy bears are for babies," Pepper said, despite hugging Natasha-Teddy against her chest.

"Well, don't tell that to old Teddy Roosevelt," Steve said as he picked up the Thor-Teddy. He smiled at it fondly.

"He's dead. I can't tell him anything," Tony replied. He felt a pang at that, because he wouldn't be able to show Jarvis his robot dog either, immediately shoving those thoughts aside to go back to the current topic. What did a dead president have to do with anything?

If Steve was surprised Tony recognized the name (Tony had memorized the elements of the periodic table by the time he was three and a half. The names of the presidents had been a breeze), Steve didn't show it. "My mother really liked him when he was president," Steve said, chuckling softly at a memory. "He's not a man you'd want to cross. Did you know that teddy bears were named after him? So I wouldn't go around saying they are for babies, if I were you."

"Really?" Tony asked, looking at the teddy bears in a new light.

"Really," Steve said with a smile. He held out Hulk-Teddy for Tony to take. Tony accepted it hesitantly, picking up Cap-Teddy too after another moment.

Steve had a strange look in his eyes when Tony held both of the teddies against him. Then he shook his head and smiled. "Has Ms. Potts explained things to you?" Steve asked.

Tony nodded, looking down. Pepper hugged him tightly in encouragement. "Then you should know that it's your choice," Steve said. "I won't let anyone try to pressure you one way or the other, okay? I promise."

Steve said that, but Tony could see Steve's hands fisting at his sides. "You want me to stay like this," Tony said blankly.

Steve winced, but nodded. "I... It's complicated. And I know it'll be hard. I'm sorry about... I know what it's like to wake up when everyone you know is gone, and I'd never want..."

Tony waited silently as Steve breathed, trying to control himself. He looked down at the Cap-Teddy and Hulk-Teddy. He didn't think the Cap-Teddy would really help Steve (and he didn't want to give that one up), but...

He hugged Hulk-Teddy once more before crawling over the covers. It hurt, but Tony ignored the pain as he held out Hulk-Teddy for Steve.

"Tony?"

"Hulk makes me feel better, so I thought it might..." Tony cut himself off. Maybe it was a baby thing after all. He'd just offered Captain America a toy and-

Steve took the bear and hugged it tightly, a weak smile on his lips. "You're right. The Hulk does make me feel better."

Pepper just looked between the two of them, an amused expression on her face. "JARVIS, tell me you have this on the security feed, because this is something Bruce needs to see."

Steve turned red but didn't deny it or put Hulk-Teddy down. Instead, he ruffled Tony's hair with his free hand. "I'd like to get to know you, Tony. I've never been very good talking to..." Steve shook his head sadly. "Anyway, I wasn't there when you needed me when you were this age originally. I'm also scared."

Tony felt his eyes go wide as he hugged Cap-Teddy against him. "You're scared?" Steve had said that earlier while Tony had been in the closet, before he'd known Steve was Captain America. "But what would you be afraid of? Dad says..."

Tony looked down. Dad says? Dad said. Past tense. His throat started to constrict, but he couldn't cry again, not in front of Steve. Not even when the eyes stared back at him.

"I get scared of lots of things," Steve said. "Right now, though... Right now I'm scared that if you get turned back, the doctors won't be able to make you better. I'm also scared of losing my second... Well, third chance now. I think we blew the second chance when the team came back together, and I'm sorry for that. And I'm terrified that by telling you this I'll... Well, that doesn't matter, I guess."

Tony stared at the Cap-Teddy, trying to imagine Cap feeling scared. Steve didn't look like he was lying, and Tony had plenty of experience with adults lying. "You want to know a secret?" Steve asked.

"What's that?"

"Sometimes I'm afraid of the dark too."

"You are?" He looked at Pepper for confirmation, because Steve couldn't be afraid of the dark! Dad said that was for babies.

"Captain..." Pepper said, her voice soft. "You..."

"It was awfully dark when the plane went under," Steve said with a shrug. "I usually sleep with the bathroom light on."

"You can keep Hulk-Teddy, if you want," Tony said, biting his lip.

"But you-"

"That way, when it's dark, he can make you feel better."



Steve was silent a moment, and Pepper looked between the two of them, debating whether to intercede. "But what about you?" Steve asked finally. "If I take the Hulk-Teddy, who will make you feel better?"

"I have Cap-Teddy and all the others," Tony said with a shrug. In truth, he really wanted Hulk-Teddy back, but Steve needed the comfort too. Besides, he did have the others. They could keep him company while Hulk-Teddy guarded Steve. "It's okay. I want you to have him."

"Thank you, Tony," Steve said. He closed his eyes for a moment, his hand tightening around Hulk-Teddy. "You really are very brave, Tony. Very brave and kind. I don't know why I keep forgetting about that when you're older."

Tony smiled shyly, hugging Cap-Teddy against his chest. He must have done something right, if Steve praised him.

"You're encouraging him," Pepper said, slight amusement in her voice. "Next thing you know, he'll get you a giant stuffed rabbit that won't even fit through the door."

"Do those help?" Tony asked.

"No, Tony," Pepper said quickly, pulling him back into a hug. "Giant rabbits don't help."

"What about giant-"

"No, Tony." It sounded like Pepper had a lot of practice telling him no.

"You didn't even hear my idea," Tony said in a sulky tone.

"I know enough," Pepper said with a laugh.

"Come on, scamp," Steve said. "Let's go get something to eat."

\* \* \*

Everyone came to visit over the next few days. Bruce apologized for Hulk killing that man, but that was the mind control, not Hulk's fault, and Tony wouldn't let him feel guilty. He did turn an interesting shade of red when Pepper told him about the fate of Hulk-Teddy though.

He missed his parents and Jarvis a lot, and the nightmares were bad. But no one yelled at him when he woke up crying, and he'd gotten more hugs than he'd ever gotten before, even from Jarvis. It wasn't so bad here, but Tony was quieter than normal, staying in the room they had given him and drawing out his robot unless one of the others came and got him.

Natasha left him with a device she called a 'tablet', kissing his forehead and telling him it was his choice. It was then Tony discovered that the future was really groovy as far as technology went. Dad wouldn't have approved of that word, but it applied.

After playing around with it for a few hours (Rhodey refused to let him take it apart for another hour. Tony had only been swayed by the promise of ice cream and JARVIS bringing

up the specs), Tony started to look through the information Natasha had put on there about his older self. About Iron Man.

Tony wasn't too sure if he liked his older self and all those suits and ties, but he was definitely making an armor that could fly. Not even the promise of ice cream would stop him from that.

Eventually, his hurts recovered enough that he was allowed access to more of the Tower - something he built, which was hard for Tony to imagine - but there was only one place Tony wanted to go.

In the end, he was glad Rhodey had made him keep the tablet. It was easier to convince JARVIS with texts to give him the entrance code to see Loki without anyone overhearing it, since the Avengers rarely left Tony on his own. JARVIS, like his name sake, was a bit of a push-over when it came to Tony's pleading, and no one had thought to scale back JARVIS's coding to follow Tony's orders.

Once he was sure Rhodey was sleeping, Tony crept out of his room, making his way down to the floor where Loki was kept according to JARVIS. The AI opened the door for him without prompting, and Tony was left staring at the man in green armor on the other side of the glass. "JARVIS says they took the collar off you," Tony said, scanning the room. "He also says that there's no sound in that room, so you can't hear me and I made it when I was grown-up just to hold you."

He found what he was looking for, pulling a chair up to the door. He stepped on top of it, pushing the yellow button on the panel by the door. "But now you can hear me, right?"

Loki smiled. "The prodigal son returns." Loki's tone was light, but there was an underlying acidity to his voice that scared Tony. "And without your guardians. To what do I owe this pleasure?"

"I want you to change me back," Tony said simply.

"So you have decided they don't need you after all and expect me to obey your whim." Loki leaned against the wall. "It will kill you to turn you back. Doesn't that scare you?"

"Mr. Coulson says the injuries reported were probably life-threatening but fixable in a proper hospital," Tony said, sitting down in the chair and swinging his legs. "JARVIS has already called an ambulance. So you just have to turn me back before the others find out I'm down here."

"And what do I get out of this? Surely you don't expect me to do this for free."

"What do you want?" Tony asked dully.

"Set me free from this prison, and I'll turn you back to just before the injuries happened," Loki said.

Tony watched Loki carefully as he spoke, then shook his head. "You're lying," Tony said. "You can't do that."

"And you are an expert on magic, I suppose," Loki sneered.

"Not magic," Tony said, looking down at his swinging feet. "Just on adults who lie."

"Ah, yes. The negligent father," Loki said, a cruel smile crossing his lips. "And how does it feel, to know he's dead without ever having his approval?"

"I don't want this," Tony said, his small hands curling into fists as he tried not to cry. He did like it here in the future, but he didn't want to stay. Not when the eyes followed him when the rest of the body was unmoving, and Jarvis or Mom wasn't around to make it stop. Not when sometimes they had those eyes too. "I don't want it to hurt this much because they're gone. So change me back."

"And what if I like you in this form? I'll admit, I could do without your older self's form of threatening, even if it does come with an offer of a drink," Loki said. Tony didn't quite understand what he was talking about, but he could guess it had to do with the armor he made when he was older.

"JARVIS?" Tony asked, looking up at the ceiling since he couldn't see any of JARVIS's special access panels in this room.

"How can I be of service?"

"Can you play the sound clip, please?" Tony asked, looking back down. He really missed his Jarvis.

"Certainly, sir," the A.I. replied. A loud roar filled the room, and Tony watched as Loki flinched away from the anger.

"Turn me back, or I tell Bruce where I am," Tony said.

"I'm not afraid of your guardians or-"

JARVIS played the sound file again, and Loki jumped, glaring at Tony. "They'll just come up with more creative ways to ask you to do it," Tony said with a shrug. He stood on top of the chair, ready to push the yellow button again.

"I take back what I said. I could do without your threatening in any form. But if that's true, why aren't they here already?" Loki said before he could press it. "No last good-byes? Or perhaps you don't want them to stop you."

"Just change me back," Tony said as he started to tremble. "I want-"

"Tony!" Tony snapped around at the sound of Steve's voice. It was followed by a sharp pounding on the door. "Tony, open the door! It's dangerous in there!"

"JARVIS will unlock it if I can't anymore," Tony said, jumping down from the chair. He looked up at Loki, sticking out his chin to hide his fear. "Change me back. I want to be good enough again."

"Tony, you're always good enough," Steve said, pounding harder at the door. "JARVIS, get Bruce down here. Tony, open the door! JARVIS! There's other ways we can do this if this is what you want!"

"Natasha is right. You don't need me like this," Tony said, blinking back tears that the facts brought up. At least it was a feeling familiar enough that Tony could push it back down easily. He was never needed, especially not with Dad gone. "Too many variables and things that could go wrong. You need the other me more, and this is the fastest way."

"It's not about what we need!" Steve shouted, ramming his shoulder into the door. It was reinforced to hold a Norse god though, so the door held. "Tony, this is about what you *want*. We need you in any form. Please, open the door!"

Loki, who was watching with a bored disinterest, stood up. "As amusing as this is, I grow weary of it. You wish to be returned to your normal form?"

"No! Tony, wait! Damn it, JARVIS, open the door!"

"Yes. Do it."

"As you wish," Loki said, starting to speak in a strange language that Tony didn't recognize. He felt himself growing taller as memories started flooding back in an almost overwhelming rate, but he held on.

"Tony, open the door! JARVIS won't... You were always good enough, so please..."

"Funny, that's not what I remember you saying before," Tony said, his voice deeper as he fell to his knees. That was the last thing he was aware of before the pain started.

\* \* \*

Pain was a universal constant in Tony Stark's life. Even before Iron Man, he'd been no stranger to the sensation. So when he woke up feeling like his body was on fire, he didn't fight the drugs that pulled him back under again. Drugs were nice. Good. Especially since he still woke up with the nightmares from the operation in Afghanistan.

Oblivion was a welcome relief to the pain. This time though, he had nightmares of a pair of unfamiliar open eyes that accused him, along with water and the night sky. He woke a few times, hearing voices that were too fuzzy to make out. He let the drugs take him again, content that the pain was just a dull roar.

He woke up completely to a headache that pounded, and it was hard to move. The lack of movement had more to do with the cast that encased his right arm and leg, and the brace around his neck. There was also restraints around his ribs, which were pretty painful as well. Tony figured medical was going to be his new home for a while, no matter how he tried to sneak out.

He debated the merit of opening his eyes. The lights didn't seem very bright, but that didn't mean opening them wouldn't be painful. He had a very long list of cons that the pros didn't

even begin to outweigh when the memories of what got him here started to filter through. Hydra. The *team*.

Tony's eyes flew open. He struggled to sit up as a hand pushed him back down. As *Steve* pushed him back down. Steve, who would rather Tony be an impressionable child than have to deal with him normally.

Tony was pretty sure he could have given the Hulk a run for his money with the fury he felt.

"It's okay, Tony," Steve said, brushing the hair out of Tony's eyes. "You're okay now. You need to take it easy for-"

"Get out," Tony croaked, his throat dry from the lack of use. It was low and hoarse, but it got Steve's attention and surprise.

"Tony, I-"

"Get out!" Tony said, forcing his voice to be louder. It was enough to wake Pepper, who was curled up in a chair on the other side. Steve's expression closed off after a few seconds of hurt.

"Tony?" Pepper said sleepily, rubbing her eyes. Relief flashed over her face. "You're awake!"

"Not leaving fast enough, Spangles," Tony said, anger lashing through him.

"What's going on?" Pepper asked, looking between the two of them.

"It's alright, Ms. Potts," Steve said, smiling that goofy PR smile he gave people when he was uncomfortable. "I thought this might happen."

"Then what the hell were you doing here in the first place?" Tony snarled.

"Tony! You-"

"I'll leave," Steve promised, his shoulders slouching. As he left, he looked over one last time at Tony. "I'm glad you're awake now."

"What was that about?" Pepper hissed, tapping furiously at her phone. "Tony, do you have any idea what you put him through?"

"Hey, I'm glad to see you're awake as well," Tony said bitterly, considering if this was why they didn't work out. Too quick to jump on each other's faults, not quick enough to defend each other. "What's the matter? Sad that you're no longer a mother and have to go back to being an ex-girlfriend to your needy ex-boss?"

"Oh, Tony. It's not..." Pepper cut off, and Tony closed his eyes, regretting his words. Pepper didn't deserve him lashing out.

She helped him sit up, loosening some of the restraints. "They were just to keep you from thrashing," She explained as she put a glass of water into his good hand and helped him hold

it to his lips. Nightmares. Those eyes. He'd seen death plenty of times before, but something about that man's eyes still haunted him.

She hugged him when he put the glass down, and he rested his head against her shoulder, taking in Pepper's perfume. Freesia. His favorite, because Pepper was the only woman he'd known who favored that particular flower, and he'd gotten it for her in a perfumery in Bermuda when he'd taken her there to relax on the pink sand. It'd been one of their last real attempts to make the relationship work.

"I'm sorry," Tony said quietly into her collarbone. She hugged him tighter in her own silent apology. "You didn't deserve that."

They stayed like that for a short while, Pepper's breaths coming in too short and fast, and Tony pretending he didn't feel her trembling. He'd missed this closeness, the smell of her perfume and the comfort of her body against his. He missed Pepper - *his* Pepper - far more than he wanted to admit.

"I stand by my earlier comment about the 180 turn from mother to ex-girlfriend being weird, not the kiss. So are you two back together or what?" Rhodey asked, leaning in the doorway.

"Rhodey!" Tony said, starting to get up, before he realized that was a bad idea. Pepper was exasperated, but Tony was just happy to see his friend. "And no, we're not back together. Are we back together?"

Tony felt his hopes dashed with Pepper's sigh. "No, Tony. We aren't," she said, hugging him a bit tighter to take away the sting of her words.

"Oh. See?" Tony said. And really this was why Pepper was the adult in their relationship, making the important decisions. He always trusted her with those.

The look of sympathy Rhodey gave him promised a night of sake-filled drunken escapades as soon as Tony was out of the Big House, and Tony couldn't muster the will to be annoyed at the pity. He really wanted that drink, and Rhodey was one of the few people he'd accept it from. "You gave us a scare with that stunt, idiot," Rhodey said, fondness and worry slipping into his voice. "You're not allowed to do that again. It's officially on The List of Ways Not to Kill Yourself."

"I'll just find more creative ways to circumvent The List, honey bear," Tony said, gently pushing away from Pepper. Sitting on his own was difficult, but he couldn't torment himself with what he couldn't have any longer.

"This time was plenty creative, Tone," Rhodey said.

"Yeah, well, being turned into a seven year-old is one I'd rather have skipped," Tony said dryly. He looked down at his arm in the cast, forcing down the wave of terror that washed through him. He'd keep his voice level if it killed him. "So is being tortured by Hydra. Bastards broke my fingers."

"The doctors said you'd heal," Pepper reassured him, and that loosened the tension Tony hadn't been aware of. It wouldn't help the nightmares, but torture hadn't managed to break him yet. It'd take more than some crappy Hydra goons to do that, and the fact that he hadn't been permanently damaged this time was a plus. He'd just gotten rid of the arc reactor and didn't need another body modification.

Pepper's hands trailed down to his chest, as if she were thinking the same thing and needing to reassure herself. Rhodey looked murderous, but he sat down on the bed by Tony and was a comforting presence. If Happy had been here, Tony would have felt complete, but he recognized the sense of having at least one of the normal faces around SI, and he figured he and Pepper had taken turns watching Tony. He was gleefully looking forward to how Pep would deal with the HR problems that leaving Happy in charge would cause.

"I need to have a talk with Widow and Hawkeye about leaving me out on these things, but you won't have to worry about this cell of Hydra again," Rhodey said, picking up the earlier conversation. He slung a friendly arm over Tony's shoulders, despite the dark tone of his voice. Tony used it as an excuse to lean against Rhodey and rest his aching ribs.

"I bet Cap loved that," Tony said, only just managing not to spit out Cap's name like a curse. "Revenge isn't patriotic."

"Actually, I think he was just as pissed about being left out of the loop as I was. Hydra is his old enemy, after all, and with you it was personal," Rhodey said, letting some approval slip into his voice. "If you have to have someone other than me watching your back, at least they're doing it right. Even if it does take all of them to do my job."

"Don't sound so smug about it," Tony said, to cover his confusion. He hadn't expected Steve to make things *personal* on his account. Tony was one of the team, sure, but he and Steve didn't get along on the best days. The level of revenge Rhodey was approving of was reserved for someone like Bucky, or people Steve actually liked.

"Steve didn't leave your side while you've been here, you know," Pepper said, testing the waters.

Tony snorted, the motion reminding him painfully that his ribs weren't healed yet. Of course Steve would stay for one of his *team*. The fact that the good Captain would rather deal with an impressionable seven year-old than Tony's normal self doesn't factor into *duty*."

"How long have I been out?" Tony asked, steering the conversation away.

Pepper and Rhodey shared a glance over his head, but they let the matter slide, proving once again that they were his favorite people in the universe. "Only a week," Pepper said, shaking her head. "You were a lot worse off, but you had some help with... a volunteered blood transfusion that had an added bonus of helping you heal faster."

Aka, he'd gotten some of Steve's healing factor, probably from Hydra's stockpiles, as a guilty peace offering. He was grateful Pepper had danced around it though, because he didn't like being indebted to Steve right now.

But with Hydra gone, there was... "Loki?" Tony asked, knowing the fact that he'd been seven wasn't a good enough excuse for letting Loki get away.

Rhodey sighed, shaking his head. "Next time you decide to have conversations with psychopaths, make sure they can't get away. Hulk only just managed to squash him, and Romanov is pissed about the security breach. You're lucky she thought you might find a way around us and pull this stunt, because she put some security features in place to keep him from escaping."

So treading softly around Natasha might be a good idea. At least Loki was confined again, which was better for everyone involved. "You're not going to let me check myself out, are you?" Tony asked, moving on to the next matter of business.

"No," came the emphatic response from both of them.

Tony sighed, remembering too late that temporary healing factors hadn't been enough to heal his ribs completely. "Alright. Then how many complaints have we gotten from Human Resources about our head of security?"

At Rhodey's laugh and Pepper's dark glare, Tony was able to forget about the eyes and torture for a little while, and that was a start.

\* \* \*

Happy was officially his favorite person in the universe. Because even though his ex-bodyguard couldn't stay around for long, he'd brought Tony two hamburgers and french fries, plus some dried mangos and a bag of Hershey Kisses for later. The crappy hospital food pushed aside, Tony made his way through the delectable second hamburger with a look of pure bliss on his face. He moaned, knowing no one was around to hear him.

"Maybe I should come back later when I'm not interrupting," Natasha said.

Almost no one. He glared over his hamburger, but didn't stop eating. Natasha didn't seem angry, but she didn't leave either. Instead, she sat down on his bed quietly, far better at hiding things than Tony could ever dream of being, but being temporarily seven reminded him of all the tells he'd searched for in adults to try to please them before he'd given up on caring about what other people thought. She was good, but he could tell something was bothering her. Her back was just a little too straight, and her gaze a little too forced, and he didn't think it was because she was walking around without the crutches he knew she should be on. "Before you start, I think I should get a free pass. Going to Loki was pretty stupid, I know, but I was *seven*. You can't blame this on me."

"I think we should anyway," Natasha said, but there wasn't much heat to it.

"No one asked you," Tony replied, wondering what she was doing here. Okay, so maybe he wasn't enough of an idiot that he didn't see the worry in her eyes and yeah, she'd want to visit him in the hospital. Because he was that awesome, obviously. But he was getting the picture that there was more to it than that. Well, easy enough to sort out. "So did you come to taunt



me for being an idiot when I was seven? Cause if so, can we leave out the crying bits? I'd rather we just blocked out the crying bits all together."

"Kotyonok," she said warningly.

Tony blinked. "You called me that as a kid. I'm going to assume that's some kind of Russian endearment, so does that make this a thing now? Whatever happened to Stark?"

"It's a thing now," Natasha said with a hint of a smile. "So get used to it."

"I'd be much more inclined to agree to this if we were sleeping together. Which we're not, by the way."

"Face it, angel moy, you wouldn't last a night in my bed," Natasha said, plainly humoring him.

"Probably not, but at least I'd go out with a bang," he agreed. Tony stuffed the last of the hamburger in his mouth, then offered her a fry. She stole a few more of them, but Tony didn't mind that much. "What is going on here?" he asked finally, since pet names were apparently a thing, and she was content with stealing his food, so this couldn't be to bitch him out.

"How many people tell you no?" Natasha asked.

That was... Tony was pretty sure she wasn't talking about their previous banter flirting, but he had no idea where this conversation was going. Which means falling back on that innuendo, because hey, that was familiar ground. "Plenty more than you'd think. They don't know what they're missing, but I don't push if they don't want to be in my bed. It's not like I'd have a problem finding someone else."

He received a gentle thwap to the head, which made Tony wince, because gentle to Natasha was sparring 'love-tap' for anyone else. "And when it matters?"

Tony shrugged. "If they tell me no when it matters, I prove them wrong. If I can. That last bit is a work in progress on some things, but it usually gets there eventually."

Natasha sat quietly for a few moments as Tony finished off the french fries and debated opening the bag of dried mangoes. He'd meant to keep them as a snack for later, but he did better with unnerving conversations when he was snacking on something. He pulled out the chocolate instead, not bothering to offer any to Natasha who just unwrapped a kiss and popped it in her mouth. He wasn't stupid enough to get between the Black Widow and chocolate.

"I told the truth," Natasha said finally, licking her fingers. "In the debriefing. We needed Iron Man back more than we needed a child."

Ah. So that's what this was about. Tony toyed with one of the little paper things that came with the kisses, rolling it between the fingers of his good hand. "You did. And you were right when you told Cap I wouldn't appreciate his way. Why's this a problem now?"

"Because you don't have to keep proving me wrong on my initial assessment, Tony," Natasha said. "Steve was right. You were always good enough."

Tony froze as she leaned against him, resting her head on his shoulder. "I was a seven-year-old," Tony said eventually. "Trust me, sweetheart, I'm over it. Well, not the whole being a seven-year-old again thing, because that was traumatizing. But I'm sure you noticed I'm over this whole self-worth thing. Wasn't the word 'narcissist' in your report too?"

"Believe it or not, you can even fool spies when you try hard enough," Natasha said wryly. "And you tried pretty hard."

"It was a bad week," Tony said sullenly.

"You went to Loki because of what I said." Natasha stole another Kiss, her voice quiet as she spoke. "I should have known better than to say that in front of you."

"That was a reason. Not my top reason, but a reason," Tony said. Was this an apology? She didn't look particularly guilty, but then Natasha was better at hiding things than he was. "Let's face it. I've never been that altruistic. I wanted the nightmares gone and I couldn't handle losing everyone like that. Which hey, it's one more reason Cap's better than me, so- Ow!"

In retrospect, Natasha hitting him probably wasn't unexpected. He had hoped she'd go easy on him since he was still wounded though. Next time, he'll know better. "What was that for?"

"You think he wouldn't take a way back if there was one?" Natasha asked. "You were seven. You shouldn't hold yourself up to what a grown man does."

"Never stopped Dad," Tony said bitterly. Natasha plucked the Kiss he'd been trying to unwrap one-handed out of his hand. She unwrapped it and stuffed it in his mouth when he'd started to say something else in hopes of deflecting.

"You're not Howard Stark," Natasha said. "Which is good, because I don't think I'd have liked him very much."

"You don't like me very much either," Tony said once he'd swallowed the gooey chocolate.

"You're an idiot, Kotyonok," she said. And yeah, maybe he was. He couldn't be a genius at everything.

Pushing his luck, he inched closer to her. Natasha sighed, resting her head against his shoulder again before unwrapping another kiss for him. "You're better than Howard."

"Of course I am," Tony said easily. "If there's one thing I've learned over the years, I don't hit people when I drink."

Natasha snorted. "No, you just shoot watermelons and destroy relationships."

"I deserved that," Tony said with a wince. Because yeah, maybe he was better than Howard when he's drunk, but not by much.

"But you can let things go. You're not him. You don't have to keep clinging to the things dragging you down like he did," she said, resuming their conversation.

"Maybe," Tony said, letting Natasha feed him another Kiss. "Why bother going through all of this now?"

"You're not the only one trying to make up for your mistakes, Kotyonok," Natasha said. And yeah, Tony usually counted as a mistake in most people's books. It was nice to be worth the bother of a not-apology pep talk on occasion, though.

They stayed like that for awhile, letting a silence fall between them that was only interrupted by Natasha stealing Hershey Kisses and occasionally unwrapping one for Tony. He honestly had no idea what they were doing, but Tony was willing to give up on figuring it out for now. It was rather nice, even if Natasha was eating his chocolate. "How's Clint holding up?" Tony asked eventually.

Natasha sighed. "He only left guarding Loki to someone else when we went after the rest of the Hydra cell. You shouldn't scare him like that."

Okay, that was designed to make him feel guilty, and it hit the mark. Tony winced. "*We are* doing the whole 'holding me accountable for things I did when I was seven', aren't we?"

"No, but he'd thank you for a few extra features on Loki's cell," Natasha said, and he nodded. He might add a ping to Clint's phone whenever Loki got near the door. It wouldn't help if Loki blasted through a wall, but he could set up a few other alerts for Clint.

"I should make sure he's behaving," Natasha said, giving Tony one last chocolate before standing up. "But Tony..."

"Yeah?" he looked up at his given name, a little surprised to hear it from her. He liked it.

"We know better now," Natasha said, running a hand through his hair. "You've proved it to us, even if no one else sees it. You're good enough."

Tony felt his chest tighten in ways that should make him worry after the surgery, but he nodded. Maybe he still didn't quite believe her, but it was enough for now. He smiled at her, and it was just as broken as his fingers, but she didn't seem to mind. "Never doubted it."

"If you say so, angel moy," Natasha said. She limped out of the room, and Tony looked down at the foil wrappers still lying on his bed. "I'm good enough, huh?" he said to himself, quietly rearranging the wrappers into something more lewd. He could totally blame it on Natasha for not cleaning up after herself when Pepper yelled at him for it. Being on a team had its perks occasionally.

\* \* \*

It was another two weeks before they let Tony out of the hospital on strict orders of bed rest, which Tony took to mean working from the cot in his workshop. With the cast on his arm, he'd be operating the suit remotely for a while, but that didn't mean he could stop making

improvements. Stock had taken a pretty big drop when the public found out the chairman was in emergency surgery, so he owed Pepper something big and mind-blowing.

He was dictating some specs to JARVIS to keep from forgetting he couldn't use his right arm when Bruce input his entry code and flopped down beside Tony on the cot. "What's up, Cookie?" Tony said absently, giving Bruce about a fourth of his attention span until he knew if the conversation was important. He knew better than to use his propped up foot to poke Bruce with, even if poking him with the cast would be entertaining. Painful, but entertaining. Unfortunately, the pain won out at the moment.

"You should be resting," Bruce mused.

"I'm in bed!" Tony protested, not looking up from the schematics for the new jet engine that promised to be more cost effective. He regulated this conversation to 'not worth paying attention'.

"You are," Bruce said, sounding fond enough that Tony knew he wasn't actually down here to force Tony into resting. With Bruce, it could go either way, depending on the direction of Hulk's anger. But if that wasn't why Bruce had come down, Tony was at a loss for why the man was here. This didn't have the air of a social call, despite the fact Bruce had plenty of reason to want to wallow in Tony's awesome.

Bruce was one of those people who one had to wait for, who went at his own pace to take the world by storm. Not Tony's style, but he was willing to go at Bruce's pace so long as the other man didn't mind gentle shoves in the right direction. It also meant Bruce had far more patience than Tony, and sometimes played games with Tony's inability to wait in return for Tony's poking. Today though, Tony was willing to wait Bruce out, and he was rewarded with a small smile and a hand ruffling his hair after a few minutes of silence had fallen between them. Tony scowled, but relaxed into the touch. Which is why he glared at Bruce for making him tense up again with his next words. "Are you ever going to talk to Steve?"

"Why should I?" Tony asked, making sure there was no hint of sulking in his voice. He hadn't so much as seen Steve since his return to the tower, not even at the small party the Avengers had thrown to welcome him back. It was pretty clear Steve wanted nothing to do with him. "He hasn't bothered to talk to me."

"I'm pretty sure he's under the impression he isn't welcome to at the moment," Bruce said with a raised eyebrow. "I can't imagine why he would come to that conclusion."

Tony inched away to the far end of the cot, returning his attention to the engine. It was much more difficult with only one hand and a foot to work with. "Why do you care?" he asked, trying not to feel childish. It didn't help that he was severely tempted to stick his tongue out at Bruce.

"You always drag me into your fights with Steve," Bruce said, sounding far too amused. "I back you up that one time on the Helicarrier, and you seem to think I'll be on your side for every fight you have with Steve. Pillow fights and popcorn fights during team bonding night included."

"You always pick my side anyway," Tony said, feeling a little smug.

"Only because you hide behind me as a deterrent," Bruce said wryly.

"Well, it works," Tony said, moving a vector that was in the way with his good hand. "I didn't ask you to get involved this time."

"No, but I thought I'd be proactive," Bruce said, bringing up a display on his own tablet to work on. He flicked over the results from some blood tests to Tony's tablet.

"Iron levels are low," Tony said after a cursory glance at the data. "What are those things? That's not normal blood. It almost looks like..." Tony trailed off, realizing whose blood sample he was looking at.

"Maybe next time you'll believe me when I say you need more protein in your diet. And no, not more hamburgers," Bruce said, flicking over a few more results from the tests they'd run on Tony once he was stable, this time with Tony's name on the data clearly marked. "Sadly, it's not a viable solution to injuries. We had to synthesize nearly all of what Hydra had drained from him to get even a workable amount of the serum's healing factor for you, and the last thing I want is for Steve to go through more of that."

"Yeah, yeah. Without him, I'd be dead," Tony said, sending the data back over.

"There were ways that might not have involved you getting hurt," Bruce said, a hint of Hulk's rage in his voice despite the forced gentleness. "Thor was talking to his mother about different possibilities, and there's a few mystics in New York that seemed genuine. You didn't have to go to Loki."

"I didn't want anyone to stop me," Tony admitted.

"We wouldn't have."

"No, but you would have made me wait." Tony tapped at his chest before remembering the arc reactor wasn't there anymore. Old habits die hard. "I didn't want to wait, because waiting meant more nightmares and I was convinced that if I was an adult, the nightmares would go away." He laughed, but the sound didn't carry any mirth. "It hasn't, by the way. I've seen countless people die before, but I keep having nightmares of his eyes."

"The trauma stayed," Bruce said with a sigh. Tony leaned into Bruce just a little, wanting, but unable to ask for comfort. Luckily, Bruce knew all of his cues, and he moved a little closer to Tony to share body heat.

"Why does it never work out between me and Cap?" Tony asked, toying with the problem. He brought up a few statistics of how many times they'd clashed and the events leading up to it, desperately searching for an equation that would make this work.

"You both seem to have very bad timing when it comes to offering the olive branch," Bruce said thoughtfully. And yeah, Tony could see that. In the six months since the team dispersed, Tony had kept in contact with the others, but every time he'd tried with Steve, it hadn't taken

a genius to know Steve wasn't in the mood. And the few times Steve had tried had been right after Pepper's break-up or the anniversary of Yinsen's death. Yeah. That's not just bad timing, that's really *shitty* timing. Since the Avengers reformed, he and Steve had only managed a shaky truce.

"Just try talking to him," Bruce suggested. "He wants that olive branch as much as you do."

"Yeah, so much he'd rather take the easy way out than actually deal with me," Tony said, feeling like the wound was laid out bare.

Bruce just ruffled his hair again and stood up. "You'll end up beating the bad timing one of these days."

Tony glared at the statistics that mocked him. Fine then. He could beat those odds. Just watch him.

\* \* \*

Saying that and doing something about it were two different things. Really, Tony wasn't all that surprised, but in this case, he would have liked to be. Tony stood in the doorway of the den, crutch under one arm as he watched Steve draw. He'd been standing there for a good part of the last ten minutes, alternating between being too pissed to say anything and not knowing where to start. His foot was really starting to hurt, but it wasn't enough to push him in the room or back out of it, though thankfully the cast was off now since his leg had been more of a fracture.

It was when Steve stopped drawing, tracing the picture with his fingers with a heartbreaking smile tilting his lips that didn't reach his eyes, that Tony realized no timing was ever going to be good for them. He might as well get this over with. "So what's a Capsicle like you doing in a place like this?" Tony asked, finally hobbling the room.

Steve jumped, dropping his pencil as he spun around, then started cursing. "That sort of inattention will get me killed," he muttered.

"If you're on a battlefield, which hey, you're not. Just Stark Tower," Tony hissed, not liking the implication. "You must really not like living here if that's the way you view it. Or maybe you just don't want to deal with me?"

"I deserved that." Steve winced, then gathered his art supplies up. He looked straight ahead, instead of at Tony. His head wasn't bowed, but it might as well have been. "I can leave, if that's what you want."

Tony realized with a start that Steve wasn't talking about the room, but *leaving*. Not leaving the Avengers, because a rift between the two of them wasn't enough that Fury would accept the resignation for an answer, but leaving the Tower. This was Captain America defeated, acknowledging his loss with a dignity Tony could never even hope to achieve.

Tony had defeated Captain America's stubbornness, forcing him to give up. All this time competing with Cap for his father's attention, and he'd finally beaten the man down. His very

own victory.

Somehow, it didn't seem worth it.

Tony flopped down on the couch where Steve had been sitting, leaning his head back against it and staring at the ceiling as he kept his crutch within range. "This isn't working. I can't fix it either. I'm a genius, but I can't figure this out. Even with pushing Pepper, Happy, and Rhodey away a few times, how fucked up do I have to be that even Captain America gives up on me?"

"That's not-"

"Isn't it?" Tony asked. "You were the one who just offered to leave." The silence answered his question well enough. "I fix things," he went on with frustration. "That's what I do. I'm one of the smartest men on the planet, but I can't fix this. I've tried everything, but I just don't know how."

"You can't always fix things that are broken," Steve said quietly.

"Why not?" Tony asked, looking over at Steve. "Tell me what I'm doing wrong."

"Tony..." Steve said, sitting down next to him. "Sometimes there are too many pieces to fix. It's not something you're doing wrong."

"It's not you, it's me?" Tony said acidly, bitterness pulsing through him. "I've heard that line before, Cap. Several times."

"Look, you weren't able to fix things with Pepper either, right?" Steve asked.

Tony couldn't help the full body flinch at this, and he resented that deeply. "Fuck you. This isn't working," Tony said, pushing himself up with his crutch. He didn't need Captain America telling him how Tony had ruined one of the few good things in his life. He knew full well how that went.

"Wait," Steve said, and Tony wouldn't have listened, but Steve had grabbed hold of his good wrist. "Tony, that's not-"

"Let go," Tony hissed, tugging on his wrist ineffectively against the super-human strength. "Let go of me you bastard or-"

"Tony, please," Steve said over him, desperation in his voice. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that."

"Then how *did* you mean it?" Tony spat.

"Would you let me try to explain?" Steve said, working back some of his own anger. "Please?"

Tony sat back down on the couch grudgingly. "Then explain."

Steve let go of his wrist and the breath he'd been holding. "I'm sorry. I hadn't meant to imply... I always say the wrong thing around you, and I don't think I've put my foot in my mouth as much with anyone besides..."

Steve paused, running a hand through his hair. "Anyone besides?" Tony asked, feeling curious. Who else had Steve pissed off this much?

"Peggy," Steve said simply, and Tony immediately regretted asking. Steve leaned forward with his elbows on his knees, looking straight ahead.

Tony couldn't tell if Steve was avoiding eye contact or seeing into the past. He also didn't know what to do with a vulnerable Steve Rogers. How they'd skipped from yelling to *this*, Tony would never know, but he wasn't ready for this step in their relationship. Really, he wanted to go back to the steps they'd missed and possibly never leave them. "Look, Steve-

"Please just listen," Steve said.

It was the please that did Tony in. He no longer had a piece of vibranium close to his heart, but he doubted even that could have withstood the look Steve was giving him. Tony nodded, keeping his mouth shut as Steve continued.

"What I meant earlier was that you and Pepper didn't work because you both couldn't find what would make it work," Steve said. "Even though you work swell as friends. It took both of you not fixing it. It's... It's the same here. It's not all your fault for this not being fixed. I think you've tried harder than I have, which is my fault, not yours."

Tony would have liked to say something about him and Pepper being *swell*, but he stayed quiet as asked. Until Steve said that last bit, then it was his turn to stare at the wall. "Yeah, I get it. You'd rather not deal with this me."

"That's not true," Steve said, sighing heavily.

"Then explain that to me, because I'm getting all sorts of mixed signals here." Tony looked over in time to see Steve wince.

"Will you listen without storming off this time?"

Tony flushed, a habit he did not willingly indulge in. He had very little shame to speak of, but yeah, Steve had a point. He'd stormed out of most of their encounters, and he was starting to wonder if his resentment towards Captain America had ended the encounters a little too quickly. He waved a hand, hoping it would distract Steve from the faint blush. "Yeah, yeah. You've got my permission to yank me back onto the couch if I start storming. Though for the record, that's totally Thor's thing." Mostly because it was much harder to properly storm out when one had a busted hand and still needed a crutch to get around.

Steve gave him a weak smile for that, then took a breath to steel himself. "It was an easy way out."



Tony flinched, wanting nothing more than to do what Steve just forced him to promise not to do. But damn it, he wasn't breaking his promise five seconds after making it.

"It was an easy out for the fact we don't get along, for all the reasons for this distance between us that we can't seem to bridge, to make up for Howard, and for..." Steve paused, looking over at Tony. For a brief second Tony could have sworn he saw *longing* that was bafflingly directed at him. It was gone before Tony could even blink though, so he must have imagined it. The emotion didn't make sense anyway, so he must have been blinded by all of these *feelings* that he hated having to sort through.

"And for a lot of other things," Steve finished. "That doesn't mean that it was right, and I'm not proud of that. I'm not... Captain America has sure been made into this big legend, hasn't he? It was bad enough back during the war, but these days it's blown way out of the ballpark. But I'm just a kid from Brooklyn. I'm not even familiar with Brooklyn anymore. My Brooklyn no longer exists."

"Steve..." Tony was at a loss of what to do. The defeated slump was about Steve's shoulders, and Tony felt his anger drain away like water through his fingers, no matter how hard he grasped at it. No one should look that lost. Especially not Captain America.

But that was the point, wasn't it? How many people looked and saw Steve Rogers?

"I'm just a kid from a world that doesn't exist anymore," Steve repeated, taking no notice of Tony. "And I make mistakes all the time. I never meant to make you feel like... to feel it wasn't worth trying to get to know you."

Tony swallowed, pushing away the fresh hurt those words brought up. "No worries, Cap. It takes more than that to get past my defenses."

"I don't think it does," Steve said, looking up at him gravely - looking *through* Tony and past his walls.

"You think wrong," Tony snarled, feeling far more vulnerable and open under those blue eyes than Steve had any right to make him feel. He was done with this conversation. He was-

The tight grip on his wrist held him in place no matter how hard Tony tugged on it. "You promised," Steve reminded him gently.

"I've heard enough. I don't-"

"I'm sorry."

"What?" Tony stopped pulling out of Steve's grip, surprised into stillness. Tony was the one who always owed apologies. Having them directed at him was a novelty that didn't really wear off, especially when he hadn't expected one.

"I'm sorry," Steve repeated, pulling Tony back down on the couch with a small tug. He ran his thumb over the inside of Tony's wrist. "I was scared of losing you if your wounds were too much when you got back to normal. I was scared of never getting a chance to make

things right between us, no matter how hard I tried. And I hated the look in your eyes when you thought that you weren't good enough to stay with us as a kid. But I made a mess of things again instead of helping."

Tony sat there in stunned silence as Steve finished, wondering if he'd somehow stepped into an alternate universe of some sort. He'd thought Steve... Well, probably not hated him, because that was a strong word, but a step below tolerance was fairly accurate. "Why do you care?" he found himself asking before he could stop his mouth from running.

Steve smiled ruefully. "'Cause you're a link to my past I've treated poorly. And you're a pretty swell guy if I could say something without putting my foot in my mouth, or if you'd actually stick around to let me explain. And it kills me a little when you feel you have to ask questions like that. I meant what I told you, you know."

Letting go of Tony's wrist, Steve reached for the sketchbook. "What did you tell me?" Tony asked, nonplussed by the direction this conversation was taking. Steve had said a lot of things in the past, most of them unpleasant. It didn't sound like he was talking about any of those though.

Tony caught a brief glimpse of the picture Cap had been looking at when he'd walked in - a gorgeous woman with short cropped hair and a hint of a smile behind serious eyes - before Steve flipped a couple pages back, handing the new image to Tony.

He stared numbly at the new picture before him, barely remembering to grasp the edge of the sketchbook with his good hand so it wouldn't fall. He was shocked enough he'd even forgotten he hated being handed things. Vaguely, he recalled reading that Steve had a nearly eidetic memory in his father's notes. That was the only explanation for the fact that his own eyes stared out at him like a photograph. Except they were young and frightened, and so very vulnerable. His younger self clutched at the Captain America teddy bear like a life-line, holding out the Hulk teddy bear with a determined air that warred with his eyes.

"When you were trapped in that closet," Steve started, meeting Tony's eyes steadily as Tony looked up at the sound of Steve's voice. "I told you that I knew someone named Tony, who was one of the bravest men I've ever met. Even as a kid, you had more guts than I could have ever imagined. You've got bravery and kindness in spades, no matter how you try to hide it."

Tony set the picture in his lap so he could touch it, fingers brushing over the Cap-Teddy in his younger self's bruised arms as he was careful not to smudge the lines. "So I'll leave, if that's what you want," Steve continued. "But I'm not giving up on fixing this. That was a mistake, and I'm sorry. But now it doesn't matter how hard it is, I'll keep trying. Because that little kid had too many people give up on him, and... I might be plain old Steve Rogers, but I don't want to be one of those people. Even if that's all I can do and if I keep making mistakes."

Tony swallowed, wondering when his throat had gone so dry. Steve had that same defeated air from earlier, but this time Tony saw an undercurrent of determination lacing it. Steve Rogers had lost the battle - and lost it badly - but the War was still far from over. He looked back down at the picture, wondering if Steve had really lost as badly as he thought.

"You can't take Hulk-Teddy away," Tony said, earning him a pair of raised eyebrows. "He gets angry when he's too far away from his friends. And you won't like him when he's angry, so you should just-"

"Are you using a teddy bear as cover to tell me I can stay?"

Tony blinked. "Yes. I mean, no. Definitely no. And anyway, teddy bears are manly and for adults, or are you telling me Captain America lies to children? And now you're laughing at me! No, you messed up big time so you are not allowed to laugh!"

He glared as Steve laughed, his shoulders shaking silently as a hand covered his face from view. "See if I get you an Iron-Teddy. It's the most awesome, and you won't get one," Tony said, which really, only made Steve laugh more. No, he wasn't *pouting*, thank you very much. Pepper not allowing Tony to have an Iron-Teddy only meant he'd ordered about 100 of them in revenge, but Steve was definitely not getting one. Bruce could have Steve's share, because Bruce was awesome and would appreciate it, unlike Rhodey who would just laugh at the offer. Bruce was obviously a better best friend.

A very small part of him wondered when the last time Steve had laughed was, and he was drawing a blank. It was an uncomfortable thought, and Tony wondered why it bothered him so much. "But Captain America did lie," Tony said as the thought hit him, immediately wishing he hadn't because Steve had stopped laughing. "You said you had a *friend* also named Tony. We're not..."

"Wishful thinking on my part, I guess," Steve said with a melancholy sort of smile that made Tony feel like he needed the arc reactor again to keep his heart from failing.

"Yeah, well, you'll have to do something about that," Tony snapped. "Because I can't fix this, and I'm crap at this sort of thing. You're the strategic genius, so chop-chop. Get moving! It's officially your problem to keep that from being a lie."

Steve's eyes went wide at Tony's temper, but slowly a sly smile took the place of the hurt expression. "Alright," Steve said, earning him a tentative smile in return. "But you're not as bad at fixing this as you think."

Tony stood up with a snort, angling the crutch under his arm as he fought down disappointment when Steve's hand didn't grab hold of his wrist again. "Talk to Pepper, Happy, or Rhodey. They'll disillusion you of that," he said, deciding this heart-to-heart was over for now. Quitting while they were ahead seemed like a good policy. He felt a little lighter too, to be honest. Maybe Bruce had a point about this whole talking thing. "Right. I've got half a dozen things that need doing and the company doesn't run itself. Well, technically Pepper does that, but she gets annoyed if I leave her to the wolves for too long and no one wants an annoyed Pepper. So I'll just-"

"Tony," Steve said, his tone making Tony stop short.

"Yeah?"

"Thank you." Tony felt his mouth fall open for a moment before he snapped it shut. Steve continued on, appearing not to notice Tony's gaping. "For letting me keep trying, and for forgiving my mistakes. And for proving me wrong every time I misjudge you."

"You aren't so bad yourself," Tony said once his voice started working. He punched Steve's arm lightly, trying to ignore the sap that was coming out of his mouth. "Even the non-bottle bits."

Steve did catch his wrist again, but not with the firm grip to keep him there. He traced his fingers on the inside of Tony's wrists in a surprisingly intimate gesture that Tony only barely suppressed a shiver for. He smiled openly at Tony, an expression Tony had only seen a few times on Steve, and only once before directed at him. "Um, Cap?"

"I mean that, Tony. Thank you."

He squeezed Tony's hand once as he spoke, and when Tony pulled back this time, he had to fight the urge to rub his wrist where Steve had touched it. It was easier when he remembered his other hand was still in a cast, but the feeling of want didn't go away. "You're welcome," Tony said uncertainly, not entirely sure what was going on, though he knew it was something big. He made a hasty retreat after that, because he hated being confused. He stole one last glance at Steve as he left the room to see him smiling at the picture of the teddy bear, giving Tony an Idea.

\* \* \*

Two weeks later, Tony stared down at the boxes that had been delivered to his suites, rubbing the tender spot on his wrist that wasn't quite a bruise with his now freed hand. It was a pity the serum had washed out of his system, because his ribs and broken bones had really appreciated the healing boost. He'd have needed both casts for another month without it. Like Clint. And no, Tony was not gleeful over the fact that his casts came off first. Mostly. Okay, maybe just a little.

He and Steve had already crashed and burned again, but Steve seemed to have interpreted Tony's permission to yank him back during the argument as a long-term thing. Tony wasn't entirely sure how to feel about that, but the silent tension that followed their spat had been halved, so he was willing to allow it for now. The faint pressure he could still feel on his wrist meant a lot of things, but mostly that Steve wasn't giving up. Tony didn't know how to feel about that either, but Bruce had smiled and told him that was okay the one time he'd mentioned it.

This though... Tony looked down at the boxes gleefully. This was a *fantastic* plan, and he knew exactly how he felt about it. Which just made it even better. "JARVIS, where did I put the scissors?"

"On the table to your left, sir," JARVIS said, a note of resignation in his voice. "Might I remind you of the Giant Rabbit Fiasco before you embark on this ill-advised adventure?"

"This is different," Tony said, grabbing the scissors and cutting the tape that sealed one of the many boxes. "These aren't giant. Besides, they're cute! Everyone loves cute. Pepper likes

cute. It'll go better than the Giant Rabbit."

"If you say so, sir, but I don't think decorating Stark Tower with hundreds of teddy bears dressed as the Avengers' alter-egos is a particularly good plan."

"It's an amazing plan," Tony said as he pried open the box. He grinned maniacally as he saw his first box was of Iron-Teddys, because that had to be a sign. They were just a little bigger than the others, and ten times more awesome. He may have also ordered more of them than the others. "Are the others asleep?"

If he had programmed JARVIS to sigh, his AI would have done so just now. But since JARVIS didn't actually breathe, Tony had disregarded that idea. "They are, all but Ms. Romanov who won't return until tomorrow morning."

"Awesome. Time to get to work! Send the reinforcements, J. I'm gonna need Dummy and Yu to help or I won't finish in time," Tony clapped his hands together, wincing in pain after remembering that he still needed to take it easy on his right hand. Then he smirked at the masked teddy bears in his box.

"Another ill-advised plan, though I'll admit it's more to the letter of the doctor's orders that you shouldn't be moving around as much," JARVIS said as Tony picked up one of the Iron-Teddies. He glanced over at the lineup of the original teddy bears he'd arranged on his desk, then down at the bear in his hand. The Captain America bear sat a little apart from the rest where Tony may or may not have found it easier to grab after waking up from a nightmare of eyes and stars. Teddy bears were definitely cool for adults.

Tony stood, crossing the room to put the Iron-Teddy next to Cap-Teddy. He smiled, liking the picture it made. They weren't friends yet, and Tony didn't pretend to understand some of the looks Steve had been giving him recently, but for the first time, Tony allowed himself a bit of hope concerning the mess that was the relationship between him and Steve.

"It'll work," Tony said, more to himself than to JARVIS. If nothing else, there'd be a spectacular explosion since they were both too stubborn to stop trying. "Right, nap time's over, boys. We've got a long night of decorating ahead of us and there's still a lot of work to do!"

And the extra work? Tony figured it'd be worth it.

~FIN~

## End Notes

Memory: I would like it to be known that the Great Teddy Bear Fiasco went over about as well as JARVIS had predicted. Tony got a very stern lecture on appropriate ideas from Pepper, Rhodey just laughed at the Iron Teddies, and Tony was forced to donate most of the teddy bears to charity. But not before all of the Avengers had stolen a full set for themselves, because teddy bears are cool. Thor is the only one who displays his proudly, however. Tony might have found an Iron Teddy next to the Hulk Teddy he'd given Cap on Steve's couch at one point, but he's sworn to secrecy. Coulson may have grabbed two Cap Teddies, one for collectible purposes and one for cuddling. Steve pretends not to be a little creeped out by the latter.

Speaking of Coulson, Tony did end up making a robot dog for him. Coulson was more amused by it than he let on and Clint thought the laser eyes were hysterical. Pepper was not so happy considering the burnt spots that started to appear around the Tower, but the dog was named K-9 and Coulson grew rather attached to it.

That's my story and I'm sticking to it.

Anyway, that's the fic. The teddy bears have taken over the tower, like they do. And Steve, why do you do this to me, wanting slash in the one fic I can't do much with it? Especially when Tony was no where near ready for slash either. This is why you had an extra flashback in Waterloo, because unlike the Brigadier, I can torment you when you torment me. Hopefully you enjoyed the fic regardless of everything I did to little Tony.

Anyway, the quote of the fic:

"Childhood is not from birth to a certain age and at a certain age  
The child is grown, and puts away childish things.  
Childhood is the kingdom where nobody dies."

-Edna St. Vincent Millay (The rest of the poem can be found here:  
[www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/23298](http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/23298) )

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