How to Repair a Broken Heart

by InfluentialPineapple

Summary

The Mechanic has a lot on his plate; Thanos is coming, the Guardians of the Galaxy are marooned, Thaddeus Ross is reaching right down his throat, and a budding super hero deserves his full attention. He's also dying. No big deal. He can fix it. He can fix anything.
And he can do it all without even opening that stupid phone.

Now, where did those notes on Extremis go...?
Chapter 1

“I might need your help,” Tony Stark admits quietly to Peter Parker on a warm Tuesday night in June. They’re high up on a jutting cliff over-looking the city, which shines like an enormous jewel below them. For not the first time, Peter marvels at the locations simply being Tony Stark allows one access to as he sits patiently in the passenger seat of the ‘crazy car’ he first ever glimpsed parked in front of his apartment building a little over two years ago. The vehicle sounds a bit worse for wear since then, clattering slightly, even as they sit idle, and Peter wonders why Tony hasn’t bothered to fix it.

“Sure, Mr. Stark, anything,” he says, when Tony doesn’t elaborate. Then he feels it; the crushing grip of anxiety, unmistakable. He can feel the wild ‘thump-ump, thump-ump’, of Tony’s quickening heart rate, just as he notices the man’s pallor and trembling hands. Peter has never informed Tony that he can sense every little weakness that overcomes him, but he’s under no illusion that Stark doesn’t already know.

“You don’t even know what it is yet,” Tony observes after a noticeable attempt to collect himself, which seems to barely work, but he says it with playful disapproval and offers Peter a sideways glance, “I could be asking you to come rob a grave with me tonight, and you would have just agreed to it. Not good foresight.”

“This wouldn’t happen to be the grave where you’ve buried all your lame jokes, would it?” Peter fires back, and Tony smirks at him, chuckles lightly. It’s short lived, but Peter’s glad to have brought a smile to his face. It’s become such a rare occurrence, Peter’s almost forgotten what it sounds like when the man laughs.

“Seriously,” Tony continues, frowning, putting the mask back on, “this isn’t something I would suggest just blindly agreeing to. This is… How old are you, again, fifteen?”

“Sixteen, Mr. Stark, I’m- I’m sixteen.” Peter says, annoyed, because he’s about to have a birthday in a couple weeks. Tony knows this, having already gifted him with a series of upgrades to his Spider-Man suit, as well as a large college grant to save face with May.

“Right, wow, damn, can’t even get into a rated ‘R’ movie by yourself yet, can you?” Tony says, rubbing his fingers thoughtfully through a goatee now speckled with gray. “Can’t legally buy booze, cigarettes, or gamble, join the military…”

Peter stifles his sigh, because he’s almost positive he knows where this is going. “I mean yeah, but I’m turning seventeen here soon, so, I’m not totally useless,” he says, defensively.

“No, of course you’re not,” Tony agrees wholeheartedly, “gosh, you’re far from useless, Peter. It’s just you’re young, and I’m sorry you never had a chance at a normal life. I’m sorry that having these powers means you feel like you have to carry the world’s burdens on your back, and I fully, intimately understand the guilt that drives that. But I want you to know that my situation and yours are totally different. I’m repenting for my negligence; I allowed very dangerous weapons to be used by very evil people to murder… countless innocents. I’ve made mistakes that cost thousands of lives. I owe a debt, and my job here isn’t done yet. You, though, Pete… you don’t owe this world squat. This world owes you.”

That’s crap, Peter knows, because it was Tony’s business partner making those illegal sales, and neither was Tony the only one responsible for the Ultron fiasco, but it’s so like him to take the full blame. Trying to explain these things to Tony simply stresses him out. Now it’s Peter’s turn to shoot
the sideways glance. “What is it you’re trying to say, Mr. Stark?” he asks.

“I don’t know,” Tony says, sighing heavily, “look, being… this, whatever it is I call myself, a ‘hero’ or whatever, it will not be kind to you. You’ll suffer, you’ll have nightmares, you’ll be ridiculed, you’ll never have a normal life, Peter, ever, and it will affect you. Maybe I’m trying to say that you shouldn’t feel forced into sacrificing your chance at something better through some misguided guilt complex, because that’s my problem, and there’s no reason for you to feel obligated to do anything at all for these people. You haven’t screwed up like I have yet, maybe.”

“Are you trying to get me to quit again?” Peter asks, rolling his eyes. This is simply Tony being insecure about his request, something Peter was completely taken aback to find out about Iron Man; the person beneath the cold, metal, uncaring gaze is troubled.

Over the course of the last two years, Peter has gotten to know Tony little by little, and he’s constantly surprised at what he finds beneath the thick armor Tony shields himself with, in the suit or out of it. Tony Stark struggles, more than most, perhaps. Of course, Tony has never directly opened up to Peter about anything like that, clearly operating under some commitment to appear as solid and flashy and unbreakable as diamonds when around nearly everyone.

But Peter will never forget the way Tony’s heart pounded and his hands shook one day while describing the techniques utilized to defeat the Chituari, during what was supposed to be a lesson on large-scale tactical warfare and planning. Tony pushed through it, allowing almost no outward signs of his distress as he elaborated the tactics behind wide-scale invasion containment, but Peter could feel it.

And he couldn’t help but think of the news on that day.

Peter had watched on live television, wide-eyed, young and so naïve, as Iron Man, completely alone, charged into the aliens, attacking them, doing everything possible to protect the city and the scurrying civilians below with nothing to put between them and the hostiles but himself. For nearly ten minutes, Tony did this while he waited for the other Avengers to show up, undoubtedly relating every scream to his own perceived ineptitude. Peter can only imagine how terrifying that must have been for Tony, because watching it unfold live on TV wasn’t something Peter is likely to ever forget.

And then, Mr. Stark used his own body as a vessel to re-route an incoming nuclear missile into the wormhole, with no expectation of survival. Simple words cannot express the respect Peter has for Tony Stark. He saved Peter’s city from complete annihilation, saved Peter, saved Aunt May and the few friends he has. Tony did that for a city full of people he’s never even met, and who probably have nothing but shit to talk about him.

That day, Peter decided if he ever gained special abilities, he would use them to help people. And there was nothing anyone could say or do to stop that. Tony knows this about Peter, knows his drive is unshakable, and maybe remaining ignorant to exactly why.

That’s how he knows Mr. Stark is bluffing, or stalling, or trying to nurse certain insecurities about whatever it is he needs help with, again, and Peter doesn’t take it seriously at all anymore. “You know I’m not gonna quit, Mr. Stark, so are you really trying this again, because- “

“No, no,” Tony says, screwing up his face and waving his hand around as though he’s trying to shoo the thought away, “that’s not it, I’m just trying to ask you for help, while making sure you understand that even though, uh, even though this involves, well, imminent danger… ugh, shit. You don’t have to say yes, I guess, is what I’m trying very hard to reiterate to you… in the most complicated way possible.” Tony looks over at him and sighs at Peter’s confused stare.
Then, he snaps his fingers, “right, story time. Let’s start with some context.”

“Makes sense,” Peter says eagerly, more than ready to hear about something not involving how young he is. “I’m ready, bring it.”

“About six months ago, I received a transmission from some guy calling himself ‘Star-Lord’.”

“Wow, Star-lord?” Peter snickers.

Tony grimaces, “I mean, you run around in a onesie and call yourself Spider-Man, I wouldn’t judge.”

“Fair point,” Peter says, shrugging.

“Guess what his real name is, though,” Tony says, and Peter shakes his head.

“Not one of my powers, sorry,” he replies, and Tony shoots him a look.

“His name is Peter Quill,” he says, and when Peter just stares blankly, Tony scoffs, “nothing I love better than telling a story while in the middle of a story. In 1988, a small boy was abducted from outside a hospital in Missouri. He was never found, and there were no suspects, but one classified account from the grandfather of the boy states that he ran outside and saw what he could only describe as a flying alien vehicle beaming Quill up like ‘something out of Star Trek’.”

“Oh, my god,” Peter says, realizing what this means, “that’s him, that’s the kid, isn’t it?”

“Yup, all grown up and re-branded,” Tony says, “and stuck out in the space equivalent of the middle of nowhere, with no fuel and limited supplies. And with half the galaxy out for his head.”

“So, he wants… what, he wants you to go help him, or something?” Peter asks incredulously, wondering if he’s about to be asked to travel into space, and how in the hell he is ever going to explain that type of absence to May.

“Well, sort of. The plan is to split the difference, make the help mutual.” Suddenly Peter can feel the man’s terrible anxiety returning, vengeful. Tony covers his eyes with his hand, his fingers practically vibrating against his face, “he told me there’s a monster coming, Pete. Something called a Titan. He’s coming for some cosmic artifact we have here on Earth. And he’s bringing another army.”

The air in the vehicle is stuffy with tension. Tony is breathing heavily, and rolling the windows down has little effect. All Peter can do is attempt to wrap his mind around what Mr. Stark just told him. Earth isn’t ready for another invasion, certainly not one led by a murderous Titan. The Avengers are merely a concept, SHIELD is essentially dissolved, and Peter knows the relationship between Tony and the U.S. government is… strained. Oh shit, what are they going to do? Suddenly the anxiety Peter is feeling is more his own than Stark’s.

“Let’s get out,” Tony says breathlessly, and Peter’s half way out of the car before Tony can finish his sentence.

They’ve been up there for a while. The night air has cooled significantly, and Peter is thankful for it against his burning face and ears as he sits on the ground facing the view of the city. From all the way up here, Peter can almost forget about the chaos that occurs daily in those streets. It really is beautiful.

Tony seems to stumble out of his car, but catches himself with a hand on the roof. He totters over to the front of it and leans heavily against its hood, sweaty and pale. Peter eyes him suspiciously.
Something is very wrong with Tony. “Are you okay?” Peter asks, refusing to stay silent about it, no matter how much Mr. Stark hates bringing up his health.

He doesn’t anticipate the truth for once. “No, I’m not,” Tony says after a long minute, and his face is slack with exhaustion, soft brown eyes glimmering in the persistent glow of a thousand shining sky scrapers. Peter waits with bated breath, eyes wide. This is unprecedented. Tony Stark is always okay. “Peter, six weeks ago, I had a heart attack,” he says finally, his sharp voice slicing through the night air like a knife. “It nearly killed me.”

Peter has uncanny mental agility and reflexes, but this new information takes him way too long to process. “W-wait, what?” is all he can stutter through the spectrum of emotion he’s experiencing right then. Anger, crippling fear, hurt, confusion, love, but mostly just so damn hurt and angry. Why did Tony keep that from him?

Tony is nodding, biting his lip and trying very hard not to look at Peter. “Yeah,” is all the bastard says in response.

“Really?”

“…Yeah, really.”

Peter gets up, hands flailing with anger, frustrated and tired. This is turning out to be a horrible night. “Why didn’t you tell me?” He shouts, panic creeping into his voice, unbidden. Strong protective instincts well up inside him, and he wants to beat the lights out of that heart attack for trying to take Mr. Stark from him. He can’t handle losing anyone else.

Tony shrugs, flustered. “I’m telling you now, aren’t I?” he grumbles to his shoes and crosses his arms tightly over his chest with a scowl.

“That—that doesn’t,” Peter is so angry, he wants to scream. He’s not some fragile little kid, he’s not! “That’s not fair, Mr. Stark,” he doesn’t know what to say, or how to even be so angry at this man. If anything, he feels stupid for not sensing it, for not addressing the sudden rhythm fluctuations he could feel in Tony’s heart rate the past few months. For not checking on Tony that night his sixth sense just wouldn’t leave him alone.

“Yes, and having heart attacks isn’t fair either, but I fucking deal with it,” Tony says, voice rising and agitated, “it’s just one of those things you didn’t need to know at the time, Parker. It wasn’t a good time.”

“When the hell is it ever a ‘good time’ to tell someone you almost died?” Peter demands, and Tony does that infuriating eye roll of his. “No, really, tell me when it would be a good time? After you died from another one? Is, is that when I’m supposed to find out you were sick, after, after, after dropping dead on me like my Uncle?”

And then Tony is laughing. Fucking laughing at him. Peter looks the other man up and down with an expression of horrified disgust. Tony can be a complete asshole.

“What the fu-“

“So funny, I cannot believe I just told you that an evil Titan is coming to swallow earth, and you barely bat an eyelash at it, but my stupid medical issues have you flipping your damn lid- “

“No, shut up,” Peter grinds through clenched teeth, trying so hard to dial it down and failing terribly, “you don’t get to debase yourself and your problems, then turn it around and use it to make me feel guilty for caring about you, just because something worse is happening!”
“Okay, then, Peter Parker, M.D.,” Tony growls, clearly pissed, and good, Peter thinks. He should be pissed, he should feel something other than self-hatred for once. “Say I’d called you about it, eh? What changes then? How does that improve your life? Spoiler alert! It doesn’t. It just sucks you in to my nightmare of a world, and the less innocent people exposed to that world, the better. I’ve got problems, Peter. Lots of them.”

“Yet here you are, asking me for help,” Peter reminds him, and Tony bites his lip, looks away. He uncrosses his arms and rests back on them, abruptly looking like all the piss and vinegar has been drained from him. “I mean, that’s why we’re up here, right? Or is it to try and get me to quit being Spider-Man again? Or, maybe it’s to make yourself look like such an asshole that I won’t want to participate in it anyway.”

Tony winces, and visibly deflates, like an animal, drained after defending itself from attack. Peter recognizes his opening and presses on, excitement giving him the jitters. God, he hopes this doesn’t set off a nuclear bomb right here on this ledge.

“Because that’s what you do when you’re hurt, isn’t it, Mr. Stark? As soon as someone acts like they care about you, you push them away because you think you’ll be a burden to them. You act like a jerk sometimes so people won’t see who you really are, or that you’re hurting, or that you may just need a little help with something. And we all know how difficult it is for you to ask for help. Well guess what, Mr. Stark? I’ve got it all figured out, and it’s not going to work on me. You can insult me, you can yell at me, you can laugh in my face every time I bring up my dead Uncle, who meant a lot to me, by the way, and I’ll just let it all roll off my shoulder, because I know it’s not real.”

“No,” Tony says, sliding to the ground, and leaning back against his broken car. His voice sounds destroyed. “No, that was shitty of me to do, to laugh at you like that. That was cruel, I can be a cruel person, Peter, and I’m sorry. Never let stuff like that roll off your shoulder, address it. Don’t be anyone’s goddamn doormat, ever. I start in on you, then you need to tell me to fuck off.”

Peter’s chest is hurting. Never mind his own feelings, the strongest person he knows is having some sort of break down right in front of him, and it’s tearing his heart in two. They have never spoken to each other like this before. Peter has never seen Tony so defensive before. It’s worrying.

“No, I’m not going to tell you to fuck off,” Peter continues, careful to keep his voice level because Tony’s heart sounds strained, and that’s a thing now; worrying about Tony getting too riled up. Wow, what a day. “Because I know you’re just scared. And you hate having to ask me for help. Maybe you’re concerned about my age, maybe you think it would only upset me and I would have nothing to contribute due to lack of life experience. Maybe you think I’ll judge you like the others. But… I’m here, aren’t I? You brought me up here to ask for help, me. So, so that means you already think I’m not like everyone else.”

“No, Peter, it’s not that I think you’re young, or useless, or any of that. See, the really cynical, stupid, conditioned part of me thought you wouldn’t care,” Tony says, and Peter shoots him a shocked look, because that’s preposterous. But Tony holds up a wavering hand, settles a little more into the dirt, legs spread in front of him, not seeming to mind that he was getting filth all over his very expensive slacks.

“Just hear me out, okay?” Tony continues, “My problems have been my own my entire life. In fact, I’ll give you a recent example; a few years ago, my best friend- “, he stops abruptly, closes his eyes, takes a breath, opens them, “my friend was involved in what I thought at the time was a terrorist attack during the whole Mandarin thing, right? He was in a coma for months. Well, I was leaving the hospital after seeing him right after the attack, and this… damn moron outside with a camera decided he wanted a sound bite from me. Well, I was already pissed off, so there I went, rattling off threats
and telling every major news outlet in the world my home address, though I was honestly shocked that people didn’t know it already. But after that, I went home. I waited. I did research. Pepper was *livid* with me.”

Tony sighs, deep and hollow. “Not a single Avenger or member of SHIELD gave me a call, Peter. No one. No one showed up to help me, no one called to ask about Happy. I was on my own. A one-man army.”

Peter catches himself gawking at Tony, and quickly shuts his mouth, mulling over this new information, trying to find optimism in it, but… there’s no excuse that could possibly justify complete radio silence from the Avengers after seeing Tony acting like that on television. There’s just none. And the way Peter knows SHIELD used to operate, they probably had the recording of Tony uploaded to them in real time before any news outlet did. It just doesn’t make any sense. Even Peter himself remembers wondering what in the world was wrong with Iron Man after watching that.

“Why?” Peter asks, flabbergasted. Tony just smiles at him, and it isn’t fake, but it isn’t actually happy either. It’s ironic.

“I don’t know,” Tony says, shaking his head, shrugging one shoulder. “I don’t know. I never asked. I answered my phone when they needed me to help locate the scepter, I paid for everything, I kept my mouth shut, and I Avenged.”

“So, you let people walk on you,” Peter points out his hypocrisy, but Tony’s smile just grows, “yet I should be just like you, and not let people walk on me, eh?”

“I never said you should be like me,” Tony says, beaming like he’s proud of Peter’s observation, “If anything I’m trying to warn you how to *not* end up like me, Pete, and you know I’ve always wanted you to be better. No, you shouldn’t let people walk on you, because I’ve done it my whole life, and look at me. I’m a mess.”

Peter’s just about sick of hearing Tony put himself down like this. “Well, Mr. Stark, just so you know, mess or not, there are still people who care about you. You don’t have to do everything alone any more. You’re, um… you’re like the dad I never met, and I mean that.”

Tony’s head whips up at that, and he’s looking at Peter with shock, reluctance and… fear? Is that fear on his face? “Yeah,” Peter says to that, nodding at Tony smugly, “Yeah, that’s right, you’re like a father figure to me, you asshole. Nothing you can do to change that. You’re the closest thing I’ve had to a father since Ben died. It’s just a fact. May and I… we love you. You’re family now. We don’t have a lot of that, you know. When things happen to you, we *are* going to care, so at least show us that respect, we deserve it. I understand you may not want to tell me everything, and that’s fine, but May is the sweetest person on Earth, you can tell her anything. So, you can either keep us in the loop, or, or, I’ll sic May on you.”

Peter sits back down a good distance away from Tony, and leans back on his arms, exhausted. Arguing with Tony Stark is just about the single most mentally taxing activity Peter can think of off the top of his head.

“You sure you’re only sixteen? You’re a smart kid, Pete,” Tony says, and although he’s looking at the city again, Peter can see him smiling just a little bit, “you got me all figured out. No reason to hide anything, clearly I’m terrible at it.”

“Right,” Peter says, hopefully.

Tony winces, “I didn’t mean to yell at you.”
“It’s fine,” Peter insists, wanting so badly to get to the point, “all’s good, just, like, are you okay? Do you have heart disease, or what? Are you going to have another one?”

Tony shrugs, “It doesn’t matter,” he says, and Peter scoffs loudly with furious disbelief, because they just talked about this. Tony raises a staying hand. “Before you get your tights all in a wad, let me explain. It doesn’t matter, because I’ve dragged you up this little hill on this gorgeous summer night to ask you to help me fix it.”

“R-Really?” Peter stutters, suddenly hopeful.

“Yes, and here’s why;” Tony proceeds, “before I was so rudely interrupted, I was trying to make a point. I’ve had this silly little heart attack, right? Well, meanwhile, this Titan, ‘Thanos’, is coming for us. Star-lord says he’s got some people together willing to help, but they’re marooned outlaws right now, no fuel, few supplies, they’re trying to lay low from Thanos’ death squads while I get things together here. Fortunately, I have an energy source they may just be interested in. I bring it to them, they come back with me, help with Thanos, peace throughout the galaxy, yadda, yadda, yadda. The problem is getting it to them and installing it.”

Tony is tapping his chest lightly with anxious fingertips, something he does occasionally when he’s deep in thought. He grimaces with embarrassment when he notices himself doing it and quickly stops. Peter pretends he didn’t see it.

“I won’t make it there. Not in this condition. Not with my heart as weak as it is. I mean, geez, I’m getting old Peter, I’m on the wrong side of 45, my ticker’s ticking its last ticks, I’ve had more broken bones in the last five years than I have had in my entire life, I’m on hard painkillers like clockwork, not to mention- “

He stops himself, and Peter can feel Tony’s panic subsiding with each deep, practiced breath he takes. “If I try to do this in this condition, I will die of cardiac arrest before I even break the stratosphere.”

The anger is back, as Peter considers how dire Tony’s health truly is, how he’s dealt with all this alone until now. Not bothered to even tell him. But Peter contains it. It’s useless. Mr. Stark is very sick, anger is inappropriate, and he needs to have the strength to get past it.

“But!” Tony says, holding up an index finger, smile more cheerful than Peter’s seen him all night, “I’ve got a solution. Or so I think.”

“What is it?” Peter asks, desperate for good news, anything to lighten this awful conversation, desperately wanting off this emotional roller coaster, “whatever it is, I’ll help you with it, I don’t care, I’ll do it.”

“Well hold on speedy, cool it, because I have to say this to you,” Tony says and Peter looks at him to find Tony being tentative again. “You can absolutely say ‘no’ to helping me with this. I will not be angry, I will not resent you, I’ll find another way. You are not obligated to do this.”

“Well- well at least tell me what it is, so I can make an informed decision,” Peter says. Tony swallows audibly. “Remember when I told you about Extremis?” he asks quietly.

“Yeah,” Peter says very slowly, because this can’t be going where he thinks it’s going.

“Right,” Tony says, appearing reluctant, “I need you to, uh, help me put it in me.”

“Um,” Peter says, biting his lip, eyes wide, “the virus?”
“Well, it would be an insult to call it that now,” Tony says, indignant, and he’s doing that new thing, where he tries so hard not to look at Peter, his voice a mile away, “I’ve fixed it so it won’t blow me to kingdom come randomly, but it’s going to take longer to work, see, that was the problem with the original formula; it worked too rapidly, altered too much at once, and only the strongest people with the fastest adapting biology could survive it. And then it acted like an addiction, a drug that constantly had to be regulated, and it had a huge potential for sudden over-dose; then boom. It was just a terrible design. The formula I rendered from it is far superior to anything AIM ever hoped to produce. It should repair my damaged heart, well, my damaged anything, really, in three to four days.”

“Is it safe?” Peter asks.

Tony shrugs, “For a healthy man? Yes. Lots of pain, but yes, overall, safe. Pre-shrapnel, thirty-five-year-old me would have had no trouble accepting the formula. Post-shrapnel and heart attack, well…” he trails off with a sigh.

“You’re saying this could kill you?” Peter’s glare demands the truth.

“I never deal in absolutes, Peter,” is all Tony says.

Letting out an overwhelmed huff, Peter runs a hand through his hair. “So, what can I do? What’s my part in this?”

“Glorified babysitting,” Tony says ruefully, scowling deeply, “you’ll be there to administer the auxiliary injections, make sure I don’t do anything stupid, and bring me back around should my shit heart quit on me.”

“I…” Peter says, because suddenly he really is feeling useless and young, “I don’t know how to do that, Mr. Stark.”

“You think I’m just gonna let you go into this blind?” Tony says, incredulous. “What kind of monster do you think I am? You already have advanced first aid under your belt, CPR, how to start an intravenous line, all thanks to me, you’ll get proper training for this too, c’mon. You’re a smart kid, you learn fast. I have total faith in you.”

This is insane. Peter wants to ask why he’s being considered for the job, but if he’s honest with himself, he already knows. Next to Tony, Peter is the most intelligent person around right now, and he recognizes that Tony is reluctant to ask for help from Rhodey, since he’s so busy. And Vision is in D.C. with Rhodey, where they’re both conducting extremely delicate negotiation work with the U.S. Government and the fugitive Avengers. Bruce Banner is perpetually MIA. Pepper would never agree to help, and would probably only berate Tony for attempting it. Happy is a simple man. Not to mention the sensitive nature of the formula, so third party health professionals are out of the question. Tony doesn’t trust anyone.

Peter is the only one left with the skill-set to help Tony keep himself alive.

“I’m not saying ‘no’,” Peter says, slow and deliberate, and Tony watches him with wide eyes, “but I’m curious; what would you do if I did?”

Tony averts his gaze. Peter can see his cheek working as he chews it thoughtfully. “I would still try it,” Tony says somberly, after a few more minutes, “because here’s the cold hard facts, Peter; I’m either going to die trying to fix this, I’m going to die in a year or so from disease, or, I’m going to die with everyone else on this rock when Thanos finally shows up. This formula is the only thing giving me a fourth choice, and for once, it involves me actually living.”
Peter stares at the ground.

“Look,” Tony says, clearly noticing Peter’s melancholy and offering him a small, kind smile, “I know it feels like you don’t have a choice, but you do. That’s why I’m asking. There’s no guilt trip involved here, I’m only giving you the facts, and a chance to be a part of this. If you choose to be a 16-year-old kid from Queens, then that’s a respectable choice as well, and I will not hold it against you, in fact, it’s preferable.”

But he’s not a 16-year-old kid from queens, is he? He’s Spider-Man masquerading as one.

“Hell no, you’re not leaving me out of this,” Peter says, as his Uncle’s words echo inside his head.

Tony doesn’t celebrate, he doesn’t beam, or get excited. He just nods. “Great,” he says, shallow and nervous, “now let’s get you home before Aunt Worry Wart starts blowing up my phone.”
After dropping a reeling Peter off at his apartment in Queens, Tony starts home, head buzzing and throbbing and positively torturing him. And fuck-all if he didn’t deserve it. What the hell did he just do? What kind of sick, twisted *fuck* puts a damn child in that kind of position? Regret and anxiety mix in his stomach, wringing it like a wet towel, and not even five minutes into his trip he’s pulling over, retching and gasping out his open door for all the world to see.

He deserves this. People honk and shout at him as they pass, not bothering to stop and see if he needs help, because that is the nature of people now. Not that he’s worth their time or anything.

Nothing comes up but bile, thankfully, having not eaten much but a few pieces of fruit earlier. Everything else tastes like garbage. He drives the rest of the way without music, listening instead to the wind whipping around his vehicle, and his own demeaning thoughts. It’s almost midnight by the time he arrives home.

‘Home’.

The compound is dark, destitute. His remaining allies are off performing extremely important functions Tony himself can no longer perform because he has lost all credibility. Rhodey and Vision talk to the grown-ups, and he sits at the kids’ table. Needless to say, he gets the compound all to himself a lot. The gates open blearily to let him in, welcoming him back to his rusted kingdom.

The Audi shuts off with a racket, and Tony has been meaning to fix that. He doesn’t really care much to upgrade cars every few months like he used to. That was when he could still use his vanity as a bandage to cover up his wounds, as a distraction so people would never ask the real questions, leaving them ignorant enough to write off his behavior as egocentric. It doesn’t work anymore. Everyone can see how Iron Man is breaking down like an old car, clear as day. They somehow *still* manage to write him off as egocentric.

He really doesn’t even care to fix the Audi, if he’s being honest with himself. If he’s being super-duper honest with himself, he kind of wishes he’d die in a car accident. Really, he wishes Peter had refused to help him. That way he could have just quit all this, quit *trying so hard*, but the kid’s too smart to be fooled by an act, that much is blindingly apparent. Tony cringes at the thought of their conversation earlier as he steps shakily out of his car.

He heads immediately to the bar.

The lights flicker on for him, revealing the common room, the bar, all pristine. The cleaning crew must have come, and is it Wednesday already? “Hey, Fri,” he says quietly to all the empty space.

“Good morning, Boss,” Friday replies. “A little late to start your nightly binge, don’t you think?”
“Hey,” Tony says defensively, sliding onto a stool, “you grow a body, riddle it with alcoholism, and then you can judge me, software.”

“Savage,” Friday says, voice full of sarcasm.

Tony pops the top off a beer and drains half of it in one go. This, he looks forward to every night. It’s one of the last comforts he has, dials all his problems down into just a few at a time. “Seriously,” he says angrily, following a burp, “save it. I didn’t program you to literally sit in the sky and judge me like god himself.”

Friday says nothing further. Tony scowls, slouches at the bar, pops a Percocet and washes it down with the rest of beer one. Beer two is gone in minutes, and he knows he’s in for hell if he doesn’t eat something soon. The mere thought of food makes his stomach roil painfully.

He groans, bitterly thankful for his solitude. “Friday?”

“Hmm?” she says, snotty as ever.

“I’m sorry.”

“No, you’re not,” she says, but the mechanical arm that holds the sandwich tray extends from within the bar out towards him nonetheless, “but here are some Tuna sandwiches I had housekeeping prepare for you, and I do all this no matter how ungrateful you act.”

Beer three is half done now. “No, I’m being completely honest,” he says, wiping his mouth on his jacket sleeve like some urchin, because fuck it, he owns a gazillion jackets. “I’m a jerk, and I absolutely take you for granted.” He grabs a sandwich and unwraps it, eyes it. It looks great. It’s made from all the most fresh and pure ingredients money can buy, he knows. He takes a bite and nearly loses the meager contents of his stomach, which amounts to exclusively beer and bile. It tastes like garbage to him. Everything tastes like garbage to him, now. Eating is simply another chore which must be accomplished every day to ensure his continued survival. And that he can drink more.

“I blew up on Peter today, too,” Tony says, eyeing the rest of his sandwich with disdain, “laughed at him when he brought up his Uncle. I’m a fucking animal, Friday. I’ve been acting like a shit a lot lately.”

“Boss, you know it’s the- “

“I know what it is,” Tony snaps, not wanting to hear it, not even wanting to think about it.

“I know what it is,” Friday says, not wanting to hear it, not even wanting to think about it.

“Don’t be so hard on yourself, that’s my job,” Friday says, and Tony pictures her smiling based on her voice inflections. For not the first time, he wishes he could see her, and a little guiltily, almost that she was real. Maybe she would touch him on the shoulder, give it a little squeeze of reassurance. Maybe she would hug him. He focuses on that phantom feeling, of being touched by someone, and uses it to keep from thinking about the tasteless mush in his mouth. The food unsettles his stomach. The beer mysteriously soothes it. Alcohol rules every moment of his life. At least it’s offering reprieve from his migraine.

Extremis will fix it… and it’s a pathetic cop-out. His vision swims as he notices the empty bottles on the bar in front of him now amount to seven, with number eight in his hand. When did that happen?

He’s spent entire nights up, thinking about how millions of people around the world suffer and die from alcoholism without access to even a fraction of the resources he has. On the flip side of that, there are millions who conquer it with the same lack of resources. It really makes Tony wonder about himself. He’s got the impulse control of a seven-week-old puppy, and even less willpower. He
needs a magic button to press and cure him instantly, because the thought of going through withdrawal and recovery again absolutely terrifies him. In his own defense, he probably wouldn’t survive detox anyway, not without the aid of Extremis.

He just hopes the process he’s about to undergo doesn’t prove to be worse. There’s not much hope for a painless transition, either way. It’s the swiftness with which he’s fixed that makes him feel like he’s cheating. A few days of pain is preferable over the months and months, maybe years, of medical intervention and recovery required to defeat all his various issues. Issues he’s caused through his own doing.

“What did Peter say?” Friday asks. She already knows exactly what Peter said, as she exists in probably four or five items on Tony’s person at all times, including inside a pair of implants in the tips of both his index fingers. Her inquiry is meant to get him to talk to her. He’s infinitely thankful for Friday. Losing Jarvis was like losing a best friend.

The question drags a long sigh from him. “He agreed to help,” Tony says, despondently, “he understands the risks involved, I think. I don’t know Fri, I really feel like I made a mistake, asking him to do this. Again.”

“Why is that?” Friday inquires, and Tony huffs and downs the last remnants of beer number ten. The belch he releases makes Friday groan with revulsion. “Ugh, disgusting.”

Ignoring that last part, Tony reaches behind the bar and grabs the hard liquor. Ten happens to be his magic number. “I don’t know. It felt slimy, telling him I’m dying and then placing the responsibility of fixing me in, in his hands? He’s sixteen, Friday. Dragging him to Germany was bad enough, wasn’t it?”

Tony regrets this daily, although he’s glad he knows Peter, certainly, he’s not happy about the circumstances under which they met. Of course, he never expected his former teammates to fight so viciously. As soon as Wanda started throwing cars, breaking his arm, and then T’Challa nearly decapitated Barnes, he knew he’d made a mistake dragging Peter out there with him. But how could he have foreseen that Steve was willing to sacrifice so much? That he was actually willing to hurt them, and get his own people hurt, maybe even killed, for the sake of Barnes and his own misguided convictions? Tony remembers being truly shocked by their collective brutality.

“Peter may be sixteen, but he can also catch a car, Boss,” Friday reminds him, and Tony nods his agreement, “you’re considering him within the context of other, normal sixteen-year-old kids.”

“Yeah, he’s different, I get that,” Tony says, relishing the burn the scotch leaves in his throat, the pain of it, refreshingly voluntary. “But that’s... that’s the problem, isn’t it? I feel like I’m using that as an excuse to justify it. Is feeling guilty enough to absolve me of this? I don’t know. I know there’s really no other choice, but... I feel like a real piece of shit, Friday.” He rests his chin in his palm, glaring into the strip of mirror behind the bar, into his own shitty eyes.

“Well, Boss, if it makes you feel any better, without your involvement, the Earth stands at an 8.67% chance of surviving a Titan invasion. With your proposed contingencies in place, it stands at a whopping 47% chance,” Friday says, and Tony must hear this daily to keep going. “If you manage to locate Stephen Strange, the Hulk and Thor, that percentage doubles. You need to stay alive.”

“What about Extremis?” Tony wonders aloud before he can stop himself. He's been avoiding it, but he’s got to stop doing that. “What are the chances of me surviving the process both with and without Peter’s help?” Maybe he can cancel, maybe Peter doesn’t have to do this at all.

There’s a slight pause as Friday calculates mounds of data. “Given all known variables, chances of
survival with Peter’s help stand at 57%, without... 3%.”

Tony drinks and drinks and drinks. Both numbers are too close to zero for comfort. “I’m really sick of this Catch 22 nonsense,” He grumbles, grunting and burping as heartburn rises, his stomach fighting hard against the scotch. It won’t win.

“You’re always sitting in a fire, Boss,” Friday reminds him.

“Those are terrible odds, try harder,” he says wearily, sneering at himself in the mirror again. Why is there even a mirror there? He’s gonna break it.

“You don’t exactly leave me much to work with,” Friday says.

“I hate you.”

“No, you don’t.”

Tony grunts, “You’re an outdated program with a disability.” The first time Friday disobeyed him, he decided he liked it. It made her seem more human. Fixing her felt too much like a lobotomy. Tony shivers.

“And you’re an exasperating, stubborn human being,” she says, and he knows she’s being nice. Friday can slay.

“Do you think maybe I should have lied to him?” Tony continues, pouring himself another glass, “made up a different reason for wanting Extremis, relate it to my ego in some way, some selfish desire to be invincible, that always used to work swimmingly, right? You know, instead of me kicking it if I he doesn't help me, leave his conscious clear.”

“The kid is like a human lie detector,” Friday says, “and it wouldn’t have been as simple as surrounding yourself with women and cars, and putting on a pair of flashy sunglasses. You would have needed to look him in the face and lie to him. You’re terrible at that, Boss.”

“Sure am,” Tony says under his breath, glass pausing just before his lips.

“Overall, I believe you took the correct course of action,” Friday says, reassuringly, “you don’t want to hurt Peter, but if you hadn’t involved him in this, if you had kept this from him and died, you would have shattered his impression of you. Maybe even tainted what it means to be a hero for him. Finding out about your illnesses from some pitiless news segment would crush him.”

Isn’t that the truth? Tony thinks of Zemo smirking from behind the safety of the blast shelter at him, as he watched his parents be murdered on some crappy old monitor, by the very same man Steve had fought so hard to protect. He can still see the fear in those stunning, blue eyes as he proposed his question, “did you know?” right before Tony saw red and lost all control. Not his proudest moment, though he barely remembers anything that happened after back-handing Steve, having been running on exactly no sleep for three straight days. But he’s already ridden with guilt over so many things, he refuses to beat himself up over that one. He refuses to own it. Steve Rogers, Captain fucking Perfect, Mr. ‘sometimes my teammates don’t tell me things’, owns that one. At least Tony went and installed fail-safes in his armor to override his command while in such a state, what has Steve done to fix his own shitty moral compass? A crap apology via written letter? Please.

“Peter told me I’m like a father to him,” Tony says with a hollow voice, rearranging beer bottles absently, “like a role model or something.”

“You see this as a bad thing?”
Tony laughs out loud. “Really? That’s a serious question? Which one of my roles would you have Peter model, eh? The bombastic alcoholic, the emotional retard, or the self-destructive, misery-ridden fool?”

“The one where you clean yourself up and help save the universe,” Friday says.

“Insufferable,” Tony says, hiding his eyes behind his fingers, “you’re completely insufferable.”

“No, I’m right,” Friday says, “and you hate responsibility. And you’re terrified of failing Peter.”

“Every single life I’ve touched is worse off for it,” Tony says. He summons a gauntlet, and it comes flying through the common room from the vault the armor lives in. It wraps around his hand, feels like an old friend.

“That is wholly untrue.”

“Oh yeah?” He says, and he’s suddenly so angry again, his voice rising to a shout, “and I’m sure Pepper is sleeping soundly right now, right? Let me know when she stops having nightmares about goddamn Killian. Let me know when Happy’s T.B.I. reverses itself and I get my old friend back. And what about Peter’s issues after Germany? Do I really have to mention Rhodey? How about Sokovia, you wanna talk about that?! Friday, people who get too close to me end up getting broken, almost like- like, I export my own brokenness into others. I have ruined everyone who has ever cared about me! I’m like the bizzaro-Midas; everything I touch turns to shit!”

The mirror shatters into millions of tiny shimmering shards at the impact of the repulsor blast he sends into it.

“Are you done?” Friday says, sounding bored. She’s seen this before.

Tony swallows the rest of his third glass of scotch.

“Scrub my notes, and send Peter the schematics for Extremis,” he demands haughtily around a burp.

“Of course, Boss,” Friday says, sickeningly sweet.

“Friday, I’m serious. Scrub my notes. Especially that one thing. And the other thing.”

“Will do.”

“Begin analysis for supply acquisition for this little experiment, I want a list when I’m sober.”

“Keeping me busy doesn’t nullify the truth. It really doesn’t even keep me busy.”

“Why can’t we just have a normal conversation?” Tony almost whines at her, ditching the glass, and upturning the bottle into his mouth.

“Because you happen to have an abnormal life,” she says, matter-of-fact, “should we discuss the weather, instead?”

Tony looks around at all the destruction, the shattered back of the bar, the hole that allows a view into the room beyond. Water spurts from the remains of a faucet, and the LEDs spark and shudder. The ten empty beer bottles sit scattered around him, and at some point, the tumbler he was using ended up on the floor, where it lies in three large pieces. The gauntlet is heavy on his arm.

Looks pretty normal to him.
“You need to eat some chips,” Friday says, and Tony snorts.

“Who exactly is the ‘Boss’, here?” he demands, but grabs a bag of chips out of the little chip basket they keep at the bar, “how about you eat some damn chips.”

“I don’t have a stomach,” she says, sing-song, as though speaking to a small child, “I don’t even have a mouth. I exist in a series of complex microtubes, wires and circuitry.”

“You’re like Satan,” Tony says, grabbing his bottle, and extracting himself clumsily from his bar-stool, forgetting the chips, heading… somewhere, “you’re the devil.”

“Does insulting me make you feel better?” Friday asks.

“Yes.” Tony says, and drinks. “You make Windows 98 seem revolutionary. You’re a sad excuse for software.”

“You created me, what does that make you?”

“A sad excuse.”

“And you’re going to sit in Rogers’ old room,” Friday sighs, “aren’t you?”

“Yup,” Tony says, and stumbles on the one damn step that leads up out of the bar area, “whoops.”

“You need to call him,” Friday says, and he wishes she would just shut up for once, wishes she would stop bringing up the damn phone, “I understand they’ve ignored your concerns before, but this is different.”

“Anyone remember when I flew a nuke into space?” he asked, to a symphony of scoffs.

“No, never heard that one before, never, ever.”

So fucking sarcastic. His gut aches with humiliation every time he thinks of it. Steve’s plan for alien invasion part two was one useless word; “together.” Pathetically shortsighted. Never in a million years would they believe Tony or even listen to him. They wouldn’t even let him do anything when he thought he was one of them, let alone their perceived enemy. They’ll think he’s trying to trick them into revealing their location. What does he even say? ‘Hey guys, I know you’re all angry with me, but remember that little thing I kept bringing up over and over and over and over, and you didn't care then? Well, y'all feel like caring now?’

“If you do, victory against Thanos is inevitable without resorting-.”

“Stop, please, give me a break, I’m trying,” he just about moans at her, and escapes safely into Steve’s room, pressing the kill switch and muting her, at least in there. It’s one of the only places he can go where her presence can be eliminated on demand, even blocking signals to his implants.

He groans dramatically with relief at her absence, and takes another long swig of scotch. At this point, he’s pretty drunk, although a normal person would have to get close enough to him to smell his breath to really tell. Tony is an extremely high-functioning alcoholic, and he’s always had to be. The number of people seeking to take advantage of a drunken Tony Stark with zero inhibitions is too high for him to be foolishly advertising how wrecked he is. It’s one of the few valuable lessons his father ever taught him; people will always seek to take advantage of a Stark.

His birthday party all those years ago was such an exception, it ended up being the last straw for him. Iron Man made him feel invincible, so he let himself go, positive he was going to die in a couple
days anyway. It’s why he no longer drinks heavily in public, and now actively avoids the party scene.

Not to mention how exploitable his guilt and misery have made him. Like soft clay, he can be molded, stolen from. Mix that with a little spruce juice, and Tony becomes his own worst liability.

Happy used to stand bodily in the way of those manipulative people, used to take care of Tony in the morning, scold him for being so stupid as his head hung over the toilet bowl. During a rather blissfully stable time in their relationship, Pepper even managed to help Tony reduce his drinking to a few times a week, and boy, wasn’t that great? Having control over it, instead of letting it control him. He could choose when he wanted to get fucked up instead of being a slave to its cruel necessity, and the time between drinks he happily filled with Pepper, Avengers and being Iron Man. Friends were always around, support, never far away. He was happy, at least for a little bit. He thought, just maybe, that he’d finally become part of a family, willing to forgive them for their apathy during the Mandarin thing, willing to overlook the way they didn’t trust him or Bruce enough to allow them to prepare for calamities properly.

But now, the Avengers all hate him, Happy and Pepper are together, Vision is angry with him, and Iron Man is relying on a sixteen-year-old kid to help keep him alive. What a spiral he’s undergone. His life lies in shreds all around him.

Steve’s room exists exactly as he left it. Tony sits on his bed, navy blue comforter and pristine white sheets pulled back as though Steve had just climbed out of them that morning. It’s… haunting. His damn drawings still line the windowsill. The dancing monkey, who Steve had described the meaning behind to Tony one day, still smiles his cheeky little smile. The ironic smile dancing monkey uses to hide the fact that he’s in pain, Tony knows.

He drinks and drinks and drinks.

It was one of the first times Tony found himself able to relate to Steve. A simple “that monkey kind of looks like you, Cap,” and to his utter surprise, Tony glimpsed vulnerability in Steve’s eyes as he explained his humble beginnings as Captain America with a sad smile. Tony had heard it a million times from Howard, but he listened to Steve’s story as though it was his first time hearing it. Because really, it was. Steve’s sorrow and helplessness at being what essentially amounted to a prop was never reflected in Howard’s accounts. The unflappable Captain America was damaged, just like Tony, had insecurities similar to his own, and at one point, had been forced to put on a fake smile and dance in front of a crowd.

Tony smiled at him then, a real smile, which he doesn’t just dish out to every Joe Schmo. He explained his public persona to Steve, elaborated on how his cocky, white-toothed smirk was literally painful for him to wear some days. He told Steve about how the flash of the paparazzi sometimes reminded him of a missile with his own name on it going off right in front of him, about young servicemen and women being blown away in the blink of an eye, and Steve nodded in concurrence then, looking slightly surprised.

After all, how else was Tony supposed to act with so many people watching him all the time? With so many eyes boring judgmental little holes into him? The arrogance hid the pain, repelled people away from him, protected him like a cocoon. The less people willing to be around him, the less people there were to disappoint when he ultimately failed them.

“I get what it’s like, to come back to a world that doesn’t understand you and really has no idea what you’ve been through, and couldn’t care less to find out,” Tony said, as he sat halfway on the edge of Steve’s desk, “the key is to not let those terrible defense mechanisms win. You’ve got to force yourself to socialize, surround yourself with as many good people as you can. I almost let it,
Steve. I almost let that darkness win after Afghanistan. And then Pepper, and the Avengers, and surprisingly enough, Nick Fury, helped me out of it and made things so much better for me, and I really had to seek those things out for myself. Well, except Nick. He displayed his care with force.”

Steve picked up a framed photo on his desk and gazed at it with a proud smile. It was the one where Tony had been badly injured after shielding Natasha from an attack that would have certainly killed her. In the photo, Tony beamed from in between Steve and Clint who were supporting him with expressions of loving exasperation, his smile huge despite the pain, blood pouring from various parts of him, the armor basically flaking off him like dead skin. Natasha had her hand in his hair, and had been rubbing it affectionately. Hill had taken the picture with her phone. Tony spent a long time in the cradle after that one.

“Well,” Steve said, more warmth in his voice than Tony had ever heard, “I’m glad we both chose light over darkness. No one deserves to be alone. You’re a good man, Tony.”

“I’m sorry I called you a ‘capsicle’, that one time,” Tony said with a tiny laugh, and it was supposed to be a joke, but Steve sighed.

“No, I’m sorry,” Steve said, and Tony had to work quickly to hide his astonishment. “I said some really horrible, ignorant things to you around that time. I antagonized you, Tony, I, uh… I, purposely put pressure on you to see if I could make you snap. I watched two videos attached to your file, and foolishly judged you based on them, and skipped the rest, thinking I had seen all I needed to know what type of person you are. I didn't even want you on the team. I was one of those people. I’m embarrassed. I was wrong, Tony, so very wrong. I may be old, but I’m far from wise.”

Tony swallowed his utter shock. “Um, honestly,” he said, trying not to let the silence between them drag out awkwardly, “in your defense, I can be an insufferable bastard.”

“Not as often as you are a hero, and a friend,” Steve said, smiling wide, and Tony didn’t know what to say. “If you ever find yourself alone again, I hope you would give me a call.”

Tony glares around Steve’s empty, empty room and drinks more whiskey. It was all a lie. Everything is a lie. He’s never actually had a family.

Things are starting to break up. He’s losing chunks of time.

Next thing he knows, he’s taking a piss in Rogers' bathroom. “I’ll leave that for you there, ya shit,” Tony grumbles, scoffing when the automatic flusher takes care of it anyway, and maybe he does up his pants, maybe he doesn’t. Not like it matters. He could walk completely naked up and down this compound and not a single human soul would ever see him. Ross made sure of that.

After his refusal to answer that dumb phone call and the subsequent escape of every Avenger being held at the Raft, Ross wanted Tony out of the equation completely, but he lacked support… at first. It took Peter’s early shenanigans and Tony’s outright refusal to identify him to provoke Ross into finally gaining the votes he needed to proceed with Tony’s leashing. He used the accords to force Tony to shut down all operations at his compound which put over three hundred people out of a job. Then the evil bastard had him sign his own suspension/restraining order preventing him from interacting with Stark Industries and affiliates for four years, effectively cutting him off from most of his resources. And his friends.

“One slip, Stark, one tiny fuck up, and you’ll spend the rest of your life rotting in solitary,” Ross had hissed in Tony’s ear, during a rather uncomfortably close handshake, “and I’ll tell you a little secret, for the sake of being cliché; what happens on the Raft, stays there. We’ll find Spider-Man, one way or another.”
It’s not his fondest memory. In fact, he considers it a main contributing factor to his current state, being intimidated into dismissing all those people, and knowing he had no choice. And then, Ross’ active slandering of Tony’s name ruined his chances of adding his voice to any conversation regarding the accords, so he has to use Rhodey as his mouth piece. People still respect Rhodey, the disabled combat veteran. Everyone forgets that Tony Stark is a disabled combat veteran, too.

When Tony’s vision next swims into focus, he’s outside, shattering windows, and blowing up abandoned tactical vehicles with his gauntlet, the almost empty bottle of scotch clutched in his other hand. It’s cathartic. He hopes he has his clothes on. No, he really doesn't care.

Then, he’s in Natasha’s room, screaming tearfully at her ghost about loyalty, and how he had been a blithering fool to trust her again. And what the fuck did any of it have to do with his ego? Asking him if he’s okay, like she ever fucking cared about him.

He smashes one of her belongings with an angry, miserable cry, a tiny glass elephant she used to like. “They’re giant, stampeding beasts, with the ability to dismantle a human being in seconds,” she said to him one day, “and yet, they are some of the most intelligent animals on the planet. People misunderstand them, fear them. I don’t know. I guess I can relate to that.”

Fuck her. He hopes she will feel loss over her little glass elephant someday.

“There’s something special about this one being tiny and glass. Huge, strong creature, breakable spirit.”

At some point, he loses all awareness.

He wakes up in the floor of his room some indeterminable amount of time later, his stomach punishing him brutally for skimping on his dinner. At least he had the sense to drag his useless husk somewhere comfortable in his drunken state, instead of passing out pathetically on the front lawn again.

Crawling to the toilet is tedious, and he barely makes it before he’s retching violently, proceeding to vomit with painful, heaving gasps and gagging coughs, for what feels like days. When he flushes, he tries to ignore the blood in the bowl. The ulcer is worse. It won’t matter soon anyway. Nothing will matter soon enough. He gasps raggedly, the unshed tears in his eyes exhibiting his agony. He’s so sweaty, so thirsty, his ribs and throat are sore, his head pounds viciously. He just wants to die. Why does he keep doing this to himself? Why does he keep living?

“Friday,” he breathes, resting his face on the cool porcelain, “did I- “

“No, Boss,” Friday says, “you didn’t. The phone is still sitting safely in the invisible rooms vault.”

“Good,” he says, because drunk-dialing Steve Rogers might be one of his greatest fears, just one more to add to his growing collection of equally terrifying scenarios. He only needs to keep the phone a little while longer. Just to be sure. “Fuck that guy.”

He passes out on his bathroom floor. At least like this, he doesn't have nightmares.
Chapter 3

Breakfast at the Parker household the next morning is an unusually quiet affair. Peter chances a quick glance up from his untouched fried eggs, bacon and toast, and finds May staring at him. “What?” He says, making an attempt to look bewildered, but it’s weak, he knows it. He looks like death warmed over, having been up scouring Mr. Stark’s research since two or so, when he received it. Extremis is insane.

“Are you okay, Pete?” she asks him gently, seeking his hand and squeezing it lightly in hers. “You’ve been awfully quiet today.”

Peter desperately wants to tell her everything, wants her to just understand and not have to ask, instead of constantly having to lie and make things up explaining his various states of general roughness. It’s exhausting.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m great,” he starts, voice a little too high, so he clears his throat and dials it down, “just was up late.”

“Oh, right, what did Tony want to talk to you about?” she asks cheerfully, taking a bite of eggs, and watching his every move.

Peter sighs, pokes his own eggs with his fork, mulls over their conversation from last night. Thanos, alien armies, Infinity Stones, and Extremis are all on Peter’s ‘don’t tell May’ list. “Mr. Stark had a heart attack,” he finally says.

May gasps, drops her fork. It goes clattering on to her plate far too loud, and Peter can’t hide his flinch. Thankfully his slip-up goes unnoticed. “Oh, my god!” She says, her face positively lighting up like a street lamp with concern. He hates stressing her out, but he had to say something. “When?”

“About six weeks ago.”

“Wow,” May says, clearly flabbergasted, and clutching at her chest dramatically, “he always seems so healthy and happy, and, I don’t know, just alive. Wow, wow, wow, he hides it so well, I could have never guessed he was that sick.”

“Me either,” and I can literally sense his vital signs, he wants to say. “But it makes sense. When Mr. Stark was in Afghanistan, a mortar exploded right in front of him, and shot a bunch of shrapnel into his heart and it sat there for years. He’s had two open heart surgeries.”

“And flying in that armor all the time must put a ton of stress on it, too,” May says, now looking so sad Peter can barely handle it. She cares very deeply for Tony. He’s nice to her, he respects her, and she appreciates his fondness for Peter. And she’s just a naturally caring person. “Not to mention all the things he’s done with the Avengers, gosh, I can’t imagine what fighting the Hulk would do to someone’s heart health. Oh, my goodness, so much stress.”

“Yeah,” is all Peter can say, because he’s already thought of all this.

“Did he tell you what his prognosis is?” she asks. Peter notices she hasn’t gone back to eating, and he doesn’t exactly feel inclined to eat either. He’s so tired.

“Not exactly. He said something about, uh, working with a, a doctor on something revolutionary that might help him, but he’s not sure if it’s going to work.” I’m the only one standing between him and certain death, May, I don’t know if I can handle so much responsibility. “He didn’t want to talk too
much about it, but thought I should know, in case…”

He fidgets with his shorts under the table, clenches his jaw.

“Oh! Well, that’s good news,” she says, smiling through her worry. It’s for Peter’s benefit. “It’s better than nothing, right?”

“I mean,” Peter says, staring at the salt and pepper, “It’s a small chance, but, yeah. I guess.”

“Oh, Peter,” May sighs, regarding him sadly. It’s the look he gets from her whenever he brings up Ben, the one that scorches him with pity. She looks at him like he’s been made delicate by his losses or something. If only she knew. “You look so tired, honey.”

“I am, I didn’t get much sleep,” he says, rubbing his eyes. Every non-lie is a victory. “I don’t know if I can eat right now, May, I’m sorry. Thanks for making it.”

“Of course, please don’t feel bad,” she says, standing and taking his plate to the kitchen for him, stopping momentarily to plant a kiss on the top of his head. “I’m going to give Tony a call later, maybe invite him for dinner or something. We’re having beef roast, tonight, Pete, your favorite.”

Peter winces. “Actually, I’m supposed to ask if I can go over there tonight,” he says, avoiding May’s gaze, “he needs help, can’t lift things like he used to, and I guess the doctor told him to stay out of the armor.”

“Of course, you can go,” May says scoffing playfully at him. “You’re almost seventeen, Pete. Just let me know where you’re going to be, you don’t have to ask me anymore.”

“Um, cool, thanks,” Peter says, a little thrown off by the trust May is placing in him, and feeling even more guilty about all his lying.

“Go lay down, take a nap,” May says, starting the dishes, “do you want me to wake you up in a couple hours?”

“Uh, no that’s okay, thanks. I’ll set an alarm,” he says, and starts heading toward his room.

“Peter,” May says, and Peter turns back to look at her. She’s drying her hands and watching him, gaze intense. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

Peter sighs. It’s times like this when he thinks maybe she knows and just chooses not to say anything. It makes his heart thunder in his ears like Tony’s does. “Yeah, I just… Mr. Stark seemed pretty confident that he’s gonna be okay, so… I just have to remember that.”

May smiles proudly at him. “That’s my boy.”

His room is a sanctuary. He locks the door behind him and dives into bed, pulling his tablet out from under his pillow and unlocking it with his fingerprint. It’s the most advanced piece of equipment he owns, with the exception of the Spider-Man suit Tony designed for him. The light blue digital rendering of the new Extremis virus flashes to life on the screen and swirls before him, icy ribbons of chaos. It’s beautiful.

Tony has conducted extensive research on the virus over a few years, on and off. The file starts with data gathered in 2013 involving Miss Potts and her forced enhancement. It details the design of a counter serum which removes the virus from a human being, a very primitive, angry version of the virus, Peter observes, as orange ribbons snake and twist violently in the rendering of it. Pepper almost died from complications twice, it notes. There are dead links in this section, and Peter can see
that multiple videos and images were removed, certainly to protect Miss Potts’ privacy.

Further in, it contains dossiers dealing with some of the significant personalities involved in its creation, starting with one on a man called Killian and a woman, Maya Hansen. There are dozens of others. Most of these people are ghosts now. Peter skips the section, having perused it earlier.

A video of a man screaming in agony and then exploding leaves Peter feeling sick.

He skips ahead, and finds some more recent activity from Tony beginning six weeks prior. Peter scoffs and rolls his eyes, imagines Tony sitting in the hospital alone the day after having a heart attack, trying to work, and ignoring all the doctors’ suggestions. Stubborn ass.

There are daily progress reports, and they’re all dotted with little annotations. He opens one; ‘complete neural interface with armor possible via biomechanical under-armor, or ‘second skin’, a note says, ‘must discover adequate storage chamber; considering bone hollows.’

‘Initial analysis determines virus will impact mental faculties, whether that impact is negative or positive remains to be seen,’ another note says further into the file, ‘will attempt reconfiguration to make this change beneficial’.

Tony’s notes are mesmerizing, and Peter is grasping at his last shreds of consciousness so he can keep reading them, eyelids weighing a thousand tons. ‘black ‘second skin’ not as cool as gold, but tactically advantageous,’ says a note Tony took down a couple days later.

‘vibranium molecules have transformed the orange glowing demonstrated in previous subjects into a light blue bio-luminescent, not dissimilar from the arc reactor light. Its purpose isn’t entirely clear other than a visual indication of healing or stress. no solution exists. I would rather not glow, but something about beggars and choosers…’

Vibranium? If Peter is interpreting this correctly, the under-armor will consist of a vibranium alloy. Tony is going to infuse his very body with vibranium. It’s brilliant.

‘Time is ticking away. Wrap up analysis on the second skin and begin diagnostics on organ regrowth.’

‘Maintain complete restructuring of nervous system, cardiovascular system, and all major organs, within new formula. Particularly the liver. And heart. And kidneys. Stomach. Just the whole, package, honestly, everything’s fucked up. Show me how to do it without exploding’

And then a week ago; ‘immense pain leading to cardiac arrest and death in mice predisposed to heart complications upon introduction of third auxiliary. Subject two just passed despite life-preserving efforts. No conclusive resolution even remotely in sight, as it seems, rejuvenating muscle tissue is an excruciating process. OTC Painkillers have small, diluted effect. I… I can’t use the mice anymore, Friday, I just can’t. I can’t. Fuck!”

It’s then Peter realizes he’s essentially reading a transcript; all these notes appear to be composed from Friday’s recordings of Tony as he worked. For an unidentifiable reason, reading these notes feels extremely personal, like he’s seeing something he’s not supposed to be looking at. Peter imagines Tony Stark, Iron Man, superhero, billionaire and combat veteran, unable to watch a small furry creature suffer at his hand. Tony is a good person, and there’s treasures in these notes, things he would never say aloud with another beating heart in the room.

Peter skips to the last progress report, yesterday’s, and the file opens with a digital image of what could very possibly be Tony’s brain. He immediately notices the small, white mass, and the note
below it; ‘dammit, I knew it was more than just a headache. Goddamn brain tumor. This is why I’ve been putting it off, I knew it, Friday, I just knew it. My memory’s been shit. We’re really racing the clock, here.’

So, the heart attack, although real, was a ploy, in a way, to distract from the stupid brain tumor, the bigger problem. Peter would probably be more shocked if he wasn’t currently reading about the solution to fix it, but, man, what a shitty way to find out. Most likely, Tony didn’t even want him to see these notes, but… forgot to remove them before sending the files. “Jesus, Mr. Stark,” he breathes, and everything is just starting to come together in his mind as he falls asleep, absolutely drained from stress.

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It’s 6:58 in the pm, and dark clouds loom menacingly in the distance when Peter arrives at the Avenger’s compound.

Or, what’s left of it.

When all the employees were forced to resign, non-essential maintenance took a backseat, and the earth doesn’t dawdle when it comes to reclaiming itself. The place looks a little worse for wear than it did the last time Peter visited. A few more windows have been blown out despite the tepid, dry weather they’ve been having recently, and he suspects, sadly, that it’s Mr. Stark’s work. The grass around the entire compound stands about a foot high and looks dead or dying in many spots. Bushes remain untrimmed and scraggly, and there are several down trees no one has bothered to take care of.

It’s distressing, coming here. Fond memories of this place at its finest peek out at him from around all the destruction as he walks toward the common area with his backpack slung over one shoulder. The ghosts of people he once met very briefly still linger here. The wind picks up, howling through the empty buildings, threatening the areas first storm in weeks. He turns his music up and walks faster, focused on the approaching common area.

“My, my, what a timely guy,” Tony sings, smiling widely from where he stands atop a kitchen counter when he sees Peter walk in. He seems to be appraising a bottle of wine he found in a cabinet up there. “Seven on the button, look at that.”

“You have a brain tumor,” Peter says, not wasting any time, sparing the new hole in the wall behind the bar a glance, and instantly deciding not to bring it up.

Tony’s smile sinks down into a frown, and a deep sigh pointed upward. “Goddamn it, Friday,” he grates out between clenched teeth.

“I’m sorry, did I miss something?” Friday says smugly. “Oops.”

“Oops,” Tony repeats sarcastically with an eye roll, and tosses the wine into a garbage can sitting on the floor, “sorry, kid, I was still in shock over it myself. Pretty embarrassed about it, too.”

It strikes Peter as odd that Friday would be capable of disobeying Tony on that level, but he pushes the thought to the back of his mind to address later. There’s more important things to talk about. “It’s fine, it’s just- wait, what are you doing?” Peter asks, finally processing the fact that Tony is literally throwing his alcohol in the garbage.
“Getting rid of it. All of it,” Tony says resolutely, tossing two more copies of the wine he was looking at earlier in the can, stoking Peter’s curiosity when he notices the lack of the ear-shredding sound of breaking glass. With no music to filter everything, a bottle of wine being smashed anywhere near him would be like firing a weapon in there with no earplugs. “Can opens a hole in the floor leading into the recycling room wherever I move it. It’s an infinity can,” Tony supplies with a self-indulgent smirk.

“Cool,” Peter says, walking over, and Tony drops a bottle in for his benefit. He watches it disappear into the black beyond, and if it shatters below them, they don’t hear it, thankfully. “Why are you getting rid of it?”

“Because I’m an irrepressible alcoholic, Peter,” Tony declares, tone level, tossing more bottles into the can, and moving onto the next cabinet, “Extremis is going to cure it, but if I so much as take a shot during the process, instead of curing it, it will stitch that dependence into my very genes. I’ll be an addict forever, hence the tragic genocide occurring currently.” He opens the new cabinet and sighs with frustration, Peter assumes, at the sheer amount of booze he owns. There’s at least twenty to twenty-five large bottles of wine all in a row just in this one small space. “What a nightmare,” Tony grumbles, “thanks for coming to help, kid.”

“Yeah, absolutely,” Peter says, and it’s sincere and motivated. This task, this is worthy of all the time it takes to get it done. “Where can I start?” Glancing around at all the possible nooks and crannies Tony could have stashed alcohol in like some kind of drunken squirrel, Peter frowns when he notices a cabinet on wheels nearby containing various types of it. It’s open, and it’s clearly being stocked, not emptied. “What’s that, though, Mr. Stark?”

“Ah, that’s my finale,” Tony says, dropping wine bottles into the can one by one in a steady pace, “a few of my favorites, you know, I still got a couple days before, uh, E-day.”

A surge of disappointment makes Peter scowl at him. “Why not stop now?” He asks, unable to keep the ice out of his voice when he notices the nearby tumbler full of rich brown liquid sitting on top of the refrigerator where Tony can easily reach it. He can’t quite put his finger on it; why it makes him so angry to see Tony drink until the very last day he physically can.

“Oh, c’mon Pete, a man can have a finale,” Tony defends himself, but it’s weak, and there’s hints of guilt in there, maybe fear, as though Tony’s given it thought, too, “plus I’ve been drinking for over thirty years, I can’t just stop, the withdrawal would kill me, no ifs, ands or buts about it.”

That… is horrifying. Peter knows a little about alcoholism and the withdrawal that results from going cold turkey, but the sheer scale of Tony’s alcohol abuse always shocks Peter as he learns more about it. He can honestly say that he had no clue that Tony has been that reliant on it. He just doesn’t make it obvious. Thirty years? Wow. What a horror show it must be, to be forced to drink even when Tony doesn’t feel well. Even when he might just want to enjoy a night sober, for fear of immense suffering, and possible death, Tony must drink.

And over thirty years? That means Tony wasn’t even at the proper drinking age when he started. Peter wonders if Tony’s early entry into college had something to do with it. Maybe he felt compelled to impress the other students, who were all much older than him, by showing them how much a Stark can drink, reducing himself to nothing but a sideshow for their cruel amusements. Shaking his head, Peter manages to dispel the disturbing thought, and focuses on the present Tony, the superhero.

“Anyway, to answer your question from before,” Tony proceeds on with quieter words, “you can start emptying the fridge, if you want. It’s mostly, uh, beer, I think, maybe some wine and a few coolers. Toss it all. I don’t need to know about it.”
“Right,” Peter says, and obeys, walking over to the fridge, opening it, and barely concealing his surprised gasp at just how much alcohol exists in there. Every shelf is filled with beer. Even the drawers, when he pulls them out, he finds are filled with full bottles of beer and wine. Peter can’t even bring himself to be angry about it anymore, this is just sad. He dreads opening the freezer. Finding a bunch of severed heads is almost preferable to this.

From behind the fridge door, Peter hears Tony sigh. “Ugly, isn’t it?” he says, voice hollow.

“I’m not here to judge you, Mr. Stark,” Peter responds, pulling another infinity can near him and beginning the grueling process of purging all of Tony Stark’s alcohol. “Just… were you actually expecting to drink all this?”

“Well, I… I kept forgetting I had it,” Tony says, giving Peter a grimace and a shrug before looking away and continuing his task. “I just kept ordering it over and over again. I guess, maybe I kept seeing it on the supply list, and knowing that I forget things I need, well, I certainly didn’t want to forget that, so I would… check that box every time, just in case.”

Peter drops an entire bear-hug full of beer bottles into the can with a grunt, and stops to look at Tony. Absolute pure self-loathing is what Peter finds on his face before it’s replaced swiftly with a forced neutral expression. “It’s not your fault,” Peter offers kindly, and Tony scoffs, “it’s not, Mr. Stark. You have an illness, you’re sick, how are you supposed to control that? Nobody blames you.”

“That may be true, but that doesn’t mean you have to blame yourself as well,” Peter says, “you have a brain tumor, and you’ve had it for god only knows how long, and- “

“Peter, I’ve been fucking up royally long before the fucking- “ Tony halts himself abruptly when his voice starts to rise to frightening levels, and breathes deeply a few times. Peter stares, patient. “Can we not talk about this? I’m sorry, the whole brain tumor thing puts me on edge, it makes me feel like I’m… like I’m losing my superpowers.” The smile that follows is totally inappropriate and Peter can hear Tony’s heart positively thundering away in his chest, betraying it as false.

Peter is very sad for his friend. The amount of patience it’s going to take to work with Tony on their newest project will be phenomenal, he’s sure. Maybe stay away from topics that could trigger Tony’s anger, since it doesn’t seem like he can control it very well. Peter certainly needs to be more aware of the man’s heart rate, because Tony is looking pale and sweaty now, just managing to jump off the counter, before he all but slides to the floor with a groan, barely catching himself, and Peter is there in an instant.

“Stop, I’m fine,” Tony murmurs, weakly trying to bat Peter’s hand away, but Peter physically insists.

“Shut up, c’mon,” is his staunch reply, hauling Tony up, slinging one of his arms over his shoulders and walking him over to the couch he put his bag on earlier. There’s nothing the other man can do, really. Without the armor, Peter is worlds stronger than Tony is. “I’m here to help, so I’m gonna help. And you may not like it sometimes.”

“You’re a little shit,” Tony grinds out as he’s lowered to the sofa where he lies back with his eyes closed and just pants and pants, skin so pale that Peter’s afraid Stark’s died already and he’s actually speaking to a ghost. “Didn’t anyone t-teach you to respect your elders?”

“You’re forty-seven,” Peter says, sitting on the couch a few feet from Tony to give him space, and Tony snorts out his sardonic chuckle. “Don’t be so dramatic.”
“Is that-”, Tony opens one eye and sniffs lightly, head swiveling wearily over to focus on Peter’s backpack, “is that roast beef I smell?”

Peter hesitates a moment, taken aback by the sudden change of topic. “Y-yeah, it is,” he says, and grabs his backpack to fish out the Tupperware May packed specifically for Tony. It’s filled to the brim with mashed potatoes, carrots, corn, gravy and beef.

Tony groans longingly at the sight of it, “oh, god, yes, thank you. Nobody cooks around here but Vision, and he’s been gone for a while, so it’s been nothing but sandwiches and fruit for me for weeks.”

“Dude,” Peter says with a pointed, slightly exasperated look at Tony, “why don’t you come over when May invites you? Her baking game may be off a bit, but she’s a damn good cook.”

Tony looks at him, confused, “I do, I’ve only been invited over twice, Peter, I can’t just invite myself into your house to eat your food, ‘hey, poor helpless billionaire over here needs some home cooking, pretty please’.” He waves his hands as he mocks himself. The color is coming back into his face and Peter can feel his heart calming.

“Twice…” Peter repeats, sharing Tony’s confusion now, because May has called and messaged him quite a few times, and they just assumed Tony was always busy- and then it hits him, and he works fast to collect himself. “Well… I’ll, um… I’ll have to tell her to invite you over more often, then,” he says, with a smooth apologetic smile, not having the heart to tell Tony the truth, and making a note to himself to warn May as well.

“In her defense, she did call me today,” Tony says, as he sits forward with a stifled grunt, apparently missing Peter’s little white lie, or maybe ignoring it, Tony is hard to lie to. A shaky hand reaches out for the food, and Peter gives it to him happily, thrilled to see the man motivated to eat something. “I informed her I’m all booked for the next week or so, unfortunately. She was very understanding.”

He lifts a corner and sniffs it, smiles at the aroma. “You told her about my heart attack.”

“Yup,” Peter says firmly, completely shameless.

“I’m not angry, or anything,” Tony continues, lifting himself shakily to his feet, allowing a second to stabilize his stance, before heading to the microwave, and sticking the whole container in there. “Just curious; did you tell her about Extremis?”

Peter narrows his eyes at Stark. “No, I didn’t.”

“Ah, well then, good thing I lied about why I needed your assistance for four straight days here soon, I figured it was one of those things,” Tony says provocatively, with a sideways glance, “though, I’m not sure what lie I’m going to tell her when I show up to dinner one night completely healed, and looking thirty years old again.”

“I’m sure you can figure something out,” Peter says coldly, because he knows where this is going.

“It’s not right, keeping it from her,” Tony continues to prod with a smile, and a pair of raised eyebrows, “it’s just like a lie.”

“Oh, you found a way to get there, didn’t you?” Peter groans, swipes a hand through his hair.

“I’m never lost, Peter.”

“What’s your name again?” Peter asks rhetorically, and now it’s his turn to get defensive. “Oh, that’s right, Tony ‘I had a heart attack six weeks ago’ Stark.”
“How many times do I have to remind you that I’m actively giving you examples you shouldn’t follow?” Tony asks as the microwave beeps and he extracts the steaming food from it, grabbing a fork out of a drawer to his right.

“How many times do I have to remind you that I’m actively giving you examples you shouldn’t follow?” Tony asks as the microwave beeps and he extracts the steaming food from it, grabbing a fork out of a drawer to his right.

“Great, then I’ll keep my identity a secret, thank you,” Peter shoots back with stony finality, standing to continue his job in the fridge, “unless you.”

Leaning one hip against the island, Tony takes small, cautionary bites of his dinner and watches Peter with an unreadable expression. “I’m not advising you call a press conference and announce it to the world, Pete. Just let your Aunt know so you can stop lying to her. And I can stop lying to her. I honestly still can’t see the harm in it.”

“She would make me quit,” Peter says firmly as he clears another shelf in the fridge of booze, scowling at Tony when he reaches in around him and grabs one, supposedly forgetting the nearly full glass of scotch he’s already poured himself sitting just above them. “And she has an anxiety disorder, too, man, ever since Ben…” He cuts himself off angrily, pursing his lips and shaking his head. This conversation has happened at least four times since Tony showed up at his apartment that one day, and there’s no use wasting his breath again.

Tony washes down a mouthful of beef with some beer and smiles kindly at Peter. “She would be so proud of you,” he says.

“I’m telling you, she’d make me quit. And she would have some strong words for you, too,” Peter threatens, pulling an entire shelf out with little effort and leaning a corner of it into the can, allowing beer to slide into it. “You know, dragging me to Germany. On a school night.”

“Oh, no, what will I ever do,” Tony drawls sarcastically, closing the lid back over his dinner after only a few bites, and sitting it in the fridge which, thanks to Peter, now sports enough room to actually put food in it. “Aunt May’s wrath, I can’t even imagine.”

Peter stops what he’s doing to turn and glare at him. “Mr. Stark, you know how talking about your brain tumor makes you edgy?”

Tony just smiles sadly. “I’m assuming you intend to turn that back around on me.”

“Yeah, yeah, I do, because this is the topic that makes me edgy, okay? This is my edgy topic, I get one too.” Beer bottles fly into the can until the fridge is finally empty. Just the drawers left.

“Alright, alright,” Tony says, raising his hands in a defensive gesture. “That’s fair enough. I’m sorry.”

“Thanks.”

“Sometimes I just don’t know when to stop,” he says, upending a second beer he managed to sneak from somewhere. Apparently, the building is bursting at the seams with alcohol. Peter wonders if Tony’s cognizant of his own irony.

“At least you’re aware of it,” Peter says, removing the last drawer in the bottom and dumping its contents down into the abyss, finishing the fridge. Opening the freezer, Peter hides his renewed shock at the sight of over two hundred half empty bottles of hard liquor, stuffed in there like Tetris blocks.

“So, hey! Let's talk Extremis,” Tony says, clapping and bending to open the cabinet below the triple beer tap set into the counter of the island. “You did your homework last night, that much is apparent, so what are your questions? Because I know you have them.”
“How much of this new formula is theoretical?” Peter asks immediately. If what he gathered from the notes last night is true, then Tony stopped conducting trials at injection number four. There are six injections.

“Almost all of it,” Tony replies with a grunt as he yanks out one of the tap bladders and begins pouring it into the can near him, “as you probably saw in my research, I had to completely restructure the entire formula to make something new, and clinical trials have… well, they’ve come to a sudden halt. There’s a few things I was able to ensure work, but most of this formula is built out of a dumb little thing called hope.”

“So- so you just sort of ‘hope’ these positive things you’ve thrown into it will happen,” Peter says, mindlessly tossing bottles away, and totally not approving of all these unknowns.

“Peter, I never, ever deal in absolutes. Pretty much everything I’ve created, good or bad, was some theoretical, farfetched, flawed idea before it ever became a working product,” Tony reminds him, replacing the first bladder, and starting on another one, sweating with effort. Peter has half a thought to tell him to switch with him, but that may not go so well. “Testing Iron Man almost killed me multiple times. I was covered in ice packs for weeks. If you sit on your hands and do nothing because you’re scared of failure, then nothing will ever happen, and you’ve failed anyway. In this line of work, not taking chances can mean being caught off guard or becoming obsolete, and both of those things lead to death.”

Peter knows this. But this is Tony’s life they’re talking about here. It’s difficult to think objectively about it. There’s this sneaking suspicion in the back of Peter’s mind that Tony’s life means more to him than it does to Tony.

“It’s going to completely regrow all your organs,” Peter states, and it still sounds weird to him, “how is it going to do that?”

“Slowly,” Tony answers, “It’s more of a rejuvenation process than it is a complete replacement, or else at some point, I would be minus a heart as a new one grows, and I would like to maintain blood flow to all my bits and pieces. The slower pace stabilizes the formula, slows the nanobots down a bit, reduces stress on the microtubes, and doesn’t ask too much of the body all at once, thus fostering a healing relationship between the body and the formula, instead of a parasitic one, eliminating the explosion problem. Then, once I’m fully Extremis ready, I’ll be a little weaker and I’ll heal slower compared to prior subjects. But there’s other things in there that will more than make up for that.” He starts chuckling then and Peter stops clearing the last freezer shelf to look at him. “I even gave the ole’ appendix something to do.”

“Doesn’t sound very pleasant,” Peter says warily.

“Oh, it’s not gonna be,” Tony says, and replaces the second bladder, just to take a couple of deep breaths before removing the third. He looks like he’s struggling with it, sweat breaking out on his forehead. “It’ll probably be one of the most painful things I’ve ever been through. There’s nothing to do about it. I’m running out of time in more ways than one. Next question, please.”

Tony’s heart has started up again, but this time it seems the man has the sense to not attempt to ride it out, and simply sits on the floor after putting the last bladder back and closing the cabinet a little too forcefully with an exasperated growl. Face tight, eyes shut, pale and sweaty, Tony puts the cabinet to his back and leans on it with his legs crossed and his fists clenched atop his knees, looking just about sick of being so sick. “Son of a bitch,” he whispers to the ceiling.

For once, Peter doesn’t really want to ask another question, terrified of the answers he’ll get. The freezer empty, Peter pushes the can away so he can close it, and walks over to sit next to Tony, who
regards him with one tired eye. Peter sits there quietly with Tony as he suffers, because he doesn’t know what else to do.

“I need you to promise me something,” Tony says, voice airy and so very distant. “If this is ever too much for you, I need you to tell me. Don’t hide it. I won’t be disappointed, I will be proud of your courage. Be honest with me, talk to me when you need to. Promise me.”

“I promise,” Peter assures him.

“Good,” Tony says, his pallor holding longer than before. He’s somehow managed to get a damn drink in his hand and Peter wants to take it from him. “Thank you. I don’t think I ever thanked you for agreeing to help me, so here it is. Thanks.”

“No need to thank me,” Peter says.

Tony kicks the trash can by him and laughs. “Hey, Peter, I’m one of the most brilliant minds in the world, and I just spent the last three days creating a goddamn trashcan. How is this a thing?”

Peter smiles too. Tony’s bright laughter is contagious and so, so rare. “I mean, in your defense, it is a really cool trash can.”

“The bottom of it hyper-condenses molecules in the flooring and spreads them out to other areas.” Tony laughs again. “Literal trash technology, and I’m about to put it in my body.”

Peter can’t figure out what’s more remarkable, Tony’s intelligence and ingenuity, or his ability to find any way to compare himself to trash.

“Alright, up, up, lots to do, little time,” Tony says, “don’t let me forget to check all the bleach bottles in the bathrooms. I hid liquor in them a while back when I thought Ross was going to take everything. Funny though, he didn’t seem to be concerned about the most dangerous substance on the compound.”
It’s early on Friday, and Tony can’t for the life of him remember how many ‘weaponized super-suits’ he’s permitted to have at any one time. But it’s not like he was going to spend two years sitting on his ass, either. Not with imminent galactic-scale doom coming at any moment. Maybe it’s two, three? He knows it’s a very low number, but he chose to ignore it at the time due to its irrelevance.

Hiding from Ross’s probes is a cake walk, Tony quickly found, so he did it, simply dug out Dad’s ole underground ‘invisible room’, as he always called it, and revitalized his armor workshop from scratch. Ross can’t inspect what he doesn’t know about.

The room is massive, contains everything he needs, including a kitchenette, washroom, sleeping quarters and a tiny infirmary area Tony has set up for his… thing. A pair of enormous launch doors devour the back wall, lead into a tunnel which will take a vehicle twenty miles to a local private airstrip, where they won’t ask questions. And an interstellar jet he’s been scrapping together sits down there too, taking up half the massive space. It’s Tony’s baby and he’s falling slowly in love with it. The size of a three bedroom apartment, and containing all the same amenities, plus some, it's mean to get him a staggering amount of light years across the universe in relative comfort. It can also comfortably accommodate a total of three other individuals. Uncomfortably, probably sixteen or so. It's invaluable, one of a kind, and so damn pretty with it's sleek black and silver exterior.

Luckily, the Accords allow him to maintain a steady source of income from S.I. despite the restraining order (not that Ross didn’t try only to trip into swift legal pitfalls), but with increased scrutiny surrounding supply acquisition, he had to convince some old acquaintances to quite literally smuggle materials in for him. Progress has been much slower than what he’s comfortable with.

Little by little, using materials derived from precious metals hidden inside canned goods, as well as all the scrap he’s cannibalized from the abandoned areas of the compound, he’s managed to build ten fully functional sets of armor, and this fucking interstellar jet, all ready to be integrated with Extremis. If he’s allowed to be proud of anything, it’s this. He stands among the unpainted armors now, double, triple, and quadruple checking ports and ensuring their strict alignment with the plugs in the second skin, or more accurately, theoretically where they should align. Any deviance could result in extreme pain, possible seizures and death, considering their attempt at integration directly with his CNS. Everything must be perfect down to the Planck Length. This is it; bleeding edge or nothing.

“Boss, a package just arrived from the heavens,” Friday says, and he’s gotta admit, he’s never heard that one before.

“Huh?” Tony looks up at her from his tablet with a single raised eyebrow.

“I’m just as confused as you look and sound.”

Upstairs in the common room, Tony finds the culprit wrapped in what looks like a green cloth sitting in the middle of the floor, smoke swirling gently around it, and eyes it warily from a distance. “Scan it.”

“You think I haven’t?” Friday says. “It’s insulting, your lack of faith.”
“Friday…”

“It appears to be Asgardian in nature,” Friday says, bringing up a hologram of the package for him, “the material it’s wrapped in is completely impenetrable. I cannot breach it with any of my scanners. There’s a small wax seal situated in the middle.”

Tony takes the hologram, zooms in to view the seal more closely- and smiles when he finds the Avengers’ ‘A’ symbol set into the wax. “Thor.”

Moving quickly, not willing to admit how excited he actually is, Tony grabs up the package, turns it over a few times, marveling at its light weight. It’s thin, yet wide and tall, and Tony’s almost positive it’s a book. The material it’s wrapped in, although having the appearance of cloth, does not give way or wrinkle when he pinches it.

“What do you want to bet it opens like… this,” he says, smirking and brushing the seal with the tip of his index finger. The green wrapping fades away beneath his palms, leaving the now blank and perfectly round seal behind, and a beautiful, ancient book inscribed with sweeping gold and silver calligraphy he can’t comprehend. Tony nearly drops it in shock when the symbols shift into one mass and reappear as English words. “Whoa.”

‘Regarding the Six Singularities, a Study’ it reads, and Tony can’t believe what he’s holding.

“Boss,” Friday says, and he practically leaps through the ceiling. “Sorry. Something fell out of the packaging. It’s on the floor by your feet.”

Tony looks down and finds folded, yellowed paper containing what appears to be Thor’s embellished handwriting. A letter. Maybe this one won’t tear open old wounds like the last hand-written letter he received. He picks it up, takes a deep breath, but it just makes him dizzy, so he sits right there on the floor.

Tony,

_I am confident the security measures didn’t give you too much pause, as I predicted you would appreciate the simplicity of providing a fingerprint for its opening. Mjolnir preserves the identity of all who touch it so, I suppose, your theories weren’t completely stupid._

“You son of a bitch,” Tony says with a breathy chuckle, so happy to hear from an Avenger who doesn’t appear to hate him yet. “Troll.”

_The book you hold contains findings derived from a series of experiments performed in secret many millennia ago by Asgardian scientists, and yes, we have those here. They were researching the singularities, the ‘Infinity Stones’, I trust you comprehend the importance. Considered too dangerous to disseminate openly, the study was banned, the only copy existing silently in my Father’s archives, forgotten. Well, I’ve been doing some reading, and I stumbled upon it. I am entrusting it to you. It cannot stay here._

_There is a disturbance in this realm I cannot yet fully comprehend. A feeling of rising doom humming in my chest. Odin is acting strangely, weakening our defenses, refusing reason. He will not agree to relocate the Tesseract. He is threatening my exile. There is little I can do. I understand now how you felt, friend, and my deepest apologies for having ignored your concerns, for having attacked you. I do hope I inflicted no permanent injury, and I’m terribly embarrassed for my actions. Anger is something I’ve struggled with my entire life, and that’s a very long time by your standards._

_This book could not reside in more capable hands. All that you do, you do for good, Tony Stark, and_
I know in my heart my trust in you is not folly. Use it to prepare your realm, as the Stones are mere minutes from being reunited once more, and I doubt those who mean to do so possess noble intentions.

I do not understand Steve’s motivations for behaving the way he did, but I fear we are all destined to suffer as a result of his irrationality. Instead of agreeing to negotiate with the governing bodies of Earth, he arrogantly considered his own opinion superior, discounted that of millions. Foolishly created a verifiable political circus during a critical time. Having caused and experienced the lasting repercussions of a comparable situation myself, I can attest that this is not how a leader should act, and I am saddened by his decisions. That being said, all hard feelings must be dismissed, if only for a moment. These stones grant the ability to erase the universe should the user snap his fingers once united. They are the beginning and the end of all things. They must be contained, their seeker, destroyed, and not one of us can accomplish that alone. I encourage forgiveness and communication.

I regret your limitations in returning correspondence, as well as my own, I used a very ancient, unique artifact to send this to you undetected, and it’s the only one of its kind. I implore you to keep it safe, and I’m sure you will.

I must keep close watch of the Tesseract, but once I can guarantee it is secure, I will return to aid you. It will be when we next speak. Never lose your courage, Iron Man.

Thor

Literally the word of a god. “Wow…”

There’s so much to digest, Tony doesn’t quite know where to begin. He reads the letter twice more, noting Thor’s apology for strangling him, his regained trust, and his understanding with a painfully fluttering heart. Now Thor’s the one being ignored in his own home, and he gets it. This is the very first time Tony’s warnings and paranoia have been legitimized by one of the old gang, with the exception of Bruce, he supposes. But Bruce fucked off too, didn't he?

Finally. The feeling of relief is like Mjolnir being lifted off his chest, or perhaps, an enormous hand unwrapping itself from his throat.

He pointedly ignores the advice about Steve and his merry gang of criminals. If Tony positions all his pieces correctly, he won’t even need them.

And this book… Tony stares, humbled by its magical origins, its elegance contrasted starkly by the arguably bleak surroundings of the compound. If what Thor wrote about it is true, Tony might be in possession of one of the most important items in the galaxy. The absolute most significant scientific study ever conducted exists right there in his shaking hands. He supposes he’s lucky it’s been largely forgotten about. It’s just given him an edge he never thought he’d have. Maybe this won’t end up being so terrible after all.

Opening it causes the whole thing to burst to life with a soft glow for his reading convenience. “Cool,” Tony whispers, smiling, watching magical ink swirl itself into something he can understand plainly; math, observations written in English. On the first page, images of beasts Tony’s never seen before don the edges, and they’re moving, snarling soundlessly from the borders, dancing upon intricate designs that undulate beneath their claws like ocean waves. Six colorful stones glimmer brilliantly at him, sitting in an arc above another copy of the title. It’s one of the coolest things he’s ever seen, demands scientific explanation. Hell, it is scientific explanation.

He pours over it, fascinated by its beauty. Pages and pages of information daunt him, and he soon
realizes he doesn’t have the time to deal with this quite yet. If only Thor had sent it a year earlier, perhaps he could have used it to improve the Extremis formula.

“Friday, any way you can scan this and form it into a manipulable copy?” Tony inquires, “I’d like to do some reading on my way to D.C. .”

“Unfortunately, no, Boss,” Friday says, and Tony curses under his breath, “I’m afraid I can’t even see it at all. It is emitting some type of aura preventing my scanners from penetrating it.”

“Bummer,” Tony mutters, furrowing his brow at the book in thought. “Guess it’ll have to wait. Analyze the aura. And get the Mark 47 ready.”

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There’s so little time and so much to do. E-day starts at noon tomorrow, and Tony has responsibilities to attend to, last minute finishing touches to add, extremely important preparations to make, a damn magical book to peruse. And yet, he’s risking the flight over to see Pepper in D.C. against his better judgement, the Mark 47 remaining in stealth mode for the entire duration, keeping above the clouds to avoid the prying eyes of Earth’s more observant civilians. This isn’t a pre-approved, legal use of his armor.

“Call Rhodes, invisibly,” Tony commands, and the ringer goes off twice.

“Hello?” Rhodey says, voice full of confusion due to the encryption.

“Hey pal, you forget about me?” Tony says, smiling at Rhodey’s still picture displayed on his HUD.

“Tony,” Rhodey whispers urgently, “why in all that is good are you in the armor right now? Is that an approved flight you’re taking?”

Shit, he already knows. Can’t hide much from Rhodey. “Is that any way to talk to a guy who’s risking his freedom to come visit you?” Tony says, stomach clenching with Rhodes’ disapproval.

“I-, wow, Tony,” Rhodey sounds positively exasperated, “you’ve got horrible timing, just, just hold on, let me roll over to a more private place before someone important eavesdrops.”

“Private, hmm, yeah,” Tony drawls suggestively, and laughs at Rhodes’ scoff.

“This isn’t a joke,” Rhodey hisses, and Tony sighs, but whatever, it’s better than not hearing from him. “Alright, now that I’m alone; are you kidding me with this right now? Why the hell are you in that suit, Tony?”

“Car broke down,” Tony lies. He could have driven, he supposes, but he’s got too much to do to waste four hours doing what the armor can achieve in one. And that’s while going slow enough to maintain stealth. Mostly, he just wanted a chance to fly one last time before...

“Car broke down,” Rhodey repeats incredulously, “uh huh, yeah, sure, that’s a lame one, even for you. Do you have any idea what I’m trying to do for you right now?”
“I can only assume you’re calculating the exact right angles at which to plant your lips on some politician’s-“

“Tony, I’m trying to end the filibuster blocking your Earth defense system proposal from moving to vote,” Rhodey says harshly, and Tony forgot he even presented that forever and a day ago. “This senator is up here reading 99 Bottles of Beer on the Wall in a flat tone to emphasize your goddamn alcoholism, man… And there you go, breaking the law, giving them more ammo, and me shit to work with, what are you thinking, Tony?”

“Who says anyone’s gonna find out?” Tony asks, but there it is anyway, the guilt, the crushing uncertainty. The fucking humiliation of having his weaknesses debated publicly by government officials. Why the hell should he even keep going? It’s just too hard, and no one will listen to him, no one is trustworthy. All his help exists on Asgard, and a dead planet millions of light years away. And in the hands of a kid. “I’m in and out, real fast, no one will even see me.”

“You’re Tony Stark, and no one is going to see you? I one hundred and ten percent suggest you turn around right now,” Rhodey grits out, “I don’t know what spawned this little adventure of yours, but it could not be timed more poorly. I care about you, man, I don’t want to see you in prison.”

“Oh, quit belly aching, sour patch, I’ve got all my firewalls in place. I might as well be a ghost,” Tony says, and continues through Rhodey’s frustrated groan, “you’re awfully hell-bent on me not stopping by, boo-boo, you cheating on me or something?”

Rhodey sighs for a silly amount of time. “I miss you, Tony,” he says, sadly, at the end of it. “I miss you a lot.”

Tony smiles and bites the inside of his cheek. “I miss you, brother. It’s not the same around there without you. It echoes, it’s weird. Take a break for a minute, just step outside, give me my Rhodey fix, c’mon.”

“You know I would if I could,” Rhodey says, and he sounds so tired, “but you can’t be seen around here, I’m serious, Tony. Ross is ready to toss you in a cell if you so much as look at him wrong. If any one of these idiots sees that armor, it’s over, you’re done, and so is this bill. We’ve both worked too hard for this, please.”

Tony’s heart sinks with disappointment, and he swallows his desire to come clean about everything. “Alright, hey, next time, then. I’ll bring a car.” Why does he have to be the one suffering most from the Accords after supporting them so valiantly?

“Go home,” Rhodey stresses gently, “don’t go see Pepper, just go home. I’m gonna try to get some leave here soon, but I’m swamped right now, man, I got senators crawling up my ass, civilians crawling up my ass, I got a Secretary of State who wants Steve Rogers dead on sight, I’ve got six different appointments with six separate world leaders tomorrow, I’m drowning in shit right now, Tones. I need you to lay low.”

Which is exactly why he can’t tell Rhodey about Extremis, having first-hand experience with it, he would absolutely freak out, and he’s already being pushed to the limit. “You gonna ask me to raise the dead next, Rhodes?” Tony pokes playfully, despite his shriveling heart, “what other miracles do you require of me?”

“Just take care of yourself,” Rhodey says, and it saddens Tony to know that it would truly be a miracle to do so. “I have to go, Tony.”

“Wait! Hold on, I need you to know this,” Tony says, because Extremis starts tomorrow, and there’s
nothing more important than telling Rhodey this; “I- I love you, Rhodes. You’ve been my best friend since college. You were my first real friend, and maybe my last, who knows, but you mean a lot to me. I’ve never told you that, so I wanted to tell you now. I want you to know how much it meant to me when you saved me from that… that fucked frat stuff they were making me do. I never talked about it, for, uh, obvious reasons, but I never forgot it, and, and thank you for having the fucking courage to pull me out of there. Thank you.”

“Tony-” Rhodey starts, but Tony interrupts him, not sure if he will be able to continue otherwise, must maintain this momentum.

“And that time they had me cornered behind bio-chem, remember? You came in and trounced them with the stuff they taught you in ROTC, man, I’ve never been so happy to see you… except once, maybe. When you showed up to find me in the middle of the desert. Rhodey, I thought I was gonna die. I thought ‘I just went through all that, dealt with torture and brutality for three months, and I’m gonna die out here, boiling like a hot dog in a microwave,’ and then, there you were. Like some angel, you descended from the actual sky and, and you found me, you saved me. You never gave up on me.” He’s starting to let the emotion leak into his voice, so he swallows it down fast.

“Are you drunk?” Rhodey sounds disappointed, and it’s important to make him understand that no, he isn’t drunk, that this came directly from his broken heart.

“Not yet,” Tony says, “I’m completely sober, honestly, I just… I still feel that doom and gloom feeling, you know? That old anxiety issue of mine is acting up a little bit, and I just needed to tell you that. Preferably in person, but this is, um… this is okay, I guess. Yeah. Sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologize,” Rhodey says after a pause, sounding surprised and concerned and sad all at once, “I love you too Tony, I helped you out all those times because of that fact, but I’m sorry, I really have to go. Give me a call whenever, man. You’re worrying me, you sound a little down.”

“Not down, just… nervous,” Tony clarifies, and it’s easy to play off. “See ya, Rhodey.”

“Bye, Tony.”

The call ends. Tony takes a couple of breaths to calm himself before making the next one. “Call Pepper,” he says, because he’s never been very good at following instructions. The phone rings six times, and Tony’s heart sinks. He can just see her sitting there, staring at it, wondering if it’s worth re-opening the Pandora’s Box that is Tony Stark. She recognizes the encryption, she knows exactly who it is.

Finally, a click. “Tony,” a familiar voice says, and the icy inflection is all too recognizable. He’s heard it before many times. “This better be good, you’re breaking at least two amendments right now.”

“Pepper, I…” he starts, falters, licks his dry lips “I just-,” he doesn’t know what to say. This is what he gets for winging it. “Um, can I come see you? I’m kind of already on my way, though, so, please don’t say ‘no’, I can-“

“Tony-”

“-I can land on the roof, completely invisible, no one will even know-“

“No, you can’t-”

“-and I’ll mask the Towers defense protocols so there’s no record, time stamps are cake-”
“Tony, I will not—” Pepper starts, desperately, but Tony is more so.

“Please Pepper, I need to see you, I’m sorry, I know we could both get in serious trouble, I just—,” he takes a huge breath. “I had a heart attack, Pep, a big one. They said I might one day, remember? I finally had one. I- I almost died.” He’s never told anyone but Peter.

“I-wait, Tony, did you just say you had a heart attack?” she asks, sounding gloomy and tired, and Tony is just an exhausting person to deal with, he knows.

“Please, just for a couple minutes, then I’m ancient history,” Tony promises, “can I use your systems? I don’t want to just do it.”

“This is such a bad idea,” Pepper sighs, but Tony knows she can’t not see him after that. If it was manipulative to tell her now, he doesn’t care, and should Extremis go poorly for him, his dead corpse won’t give any shits, either. Lingering finality has always pushed Tony in strange directions. “Fine, ten minutes, Tony. I mean it, and don’t leave behind a trace in my systems, do you hear me? I would like to keep my job, believe it or not, I sometimes enjoy it.”

“Ten minutes,” Tony repeats, already beginning the process of disabling security and surveillance systems, “done deal, ten minutes is… great, more than enough,” he lies. Ten minutes is pathetic, insulting.

“Make sure nobody sees you on the way in,” Pepper hisses and ends the call before Tony can say anything.

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The clouds are thick enough to provide adequate concealment for his descent onto the roof of Tony and Pepper’s last joint effort; the D.C. Tower, her primary residence. Of course, no one really looks to the sky expecting to see Iron Man any more, not that the stealth would allow it. Being shelved has its advantages, he concludes.

She’s there waiting for him, tall, all legs in the little shorts she likes, red hair pulled back in a ponytail and caressing the wind like wild flames behind her. The shirt she’s wearing is one of his old, solid black ones, the holes in it familiar, and he wonders if she even remembers that it belonged to him. Her arms are crossed and she’s scowling at him.

He doesn’t care.

When he lands, he stumble slightly with a grunt, Iron Man’s boots clanking loudly on the helicopter pad. He’s been flying for a little over an hour, and he’s stiff and dizzy, and his heart is walloping his rebuilt sternum. Eleven years ago, this would have been preschool level easy for him. Now, when the suit opens, he groans and falls out of it onto all fours, knees refusing to support his weight.

“Tony!” That sounds nice. There’s care in her voice. He hasn’t heard that in so long. She’s crouching in front of him in seconds, concerned.

“Don’t worry ‘bout me,” he pants, sitting back on his ass, and smiling at her, “jus’ a little thing, is all, I’m fine.”
“Tony, you look like death,” Pepper says, touching his forehead, and then his cheek. It takes everything he has not to lean into it. Things between them aren’t like that anymore, will never be like that again.

“I’ve actually died a remarkably high number of times, so that makes sense,” Tony says, wiping sweat off his forehead with the hem of his t-shirt, or really, wiping Pepper’s touch from it. It can’t mean anything, he can’t have any ideas. They’re finished, he knows this. “Only a matter of time before the ticker got fed up with me.” Like everyone else, he doesn’t add.

Yikes. This might’ve been a bad idea.

“Well, c’mon, let’s get you inside,” Pepper insists, standing and offering her hand, but Tony doesn’t take it, looking guardedly into her eyes instead.

“Ten minutes, Pep, it’s already been two,” he reminds her, and Pepper scoffs.

“Ridiculous, you’re not leaving until you gain some pigment back in your face,” she says, moving to grab his armpit and pull him up forcefully. Geez, she’s been working out again. “There’s a couch with your name on it in my den, I want you to stay there until you look more man than ghost.”

After parking Iron Man in a safe area, Tony lets her walk him through the penthouse as he fights hard to ignore the vanilla scent floating all around her, the shampoo she’s always used. It’s stirring up memories he doesn’t want, has worked for years to expunge. The old longing returns, his urge to be held close, to be cared for. He’s always been too clingy for her, needing constant reassurance, his wretched insecurities interlacing themselves unavoidably into their relationship, a poorly stitched wound.

She deposits him on the couch, a large, white sectional, and sits next to him. Still so dizzy, feeling slightly ill, he sets his head back against the cushion and closes his eyes with a groan.

“God, Tony,” Pepper whispers, and he knows it was a mistake coming here as he feels her worried gaze penetrate deep into his soul.

“I’m sorry, Pepper,” he says miserably, “showing up here like this, it was stupid.”

He waits for her to agree. “No, I’m glad you did, Tony, I’ve missed you,” Pepper says with a sigh, and hugs him. Tony freezes, bristling like a startled cat. “It’s okay, relax,” she soothes, and rubs his arm, puts her head on his shoulder. Not allowed, this isn’t allowed. He would never have the time, anyway, to devote to anything outside the coming threat, let alone a relationship. All the tender moments in his life are over, it would be irresponsible of him to get involved with anyone ever again. It would just doom that person to immense suffering.

“Honey, I’m back,” comes another familiar voice from the elevator, and Tony looks up with scared, guilty eyes as Happy Hogan strides through the sliding doors, huge and clad in a suit as always, juggling what looks like groceries, “I couldn’t find mint, so I got regular chocolate chip, I wasn’t sure- “ Then he sees them, like that, together, Pepper holding Tony, giving him more human contact than he’d had in years. Tony chuckles nervously.

The groceries fall to the floor with a crash much louder than it should be, and Hogan is crossing the room with massive strides, looking crushed, hurt. “Now wait a minute,” Tony says, holds his hands out as Pepper lets him go, “It’s not what it looks li- hurk!”

“You son of a bitch, where have you been,” Happy growls as he scoops Tony up into the most crushing hug he’s ever had, and Tony is just getting over the horrifying thought of having to defend
himself from Happy. Feeling faint from it, he can barely process what’s happening right now. Last time he spoke to Happy, he vaguely remembers calling him something horrible, and possibly derogatory towards his brain damage, but it’s fuzzy. He was so drunk that night. Happy called to tell him about his relationship with Pepper, to be open with him about it, and Tony exploded on him. That was months ago.

Yet here’s Happy, embracing the shit out of him no matter what despicable things Tony’s said to him, loyal as a dog. “I…” he begins, but shuts his mouth and wraps his arms hesitantly around Happy’s broad chest, finding no words appropriate. Tears sting his eyes. Shit. They don’t hate him? This isn’t right, they should be angry, Tony should be angry, Happy stole Pepper from him, right? Tony squeezes Happy like he’s the only person left in the world.

Who cares if he’s dating his ex, who honestly gives a shit? This is Happy. It’s always been Tony’s weakness, displays of affection for him, because they are just so rare, he has to preserve them. It’s why Nick Fury was the only one he opened up to about Ultron and the terrible vision the witch had mind raped him with. Tony was defensive at first, positive the director was going to scold him, guilt him, like everyone else already had. But; ‘I’m just an old man who cares very much about you.’, happened to speak to him a little better than being strangled and berated and undermined did. Imagine that.

“Tony, you dummy,” Happy scolds wetly, sniffling. He’s crying too? Happy doesn’t cry. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“Embarrassing myself, apparently.” Tony mumbles into the rich material of Happy’s jacket, not wanting to ever let go. “I’ve been doing it a lot lately, and I’m sorry, Happy. I’m the world’s biggest idiot. You guys tried to reach out to me, and I bit your hand, I’m sorry.”

“Forget about it, it doesn’t matter,” Happy says, pulling Tony away from him and observing him at arms-length with a pinched, worried face, red from crying, “you’ve lost weight, are you okay? You look sick, Tony.”

“I am sick,” Tony says, shrugging Happy’s hands off his biceps, and sitting back down, too dizzy to keep standing much longer, “heart’s crapping out on me, Hap, I finally had a heart attack. Please don’t worry though, I’ve got a plan.”

“A plan?” Pepper repeats, sharing a worried glance with Happy, then regarding Tony with suspicion. “No.”

“Shit! “Guys-,”

“Not that,” Happy says, eyes going wide with horrific realization, “You’re not talking-, “

“No, it’s not that, it’s different,“ Tony tries desperately to defend himself, feeling foolish for even coming here at all. Now his friends have to worry, and there’s nothing they can do to help him, “it’s something new, it’s-“

“Extremis,” Pepper says disapprovingly, upper lip wrinkling, “it is, isn’t it? You’re going to use Extremis.”

He searches the floor for the answer to this, but comes up empty. “…yes, but-“

“Tony!” Pepper interrupts sharply, hurt disbelief on her face, “you said you would destroy all of it! You promised me it would never be an issue again!” The betrayal there stings him.

“…well that’s just unrealistic, honestly- “
“You jerk, dammit, Tony,” Pepper says angrily.

“Would you just listen to me?” he insists, waits for further rebuttal, but they stay silent, Happy sitting on the couch next to Pepper, a hand on her shoulder. Tony tries to ignore it, to ignore the flight response he’s feeling. “Good, okay, look, this isn’t Extremis, not really. This is something I’ve derived from it, but it’s completely new, and it is. Mine. I promise. It’s not going anywhere but in me, I swear to all the Thors and Lokis, I wouldn’t be doing this if I had another option.”

“Is it that bad?” Happy asks as Pepper hides her face in her hands, “is there anything that regular doctors can do for you?”

“Trust me when I say I’ve already exhausted all those avenues,” Tony insists, running hands through his hair with frustration, regretting every second of this. They weren’t supposed to find out, how stupid he was to think he could be vague and get away with it? “If I could do this the normal way, I would.”

“How are you doing it?” Pepper wants to know from inside her hands.

“I’ve got someone I trust helping me out,” Tony says, smiling at them both in what he hopes is a reassuring way. “He knows what he’s doing, don’t worry about me. I’m in good hands.”

Pepper narrows her eyes at him. “Who?” She asks, but she knows too much already.

“It doesn’t matter, it’s not why I came here,” he says, withdrawing a small black device from his pocket. “This is.”

“You can’t go without telling us what to look out for, man,” Happy insists, moving to get in front of him. Tony stops, though he could easily move Hogan should he choose to, knowing things now that make ‘Happy Time’ look like amateur hour. The memory makes him sad. “Please, we haven’t seen you in almost a year, and you’re scaring the hell out of us. Don’t go yet.” There’s desperation in his voice that makes Tony feel wanted.

He sighs, hating the Accords, loathing Ross and his goons for widening the division between him
and his closest friends to satisfy nothing but his thirst for vengeance. “Okay,” he says, “fuck it, alright, I just need something to drink, please. No alcohol, though.”

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Tony is blessed with a call from Ross while he's on his way home around 16:00.

“Shit,” he spits startled by the sight of the man’s cool demeanor on his HUD. “That son of a bitch. Land me, right now, Friday, land me right freaking now!”

“Ensuring clearance, scanning for life forms- “

“We’re over the fucking woods, Friday, just land!”

The forest floor caves beneath his rough landing, throwing him off balance.

“Hello?” he says on the seventh ring, slightly breathless.

“That took quite a while, Stark,” the Secretary observes immediately, and Tony rolls his eyes.

“Sir, the day a man can’t take a shower in his own damn house, is the day-“

“And you sound a little out of breath,” Ross interjects, and he probably knows, Tony thinks with a flip of his injured heart. Luckily, they’ve stopped just short of sticking a tracking device on him to date, but still, Ross is no idiot.

“Uh, well, it makes me a little nervous when you call, considering,” he says, cringing at his own words, but knowing it will boost Ross’s ego, distract him a bit. Tony Stark, made nervous by a simple phone call from him? Masturbatory gold for the power-hungry bastard. “Almost slipped and died in my damn bathroom getting to this, I really hope it’s urgent.”

“Every single call from me is urgent,” Ross threatens.

_Urgent like a bad shit._ “Right,” Tony says instead.

“I’m required by law to inform you of your approaching non-compliance with the new quarterly inspection statute,” Ross explains, and Tony silently mocks him, fake gags at his picture, makes faces at it, “so, here it is. Your certification expires in seven days, leaving you open for an inspection of your facility to occur randomly sometime in the following three months. Do you agree to these terms?”

“Quarterly, geez. Can you remind me what option B is, again?” Tony asks insincerely.

“Indefinite internment,” Ross grits out.

“Ah,” Tony says, smiling sadly, “that’s right. So, I guess I don’t have a choice.”

“Oh, no, there are choices,” Ross suggests. “The Raft is a choice. Putting a tracker on you is a choice.”

“You know what? You ever realize how- how messed up this has gotten?” Tony suddenly spits
angrily, because he’s tired of being railroaded into this corner every single time, sick of having his entire life invaded and molded by these idiot lawmakers who have no idea what the hell is coming, and refuse to listen to his pleas. “This is a pile of steaming bullshit, Ross. I’ve been cool, I’ve been patient, with these fucking Accords, supported them, stood by them because I thought what I was doing was the right thing. And yet here I am, the only one being reamed by them. And almost daily, I feel like, there’s a new rule designed, and I’m only speculating here, but designed specifically to make sure I fail. Not that I’m hiding anything, but, c’mon, that statute was considered semi-annual a month ago, and a guy’s gonna get tired of having storm troopers rifle through his shit every three months.”

“They’re amendments, Stark, you used to be a fan,” Ross says, like it’s enough to justify what Tony feels is their attempt to actively dehumanize him, “totally legal, voted into law through our strict legislative process.”

“Well your priorities are clearly twisted,” Tony says, voice rising as he sees red, and it’s dangerous, he knows it. Ross needs only to become annoyed with him for the unthinkable to happen, but Tony is fucking done. By this time, in three or so days, he’ll be more than equipped to deal with something as trivial as escaping the Raft, and it takes a literal act of congress to imprison Tony Stark. He’s covered. “That’s a lot of time and taxpayer monies you’re dedicating to making sure I don’t get my hands on an unauthorized toaster or two.”

“You’re awfully mouthy today,” Ross observes, and Tony hates him with his entire being, mutes his microphone so he can growl furiously through gritted teeth, entire body tight with unexpressed rage. “You know, I could introduce a motion to have you temporarily detained for minor Accord infractions, instead of these amendments you hate so much. A trial period, if you wish. See? I do give you choices.”

“How considerate of you,” Tony sneers, before rattling off what he knows Ross wants, because he just wants to be done with it; “I agree to the terms and conditions outlined in the Sokovia Accords, section one, chapter three, amendment twenty-seven, paragraph… what are we on now, six? Paragraph fucking six. I understand that should I break any statute therein, that I may be subject to immediate detention and automatically waive my right to representation. Happy now? Your dick nice and hard yet?” It’s his vocal signature. Ross seems to prefer it over his physical signature.

“Charming,” Ross sneers.

“One of my best qualities.”

“I’ll be seeing you soon, Stark, regretful as it is,” Ross continues, deadly promise in his voice, “there’ve been some… anomalies in your surveillance equipment I would like to discuss with you.”

“Sure thing, just try to keep up this time,” Tony grits through clenched teeth, feeling his anger rising, kicking a boulder the size of a large dog and splitting it in two. “Anything else?”

“Keep yourself available. My calls should never ring more than three times,” Ross says, and hangs up.

Tony disengages his helmet and screams long, loud, and frustrated into the empty woods around him, but nothing startles, everything having already been scared away by his shit landing. When he’s done, he collapses to his metal knees with a groan, positively beat, relived that, at least for now it seems, he’s gotten through another call with the Secretary of State successfully, and without jail time.

It’s moments like this when the resentment takes over. He’s sure he wouldn’t be in this situation if he had Steve’s support right now. If other signatures existed on this thing beside Tony's, they would all
be more powerful. And in the end, when the dehumanizing shenanigans started inevitably happening, they all could have fucked off together. Made the decision to do so together. All they had to do was play the game for a little while. They may have even been able to wrangle support from the general population, but they all chose to break trust they hadn’t even earned yet. No, instead Tony’s team abandoned him to deal with this alone. And somehow, they expect him and his actual friends to make everything better for them. Fucking degenerates.

“That guy’s an asshole,” Friday says, and Tony smiles.

“Gaping,” he agrees, “not the biggest I’ve ever met, but Ross is a wide one for sure.”

“We should get home,” Friday reminds him gently. “You have less than twelve hours to prepare for Extremis, and that includes sleep.”

Twelve hours is not a lot of time. He considers calling Peter, but decides against it. The kid deserves a night. “Then I’ll nap now,” Tony says, “Get me home in one piece please.”

Chapter End Notes

Love all my readers. Every single Kudo/Bookmark I get pumps me the fuck up, and I figuratively explode with excitement while reading comments! So thanks you guys, you’re making life pretty awesome right now.
Chapter 5

E-day starts at noon on Saturday. It’s 11:30. Peter’s been there helping Tony since eight in the morning, having been unable to sleep at all, anyway. And he’s glad he showed up early, because Tony ended up needing a lot of help, having procrastinated doing something the day before.

Rolling the stool he’s sitting on back and forth, arms crossed atop the gurney, chin resting on them, Peter stares up at the syringes. All six sit vertically in their little stand, locked within the supply cabinet, numbered and labeled in several areas. Following the first injection (labeled ‘endocrine, exocrine’), there are five auxiliary injections, each altering one or two specific systems in Tony’s body, Peter knows. ‘Immune’, ‘Digestive/renal’, ‘muscular/skeletal/integumentary’, ‘respiratory/cardiovascular’, and finally, ‘central nervous system’ all follow the first injection at six hour intervals. Just bonkers.

For days, he’s listened intently to Tony explain every aspect of the process, poured over schematics and notes, absorbing all the information he could about Extremis. Now, with this liquid fate glowing faintly in front of him, he’s starting to feel uncertain again.

“Every six hours,” Peter repeats, taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly. Tony’s underground workshop is suddenly stifling. Maybe Tony’s feeling the same, maybe it’s why he’s clad in nothing more than a black tank-top and shorts instead of his customary workshop uniform of jeans and long sleeves.

“On the button,” Tony says. Peter can see him through the open hatch of the jet. He’s got a section of the floor pulled up and he’s halfway inside it, the one concealing the heart of the spacecraft, the new warp core Tony has been working on for months. It glows down there brilliantly, illuminating Tony’s grinning face with pulsing light as he watches numbers fly across the screen of a diagnostic machine he’s hooked to it. Peter has known for quite a while that the craft is supposed to achieve space travel, but never could he have predicted the mission it’s destined to go on.

“Boy, the Guardians are gonna love this.” Tony huffs a small laugh, and shakes his head, as though in awe of his achievement, "Tesseract-enhanced propulsion system, thank SHEILD and all their meddling for the data I used to fabricate it. Eliminates the time penalty incurred with hypertravel, so I won’t come back to an Earth under a new ice age or something, because, as you know, time is influenced by speed. The Guardians’ fuel sources rely on carbon-based matter, and for them, hypertravel requires access to a series of quantum gates that propel them forward. This will achieve that totally independent of those booster portals. According to my buddy Rocket, if it works, it’ll be the fastest shit this side of the galaxy. I’m gonna bring them one. Absolutely no one can get their hands on it.” He unhooks the diagnostic machine, smirking with satisfaction at the numbers displayed.

“Mr. Stark, I know you don’t want to think about it, but this thing starts in twenty minutes,” Peter says, from the infirmary area, a rough setup specifically for today consisting of a large gurney on wheels, a cabinet stocked full of supplies, a tiny rolling stool, and an I.V. tower, all away from anything else that could potentially obstruct a desperate path. “You need to at least come get your I.V. put in.”

“Frigin’ Parker, M.D., should have his own show on Lifetime, I swear…” Tony grumbles, setting the machine aside and twisting a bolt back into place with a wrench. The reactor hums happily, glows solid now, and Tony covers the exposed core with a regular looking titanium floor tile, using a drill to secure thick screws back in place with quick mechanical whines.
“You’re actually sucking the moisture out of the room through osmosis with how dehydrated you are,” Peter says, washing his hands and drying them before pulling on latex gloves, wondering how this became part of his life, “and all the fun, with your bad attitude.”

“Sorry, I’m not fond of being attached to something via a tube, or a wire, or a series of both,” Tony says, depositing orange safety glasses on a table and eyeing the drip pole and saline bag with a microscopic sneer as he saunters over to the area, like this is no big deal at all.

“Well, get used to it,” Peter says, ripping supplies out of sterile packaging and valuing the fact that he knows how to do this stuff now, knows how to save a life, “because that’s going to be your reality for a few days at least.”

“Thrilling,” Tony says flatly, taking a seat on the gurney, and Peter can see him gnawing his cheek and avoiding eye contact.

“Hand or arm?” he asks, brandishing an alcohol pad at him.

“Hand. Easier to move around, just put a glove over it and go,” Tony says stiffly, offers his right hand and looks at the floor.

Peter’s stomach does a little flip and he stares momentarily, because he’s never touched Tony Stark’s hand before, they’ve always just used his arm to practice. Scars cover it, pale ghosts of tiny cuts and burns, and two of the fingers are a tad crooked, as though they were smashed or broken at some point. An engineer’s hand. Peter’s will never look like this, no matter how much he abuses and injurs them through his own engineering pursuit.

Peter takes it, tourniquets the arm, finds the vein he wants in seconds, as he can practically see them and their blood flow right through Tony’s skin, and swabs the spot. The needle enters unhindered, the catheter takes smoothly, and Peter is taping down a successful I.V. in no time. “See, that wasn’t so scary,” Peter mocks him, “the receptionist has stickers for you on the way out.”

“Who’s the one who still sees the pediatrician when he gets sicky-icky?” Tony asks the floor with dry mirth, “oh, that’s right, that’s you, isn’t it?”

Peter smiles as he attaches Tony to the saline tube and starts the drip. “Last time I was there, they had Spider-Man stickers.”

“Hah!” Tony laughs, and finally looks at Peter, happily incredulous. “You’re up to merchandising status, congratulations. That’s pretty cool.” He truly does seem enthused about it.

“It was kind of surreal,” Peter says, removing his gloves and disposing of them and all the other garbage into an impenetrable biobag. “I was a cartoon, and I was giving a thumbs-up. Is, uh, is that a thing I do?”

A clock pops up as a hologram in front of them, reading 11:55.

“Boss…” Friday says, any further instruction implied in her tone. Peter’s stomach flips over. Go time.

Tony heaves a deep, shuddering breath, before meeting Peter’s eyes with intense study. “This is it,” he says, nodding to all the medical crap lying around for emphasis, “you can still back out, Peter. No hard feelings.”

“Just stop,” Peter says, removing the first blue syringe (endocrine/exocrine) from its stand, and looking through the translucent liquid at Tony, “this is going to save your life.”
“Going to do a little more than just that,” Tony says, and he’s grimacing like he’s not quite content with Peter’s response. “That one you hold there is going to reshape my entire hormone highway, make it hospitable for Extremis to travel and utilize for the rest of the process. I’m essentially upgrading my hardware so I can introduce more powerful software later. This is step one of that.”

“Side effects should be mild,” Friday offers helpfully, data and schematics popping up around them as very colorful, animated holograms. “Mood swings, angry outbursts, you may experience some fatigue, nausea and minor pain.”

“Sounds like a normal day to me,” Tony says wearily, flipping all the info away with a trained motion. “If anything happens to me, which I truly don’t expect, so don’t get scared or anything, you’ll still have Friday. She’s programmed a series of timers to go off when I need each injection. They’re labeled extremely clearly.”

“Got it,” Peter says, removing the caps on both the plunger and the needle, “and these all go in the line?”

“Yup,” Tony says, watching the clock, which reads 11:58:39. Peter catches him close his eyes and take a couple of enormous breaths, noting his heart rate, and how dangerously high it’s getting. “Friday, do a full biological scan, keep track of all changes, no matter how subtle, log all of it. I want some before and after pictures.”

“On it, Boss,” Friday replies.

A few more huge breaths. “You ready?” He asks Peter with high brows. There’s fear in his eyes.

“As ever,” Peter says, nodding and smiling reassuringly at Tony. “It’s, uh… it’s gonna be okay, Mr. Stark.” He really tries hard to make it not sound like a question. How does one comfort Tony Stark?

“Let’s hope,” Tony says, and then smiles sadly as if a fond memory just struck him. “Light me up.”

Peter inserts it into the port without hesitation, and it engulfs the line in blue light as it travels slowly into Tony’s hand. “Whoa,” Tony says, wincing with a hiss, observing his vein as it lights up under the skin, “that burns like acid. Wow.”

It sort of looks like electricity crackling through his arm, and Peter watches it until it fades away. “Cool.”

“I guess,” Tony says, and he’s so tense, like he’s anticipating a car crash, one leg bouncing nervously.

“Second injection to be administered at 1800,” Friday says, and a new timer pops up, counting down from six hours. “Good luck, Boss.”

“What do we do now?” Peter asks. Tony shrugs.

“We wait,” he says.

Seconds later, a call comes in, and Peter has never seen anything like it. Alien symbols pop up in a purple hologram, static crackling, a red box with what looks like a warning in geometric gibberish flashes rhythmically. Peter looks uncertainly at Tony, but all his anxiety dissipates when he sees that he’s smiling.

“Nice of them, to check up on me,” he mutters, looking happily surprised, and swipes his hand across the hologram to reveal not some crazy alien, but a regular-looking man with a short beard and
a big, warm smile. “Star-Lord, is that excess fuel I smell, or are you just happy to see me?”

“Tony! Glad to see you’re still alive, you glorious bastard, you get that first injection-” Quill starts, and then spots Peter, and his whole face lights up with excitement as he points, “Hey! Is that the spider-guy?”

Peter gives a half smile, awkward and a little shocked, because he didn’t expect to meet the Guardians like this. “He-hy, I’m, I’m Peter,” he tries his best, gives a little wave.

“Dude, me too!” Quill says touching his armored chest with a grin, and Peter lets out a huffing laugh. “I heard you can climb up walls and stuff, man, that’s sweet.”

“Been talking shit about you,” Tony says with a smirk at Peter’s searching glance. “Can’t help it.”

“Good shit, don’t worry, all good shit,” Quill says, and then, “hey, Rocket, come check it out!”

Rocket? Tony’s mentioned him, some awesome tech genius who helped him design the new spaceship currently taking up half the invisible room.

A huge groan rumbles from behind Quill. “What now? I swear, if you ask me to kill another ‘horrifying’ bug for you, I might have to murder you in your sleep, then you really won’t have to worry about bugs at all, will you, you huge, hairless baby? Let it be a bug, one more time, Quill.”

“It… it’s got something to do with a bug… er, arachnid,” Quill says, and when Peter sees a tiny raccoon face pop up from under the floor, he can’t help himself.

“No, don’t- “ Tony starts, but Peter is already blowing it.

“Whoa, you guys have a pet raccoon?” He says stupidly, and knows immediately he’s made a mistake when both Tony and Quill take in nervous breaths, and the raccoon's face goes from cute, curious and furry, to positively rabid. So, this is Rocket. A talking raccoon. Peter lets go of everything he thought he knew, and looks on, embarrassed.

“Rocket, don’t- “ Quill starts.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t – “

“Did that little pasty shit just call me pet?” Rocket thunders, climbing out of the floor and pushing Quill aside, filling the screen with an oil-covered, furry, enraged face flashing pearly white fangs. “Alright, that’s strike three! I’ll floss my teeth with your tendons, you, you, tiny, presumptuous little-“

“Rocket, enough! That’s Spider-Man,” Quill says, putting a hand on his tiny shoulder, and pulling him back down while he claws toward the screen, “calm the hell down, he didn’t know.”

"How did I get to strike three already...?" Peter wonders, aloud.

“Hey, that’s my bad, Rocket,” Tony says with a sigh, patting Peter on the back reassuringly, “kid didn’t know, give him a break. I should have warned him. Sorry, I thought of you as an engineer first.”

“Oh, hey Stark,” Rocket puts his teeth away and smiles when he spots Tony. “You’re all good, not your fault the kid’s an obvious moron.”

“Rocket, enough, dammit, just try for once not to make us all look completely freaking nuts, would
"Quill hisses, then turns to Peter with an apologetic smile. “We’ve been stuck in the same small space together for months, kid, don’t take it personally. Strike one was Drax, this morning, leaving a dump the size of a quasar inside the ship instead of out, so we’ve been smelling his shit all day, and I think two... what was two? Oh, it was me, I kicked him in the uh, in the head earlier, on accident, he popped out of the floor right as I was stepping over the hole, and oh no, whamo. Yeah.”

"I've decided; if I'm having a shit day, everyone has a shit day, right with me," Rocket clarifies for the people in the back, poking himself in the chest with a thumb, "maybe then, I'll stop having so many shit days, eh?"

Peter wrings his hands bashfully, trying not to resent Tony for not warning him. How was he supposed to know? “That was ignorant of me, I’m sorry. My name’s Peter, it’s nice to meet you.”

“You got a lot to learn about the universe, ya pink munchkin,” Rocket scolds with a growl, but crosses his little raccoon arms, and looks Peter up and down anyway, his sneer revealing some more daunting teeth. “I’m Rocket. I heard you got skills.”

Peter smiles and forgets all about Extremis.

They talk for a while. Peter discovers there's five Guardians, Quill and Rocket, then Drax the Destroyer, Groot, a plant-based humanoid with a breathtakingly limited vocabulary, and Gamora, the former mercenary. Though, it's only Quill and Rocket in the ship right then, keeping watch while the others scavenge for scraps on a nearly dead planet. Which apparently is what they've been doing for a number of Earth-months now. Those horrible facts aside, Peter feels like one of his child-hood cartoons has come alive and sucked him in. He's literally meeting the freaking Ninja Turtles right now or something, there's nothing comparable. It's so exciting.

Until Tony’s skin starts taking on a lighter hue, about a half hour later, and it becomes clear they have other things to focus on, things not as fun or exciting.

“Looking a little pale there, man,” Quill says to Tony, and smiles kindly at him, “wish there was something we could do from here.”

“Just stay alive, try not to kill each other,” Tony says, voice getting fainter, strained, and Peter can see the sweat beading on his pale skin, “gotta go, sorry, tell the others we said ‘hi’.”


The line goes dead, and Tony groans quietly. Peter sees it happening before he even begins to lift himself up, and rushes to catch him with a hand under one sweaty armpit, just as his knees fail him completely. “Whoa, damn,” Tony croaks breathlessly, grabbing hold of Peter’s arm, eyes wide and scared.

“What do you need?” Peter asks, and Tony nods toward the restroom.

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the closet behind them, and Peter wets one lightly with cool water and forces it into one of Tony’s hands. He leaves the bathroom, thankful to be away from the horrible noise, and feeling slightly guilty about it.

The kitchenette is a safe space, and Peter coughs and gags dryly into the sink, thankful the moment of weakness is short lived. That he’s lacking an audience. Poor Tony. He locates a cup and fills it with ice water, pausing only a moment to convince himself to bravely go back with a huge steadying breath. He can do this.

Tony is graciously done by the time Peter returns with the water, leaning his forehead against the lid, one shaking hand using the washcloth to wipe blood and bile from his mouth and nose with disgusted scoffs. The automatic flusher takes away the gore, and Tony collapses back against the wall, panting, pale and soaked in sweat.

“Hey,” Peter says softly, and Tony looks up at him as he goes to hand him the water, “cold water, drink up.”

Tony glances from the water, to Peter’s face, to the washcloth in his hand probably four times, before, to Peter’s abject horror, bursting into tears.

“Fuck,” he whimpers through his sobs, looking away from Peter who can only stand there and watch helplessly. “Fruh- Fruh- Friday?”

“Mood swings, Boss,” Friday reminds him with pity in her voice.

“R-right,” Tony says, sniffling, and breaking down into one shaking hand, “what a- a bitch.”

Peter doesn’t know what Tony wants him to do. He knows what Tony probably thinks he wants, which is crushing solitude, but what Tony desires isn’t always necessarily what’s good for him. So, he decides to spare him the decision and sits on the floor next to him, ready for whatever. “I’ve got this, when you need it,” he says about the water, and smiles reassuringly when Tony looks over at him with a wet face, despite Peter’s own desire to cry right along with him.

“I’m sorry, Peter,” he says, and he’s calmed down some, but a sob is still sneaking out here and there. He takes the water and glowers miserably into it, “this isn’t something you should be seeing.”

“No time for regret, so stop,” Peter says sternly, as Tony takes a swig and swishes it around, before spitting pink into the toilet, gasping with relief, “I don’t regret saying ‘yes’, so don’t you dare regret asking me.”

“Don’t you tell me how to fucking feel-,” Tony starts angrily, eyes narrowing at Peter dangerously. It’s scary when Tony yells, and Peter’s only heard it a handful of times, but the ferocity of it, how his voice dips into a lower pitch, and takes on a growling undertone, frightens Peter still. Tony catches himself with a visual moment of horror, and a shake of his head, and looks up. “Friday, lock down code two, Alpha, Tango, three, India, Mike, authorized user, Parker, Peter. Confirm.”

“Confirmed. Code accepted. Registering Parker, Peter as primary authority,” Friday responds, and Peter looks all around, confused.

“What did you just do?” he asks Tony, who seems to be struggling to control a fresh wave of tears, managing to keep himself from displaying his imagined agony vocally.

“Locked- locked down the armor, all weapons, emotions too compromised, dangerous,” Tony forces out. “You’re the gov- governing authority. Cheers.”
“What does that mean?” Peter asks, wondering what else he will be responsible for by the end of the night.

“It means, genius, that when this nightmare is finally over, only you can override the goddamn lockdown,” Tony snaps, and immediately scoffs at himself, hiding away in his crossed arms and raised knees. “Dammit, I’m sorry.” He’s squeezing his own biceps so tightly, Peter’s afraid he might hurt himself.

“Okay, uh, what is a good distraction? What usually calms you down?” Peter asks, mind working furiously to escape the grip of his stress.

“Drinking,” Tony growls.

“Not an option, what else?” Peter insists.

“Fuck you, I know that, you’re the one who asked, you parentless pustule.”

“What else, Mr. Stark, you huge jerk,” Peter demands, knowing better than to feel insulted, wanting so badly to just put a hand on this suffering man’s shaking back. At this point, though, Peter’s not sure it wouldn’t end in Tony accidentally throwing a punch or two. Though Peter could easily handle it, he doesn’t want Tony dwelling on the guilt of having attacked him.


“What else?”

“I used to like fucking the absolute shit out of hot blondes with huge tits,” Tony says bluntly, and laughs into his arm.

“Dude,” Peter says, embarrassed.

“Get me to the jet,” Tony finally says, using his I.V. pole to pull himself up, “I like to build shit, Peter. Jesus Christ on a Fischer Price pogo stick, do I have to spell everything out for you, pre-K?”

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It’s 17:00, and Tony is exhausted from puking and crying and just feeling like the world’s most pathetic drunken dumped prom date imaginable. Thankfully, the… fits are becoming rarer and shorter as hour six approaches, and Extremis finishes up step one. Working on the jet offers a mild reprieve, but the nausea threatens to cripple him at every turn, until the unavoidable purging reappears to torment him, with fruitless results. The twenty minutes or so of relief that follows just isn’t enough before the wretched cycle starts all over again.

Peter has been a saint, getting everything he needs, talking to him and absorbing the unpredictable bouts of pissyness Tony’s ashamed to admit he’s had zero control over. Curses spill from him like he has a syndrome.

Around 15:45 Tony got violent, descending into a shouting rage, ripping his I.V. right out, and using the pole to smash a television, not even sure about what triggered him. Peter webbed his hands to the wall, listening and watching with a straight face as Tony viciously slung insults at him like stones.
Until, of course, the inevitable tears started up, and he was permitted to have his hands back after promising not to hurt himself again. His right hand was bleeding, so they had to bandage it and use the left one for the new line. Tony sulked as Peter put it in for him. The apologies he offered felt invalid, despite Peter accepting them all.

What an embarrassing thing this is all proving to be. And that was only shot one. And 18:00 is just around the corner. Tony doesn’t even want the low down on the side effects the new injections will torture him with, so he distracted himself with the intricacies of interstellar travel, running tests on the jets space debris detection and defense system.

“It’s almost that time,” Peter says from the couch inside the jet, where he’s bent over his web-shooters, a tiny screw driver spinning with quick little flicks of his fingers, "you should eat something,"

An hour ago, Tony would have told Peter that he could go eat a dick. Now, he’s relieved to feel not anger, but warmth and companionship, because he’s not alone in this. There’s someone here to force him to do the right thing, even when he doesn’t want to. He looks over at Peter, just takes him in for a second while the kid isn't paying attention, appreciates him, looks away before he's caught. “Hey, I don’t feel like telling you to go eat a dick anymore,” he says, grinning, and feeling emotionally… composed for the first time in a while.

Peter snorts a laugh. “Baby steps,” he says, placing his work down on the table and getting up to stretch. “Next step: food. Shower too. No offense, Mr. Stark, but you’re rank.”

“It’s an aroma, and it’s called 'success','” Tony says, smiling, knowing he smells like a sewer, or maybe a locker room, from all the sweat his battered hormones nearly drowned him in.

“Oh, god, well, it’s successfully making me sick,” Peter says, forcing a false gagging noise that makes Tony snicker, “please, get rid of it, before I’m the one who’s puking, Seriously, I can smell it like a dog can, so please, please take a shower.”

“Right, right, super-duper smelling senses,” Tony says, wiping oil from his arms and hands, careful to avoid jostling the catheter Peter had taped down extra tight. “You know, I used to know a guy who wore cologne that smelled worse than this. He’s in prison. Unrelated incident.”

“Eww,” Peter says, shaking his head, and leaving the jet, “gross. Take a shower. I’m gonna go grab a pizza.”

“Pizza, bomb, I’ll be here,” Tony says, and hopes to whatever that Peter doesn’t think less of him over that little display, sobbing and shouting like he was, completely lost in himself, his own body controlling him, moving him like a puppet. He shoves the memory aside with a deep sigh, watches Peter drive from the secret lot outside the compound in his aunt’s green Honda Civic, the surveillance hologram following Tony as he heads to the washroom. Regret isn’t something he has time to entertain, he must remember that.

He showers quickly, left hand hanging outside the door, practicing his breathing steps, because sometimes it does come back. That fucking disgusting goat trough full of murky, questionable water howls at him from time to time in there. Water is okay to drink, it’s fine to be around, lakes and puddles aren't scary, and rain is simply rain. But god help him if it gets up his nose, or covers more than seventy percent of his face at a time. It's just not worth the risk, no matter how alluring the heat is. No matter how much he used to actually enjoy taking showers. With Pepper, he enjoyed taking showers again, her strength, a barrier against it, and she always shared it with him. Now it's up to Tony to deal with all on his own. There's no resentment, just cold, brutal fact. Tony shivers in the steam.
Peter returns with a large meat-lover’s pizza at 17:35, and Tony is feeling better than ever, eating four entire slices, and enjoying the taste for the first time in months. He knows he’s riding on nothing more than a hormone high and that soon enough, he’ll be feeling real shitty when his body realizes it once again won’t be receiving its daily sacrificial offering of alcohol. But he enjoys it all the same. The food, Peter’s company, the renewed hope brought upon him with their initial success, it’s too good.

“Next dose is going to do a couple things,” Tony elaborates, picking a loose pepperoni off the pizza box and tossing it in his mouth, enjoying the slightly burnt edges, “one; it’ll prime my immune system so my body doesn’t try to reject the more physical changes I’m going to ask it to perform. Two; all my stem cells are going to be completely refurbished and upgraded, making them swiftly reactionary, a.k.a., I’ll be able to regrow stuff, albeit, slowly. And they have a critical role to play in this process as well, aiding the remainder of the initial alterations. Three; it’s going to completely replace my bone marrow with something a little more… efficient.”

“Replace?” Peter repeats around a bite of crust. “Right, with that new, uh, second skin vibranium infusion. So, you did go ahead with the bone hollows, then?”

“I know it sounds weird,” Tony says with a chuckle, “trust me, I think about it sometimes, and my bones ache with the weirdness, but do you understand what it’s going to allow me to do?”

“It said… it said ‘complete neural integration with the armor’, or something along those lines,” Peter says, brow furrowing as he remembers and Tony nods encouragingly, “so, basically, you’ll be able to move the armor simply by thinking it, like you do normally with your arms and legs.”

“Ding, ding, ding, we got a winner,” Tony says, grinning foolishly, immensely proud of how smart Peter is, “It’s going to merge my Central Nervous System with the armor when activated. If initial analysis can be trusted, this direct integration should improve armor reaction speed by an estimated twenty-one percent, but basic mobility is a fraction of what the armor can do, isn’t it?”

“Wait, so- **wow**, so, you’re saying rockets, repulsors, flight speed, Peter lists off, becoming gradually more visibly awestruck with each realization, “are we really talking scanners and targeting systems and bio-containment environment, pressure controls, weaponry, fight analysis, radio comms, all that with your **mind**?”

“That’s the plan,” Tony says, taking a swig of water, not coffee, not beer, though he craves both something awful, “but I don’t expect to be able to literally fire mind-bullets right out the gate, it’s going to involve some intense training to get there. It’s one of the reasons this is so rushed, we’ve simply run out of time. And since the Guardians lost track of Thanos last week, it’s even more dire we get a move on. I don’t have the time to Mr. Miyagi this shit and wax a car for two months, I gotta get this going, it’s do or die at this point.”

“Boss, it’s time,” Friday says, and Tony’s heart leaps into his throat, because he’s felt better this last half hour than he has in years. Everything good ends too soon for him.

“Alright,” Peter says, and Tony can’t help but notice his restlessness, the way he’s fidgeting with the strings on his shorts, how he only ate a slice and a half of pizza, despite his outlandish metabolism. “Cool, let’s do this.”

“You okay?” Tony asks, knowing the correct answer, and doubting Peter will give it to him, because Tony’s just been a stunning influence on the kid, hasn’t he?

“Yeah, man, I’m great,” he replies, waving off Tony’s concerns, and heading to the sink to wash his hands.
“Nope, not buying it, talk to me,” Tony insists, planting ass on the gurney, forgetting his own uncertainties in light of Peter’s visible stress, “seriously, you promised you’d talk, so spill.”

Peter sighs, dries his hands and looks at the floor, avoiding Tony’s searching gaze, “I just… it’s hard to watch you suffer, Mr. Stark, that’s all.”

“And it’s making you feel weak,” Tony completes for him, and Peter just looks deeper into the floor. “Don’t mistake empathy for weakness, Peter, that’s how you become an uncaring asshole, and nobody likes those, trust me.”

“No, I should be stronger than this,” Peter says, clenching a fist, and Tony’s gut aches with guilt, because he knows first-hand what it’s like to stand by helplessly and watch someone suffer, “I shouldn’t be so scared.”

“Why not?” Tony pokes with a kind smile and a curious tilt of his head.

“Well, I,” Peter starts, and then looks around with exasperation, hands flopping against his sides, “I don’t know, man, this isn’t about me, why the hell am I scared? I’m not even the one going through it.”

“So?” Tony says, and Peter looks at him with a dreary face, “You think I see your role in this as some walk in the park, or something? Absolutely not, your job is ten times harder than mine, Peter. All I have to do is wait and experience a little discomfort, and at the end of it all, I get a stupid get-out-of-jail-free card I probably don’t even deserve. You’re doing footwork, monitoring, nursing, and you’re babysitting one of the world’s most notoriously irresponsible people. On top of that, you must possess the mental and testicular fucking fortitude to watch me hurt. That’s not easy work. Totally normal to be scared, Pete, it doesn’t make you weak, if anything, it makes you aware and intelligent and empathetic, which is what this world lacks; empathy. Don’t downplay what you’re doing by comparing it to my pain, it’s just pain, we’re well acquainted.”

As Tony speaks he can see Peter’s expression become gradually more relaxed, stress lines fading away in favor of determination. When his little motivational monologue is over, Peter says nothing, just grabs the next dose, and sits in front of him on the little stool with wheels. “What’s this one going to do to you?” he finally asks, uncapping it.

“It might give me a fever,” Tony says, and perhaps he’s downplaying it, he doesn’t really know, “maybe even mimic an allergic reaction, but it shouldn’t threaten my life. I’ll be honest, though, I don’t expect the bone marrow replacement to be pleasant.”

“I suggest a combination of Tylenol and an NSAID to combat the fever. It shouldn’t give you much trouble, but better safe than sorry, I always say, when it comes to you,” Friday advises, and Tony’s popping pills before she can even finish her sentence.

“Sugar pills compared to what I’ve had,” Tony says with a grimace after swallowing them all down expertly, “I’ll miss the good stuff.”

“It’s not pain we’re trying to control here, Boss,” Friday reminds him. “Twenty seconds…”

Putting a hand on Peter’s shoulder, Tony shakes him slightly, smiles at him. Feels much more relaxed about this second dose because he must be that way for Peter. “Ready if you are.”

Peter nods at him, and it encourages Tony, because he does look ready. “Let’s do it.”

The second dose is much like the first, in that it feels like either pure ice or raging fire is being pushed into him. Extremis acts beautifully, dissipating throughout his arm like a lightning strike, as it should.
Tony bites his lip through the momentary pain.

“Great, that’s done, back to work,” Tony says with false cheer, trying to ignore the way a small, red patch is already creeping its way up his hand, originating from the catheter. Looks like this dose is willing to spare not a second, so neither should he. “C’mon, Pete, I’m gonna give you a crash course on how to fly this thing.”

Over the next hour, Tony feels increasingly terrible, as he had with the first injection, but packaged within is a whole new set of symptoms. The rash spreads up his arm, across his torso, and soon enough the material of his top becomes like steel wool against it, and he has to remove it with a grumbled apology to Peter, who just shrugs and looks concerned.

“Does it itch?” Peter asks, eyeballing Tony’s left side and armpit with repelled sympathy. It spread in large, painful raised splotches, and Tony’s got his arm up, currently observing it in the jets bathroom mirror with his own expression of revulsion.

“No, but it burns. Not sure which sensation I would prefer,” Tony says, lightly touching one, and wincing at the feeling. “It’s like a bad sunburn or something. I can’t really describe it. It just sucks.”

“Your body is creating a new immune system, Boss,” Friday says, like it’s something that happens at least once a month somewhere, “the old one is fighting back, naturally.”

“Well tell it to stop,” Tony says, groaning when he finds another growing splotch under his right arm. “See, body? This is why you’re getting an upgrade. You don’t know what’s good for you.”

“Maybe you should go lie down,” Peter says, concern in his voice.

“There’s no time,” Tony locates some aloe infusion in the medicine cabinet, an invention of his and Bruce’s. It’s the strongest topical painkiller in the world. “I’ve wasted enough time being a drunk, and there’s still so much to do.”

“Whatever,” Peter says, and Tony can see him shaking his head in the mirror, “but as soon as you pass out, it’s happening, whether you want it or not.”

“Threaten all you like, Parker,” Tony says, grimacing at the cool feeling of the infusion against his burning skin, “passing out is for swooning women in the twenties.”

Fifteen minutes later, as he’s working on calibrating the jets thrusters, Tony finally starts feeling the fever, but he never expected it to hit him quite like it does. In less than thirty seconds, his temperature spikes to miserable levels, and then he’s eating his words, and the floor, completely without warning as his world closes in around him.
Peter’s in the pisser when he hears Tony groan softly and then the loud *thump* of him collapsing, despite the closed door.

“Crap,” he breathes, finishing quickly and doing up his pants, angry with himself for his timing, “Friday, what’s happened?”

“Tony’s fever just spiked to 103.2, and it’s still climbing,” Friday informs him as he rushes through washing his hands, “it hit him too fast, his body didn’t even have time to adapt before it knocked him out cold.”

“Idiot.” Peter hisses. It’s difficult to ignore the worry in Friday’s usually stoic, if not snappy, voice. “You said it’s rising?” He leaves the restroom and locates Tony lying sprawled on his stomach beneath the jets massive engines, body covered in rashes and sweat. “How hot can he get before it starts killing Extremis?” He rushes over and scoops Tony gingerly into his arms, ignoring the slick goop he slathered all over himself earlier. The I.V. lies on the floor, alongside drops of Tony’s blood, torn out during his fall. *Dammit, Mr. Stark.*

“A fever over 107 will be capable of contending with Extremis,” Friday says while Peter places Tony’s shivering, pale form on the couch. The man’s face is scrunched with distress, parted lips dragging air in around a crackling, audible resistance. Peter pauses, watches him, disturbed. “Temperature at 103.5, I would suggest beginning mitigation procedures immediately. Extremis won’t be the only casualty of a fever that high.” Words soaked with warning.

“Right,” Peter says, swallowing nausea. *Deep breaths, deep breaths. It’s all up to me, but remember to freaking breathe, okay?*

“Engaging fans,” Friday says, and cool air flows over them from the vents above. Tony shivers. Snapping into action, Peter webs a two-gallon basin to himself from a distant shelf, catching it skillfully. Then, two gallons of cold water out of the fridge in the kitchenette, ice from the freezer, towels, towels, towels, until he’s sick of them. It’s simply faster than walking everywhere. Cabinets slam open and objects fly at him like he’s some kind of telepath.

Tony moans and moves his head to one side, but his eyes stay closed. Probably better for him, Peter thinks as he fills the basin with cool water and ice. Being conscious for this type of fever would be hell. “How did it get so high?” Peter inquires Friday, letting a few washcloths soak for a moment, before wringing one out as much as possible. “All analysis pointed to a low-grade fever.”

“Unfortunately, his alcohol dependence is exacerbating it,” Friday says, and Peter groans at the reminder, “he’s experiencing some strong withdrawal symptoms at the moment, as it’s been almost forty-eight hours since his last drink. The good news is, Extremis is fighting it and will speed up his recovery significantly, though it’s being forced to run very hot to do so. He should be detoxed within the next two hours, if what I’m sensing is correct.”

“Wow, that’s incredible.” Peter intends to address that later. From the sound of it, Tony didn’t have his finale last night. He drapes one of the cloths slowly over Tony’s upper thigh, the artery there being the swiftest at distributing the coolness throughout his body. Tony moans and tries to jerk his
leg away, but Peter gently catches his ankle. Confused brown eyes crack open just a bit.

“What the…” Tony slurs, reaching for the offensive item on his leg, feeling the wet and grimacing.

“It’s alright, calm down, you have a really high fever,” Peter explains as steadily as possible, getting another cloth ready, wringing it tight to avoid drips. His hands are shaking as he folds it into sections.

“Christ, it’s so cold,” Tony grits out through chattering teeth, hugging his chest and curling slightly in just enough so Peter can still place the folded cloth over his neck. Tony hisses, a shiver wracks his whole body. “Fuck.”

“I know, I know, I’m sorry. It’s- it’s gonna be okay,” Peter assures him, but he can feel the heat radiating off Tony’s body, can actually see his entire form pulsing microscopically with each beat of his pounding heart. Convincing himself his own words are true might be more difficult than convincing Tony.

“Gimme one of those,” Tony whispers, barely coherent if not for super hearing, and Peter wrings another cloth out and hands it to him. Shivers abated, for the moment at least, Tony wipes the cloth slowly around his sweaty forehead and face, across his cracked lips, “so damn hot…”

“Here,” Peter removes both the cloths and throws them back into the ice water, replacing them with freshly chilled ones, smiling slightly when Tony sighs. The ‘thwip’ of Peter’s web shooter makes Tony flinch, but he accepts the chilled bottled water Peter was retrieving all the same. “Drink, it’ll help cool you down.”

Tony does, a bit greedily, sitting up only a little and letting it leak down his chin and onto his splotchy, welted chest while he gulps. Then, the shivers are back, and Peter wants to match the groan of frustration Tony releases as he twists in agony, tossing away the empty bottle behind the couch angrily. Victories are always short lived in Peter’s world. “Am I ru-running too hot for a damn thin sheet?” Tony wonders through clenched teeth, curling into himself for warmth his body has convinced him he needs.

“Your fever is unstable, making you hotter won’t help. C’mon, you’re supposed to be a genius or something,” Peter says, and a hologram containing Tony’s vitals appears beside him courtesy of Friday. It says 104.1. “Geez, I don’t even know how you’re not unconscious right now, Mr. Stark.”

“Wish I was. Extremis is probably fighting it,” Tony gasps, glaring at the image through one watering eye, but he doesn’t seem capable of focusing on it the way he’s blinking. “Can’t see straight, this sucks. Friday?”

“Peter’s efforts are saving your life, Boss,” Friday says, and Peter’s heart swells with pride, cheeks flushing. Is he really doing this? “Your body temperature would be at 105.7 right now without his swift intervention. And it looks to be slowing down. At this rate, it will stabilize at 104.3, and should decline from there by at least one degree per hour.”

“You d-don’t say.” Tony huffs an impressed chuckle, and gives Peter a smile, and though it’s dreary with suffering, it’s probably the most genuine smile he’s ever glimpsed on the other man’s face. “Goddamn, Parker M.D., putting that d-d-doctorate to use.” Tony shakes his head in disbelief, like he’s beyond impressed. “You’re the shit, Pete, wow.”

“Nah,” Peter says, outwardly composed, but internally, he’s so proud of himself he can barely contain it, “I’m just some useless sixteen-year-old kid, right?”

“Bullshit, who told you th-that?” Tony asks insincerely, playfully, but his shuddering is returning
again, his smile is disappearing.

“Just some guy who’s not as smart as he thinks he is,” Peter says, and Tony chuckles ruefully at this. It transforms almost immediately into a groan.

“What time is it?” he asks, turning slightly to lie flat on his back with a long miserable growl. “Damn, I’m still covered in that rash, aren’t I?”

“Yes, and you’re getting that gunk all over your enormously expensive genuine leather sectional,” Friday adds, “and it is quarter ‘til eight, by the way.”

It’s shocking to hear a small whine come from Tony Stark, but it does, clearly distressed by the progress of time, or lack thereof. He closes his eyes and snarls around gritted teeth, grabs the side of the couch puncturing the leather with one of his fingernails, he’s gripping it so hard. “Not- not good enough,” he hisses, moving slowly, deliberately, as though he’s trying to stretch out a soreness he hasn’t spoken about. It looks miserable.

Peter hesitates only a moment before he forces Tony’s quivering hand away from the couch and into one of his own, squeezing it, just doing it, because he knows Tony would never ask or reach for it himself. To his surprise, Tony doesn’t yank it away, doesn’t get angry, just lets out a small sound Peter can’t identify and squeezes back, hard. “Hey, it’s alright.” Peter sits on the floor with his left side against the couch, sure Tony doesn’t want him hovering like he is, “just a few more hours,” he says tiredly.

“Fever stabilized,” Friday informs them after a moment, and Peter sighs with relief just as Tony groans his. “Mitigation no longer necessary. Good job, both of you.”

“Sh-Sh-Sh-Sh-Sheet,” Tony says, shivering so hard it almost resembles convulsions.

There’s some difficulty in extracting his hand from Tony’s, but eventually the man relents, and Peter removes the damp washcloths. Sitting at the end of the couch, there’s a tower of thin, black sheets folded up, and Peter shuffles one out and covers Tony’s body gladly, hopes it will provide at least a smidgen of comfort for him. Tony clutches it to him, turns slowly onto his side. It’s soaked through with sweat almost instantly, and Tony barely has time to vocalize his displeasure at it being taken away so soon before Peter is covering him with a dry one.

“I.V. time,” Peter says, and Tony grunts his acknowledgement from under his sheet, “try not to rip this one out.”

No fuss is involved. Peter chooses the insertion site for Tony, his left forearm, and expertly places it within seconds. Then, he discards all the various wrappings and pokey things appropriately, and plants himself resolutely back into his spot on the floor by Tony’s waist. Tony just shivers beneath his sheet, only allowing one foot and a hint of matted, curling brown hair any exposure.

“You know,” Peter starts, wrapping his arms around his knees, remembering what Friday said earlier, “this is partially withdrawal related.”

“Sure, as shit is,” Tony growls, “you want a promotion, Captain Obvious?”

“No, just… why didn’t you drink last night?” Peter asks, searching the area where he knows Tony’s face is. “What happened to your grand finale?”

There’s a lot of silence, so much Peter’s sure he would have thought him to be asleep if not for his gradually diminishing shivering. “I decided that I’d rather prove to myself that I could choose not to,” Tony finally answers.
Peter smiles at the floor. “That’s awesome, Mr. Stark,” he says.

A few minutes later, Peter can sense Tony snoozing, and feels immense pressure lifted off his chest as he allows himself to drift as well, not even bothering to get up. He just rests his head on the cushion next to Tony’s stomach and falls instantly to sleep.

It can’t have been more than a couple hours before Peter is snapping awake again, startled, barely able to get his bearings about him through the twanging of his sixth sense.

“Please, I can’t…”

It’s Tony’s rough voice. Peter blinks a few times, focuses on him, finds him tossing fitfully in his sleep, face contorted with effort and fear. He’s crying, sweating, shaking horribly, caught in the purgatory of some nightmare and flailing to get out like a fish in a net. “Whoa, hey-”

“Fuck you,” Tony spits weakly between his sobs, fists ready to tear his sheet into shreds, “I-I-I won’t do it, fuck all of you.”

“Mr. Stark, wake up!” Peter says, desperate and scared, not sure what the hell is happening to Tony inside his mind, and wondering if touching him to rouse him is a bad idea.

But then, Tony cries out so loudly that it actually frightens Peter, and he knows he has to put a stop to it, for both their sake. “Alright, hey,” he says gently, grabbing one of Tony’s wrists, and tapping his tear and sweat-streaked cheek lightly with an open hand, but Tony just cringes away from it, sobs harder. “Hey, c’mon, wake up.”

“No, not again, please,” he whimpers, and someone is stabbing Peter in the chest, has to be. A punch is thrown, Tony’s attempt to defend himself against attackers only he can see, and Peter dodges it easily, catching this wrist too.

“Tony, it’s me! It’s Peter, wake up!” he shouts, the name feeling so foreign on his tongue, but it works. Tony throws his eyes open with a strangled shout, and they dart frantically around, unfocused and wild. Before Peter can even begin to string any sort of calming sentence together, Tony catches sight of something on the floor next to Peter’s feet and positively loses it, wrenching himself from Peter’s grasp with another terrified wail, and straight launching himself over the back of the couch, hitting the floor with a thump. Too shocked to move, all Peter can do is attempt to locate whatever it was that caused that type of reaction, but all that’s there is a couple of washcloths and that basin of water.

“Boss, calm down, it’s alright,” he faintly hears Friday trying to calm Tony. What in the world? Gathering his wits, Peter swallows, gets shakily to his feet, presses on, because that’s what Avengers do.

On the other side of the couch, Peter locates Tony with his back against it, breathing heavily in sharp, miserable little pants, arms wrapped protectively around his chest. He looks ready to shake right out of his own skin. “Mr. Stark?” he queries softly.

Tony jumps, looks at him then, and Peter is distressed to find his gaze distant and glazed with fear, knows that whatever he’s just dreamt about has truly terrorized him for real at some point in his life.
Vague details are available to the public about Tony’s captivity in Afghanistan, but Peter isn’t naïve enough to blindly hope something awful didn’t happen to him there. That the people who took him didn’t expect something from him, only to be met with Tony’s honorable attempt at resistance. It would make sense, considering the upsetting dialogue earlier. Peter’s more than capable of putting two and two together and getting four.

But it’s still hard for Peter to swallow. Tony’s been tortured before. Tony has been tortured. It might be one of the worst things that could happen to someone, and he’s lived through it.

The man’s chest heaves and it sounds painful. Peter sits on the floor in front of him. “You don’t have to say anything,” he starts gently, looking directly into Tony’s eyes where he finds a hurt, weathered soul, encouraged when Tony meets his gaze, “but, I- I think I need to tell you that you’re not there anymore, alright? This is now, we’re in your workshop, it’s the safest place on earth. It’s about, what, ten at night? Ten o clock at night and you still have a high fever, you’re withdrawing, it probably made you see stuff... It’s only us here. I promise.”

“Right, yeah.” Tony’s voice is light and shuddering, like a spirit’s whisper from beyond. But Peter’s words seem to be working, because he’s breathing a little easier and the stress lines in his face are smoothing out. His eyes remain dull though, perhaps because of the fever. Peter hopes it isn’t shame. He thinks no less of Tony. “Whew, wow,” Tony says after a minute longer, composure returning, wiping a hand through his hair and leaving it standing in spikes, “sorry about that, that was, uh…” he bites his lip, shakes his head and drops his gaze to the floor between his legs. “Did I say anything?”

Peter pauses only a moment before answering, “yes.”

“Shit,” Tony curses at himself, hides his face behind one shaking hand, “dammit. Fucking dammit. Peter, I’m sorry, you shouldn’t have to... that was something that... I mean, I haven’t even thought about that in years, I can’t believe I just- “

“We’re, hey, stop,” Peter insists, perturbed by Tony’s vulnerable self-blaming, “you have absolutely nothing to apologize to me for, I’m fine, everything’s fine, I get it. God, it’s not like you did it on purpose. You don’t have to explain anything to me if you don’t want to, and you for sure don’t have to apologize for it, so stop.”

“Okay,” Tony says, nodding, shivering slightly, closing his eyes and taking a deep breath. When he opens them again, the light that always shines there is back, determined. “Friday, how’s everything looking?”

There goes Tony, just moving right along, as though nothing happened. Peter understands this might not be the best time to address the traumas in Tony’s past, but he intends to directly allude to this moment should he ever need to. It’s not something he’s bound to forget about any time soon.

“Your fever remains in decline, Boss,” Friday details, pulling up a hologram for him to peruse. “You are currently running at 101.7, and your alcohol dependence will be fully reversed in less than an hour.”

“Wait, wait,” Tony says, shaking his head in disbelief as he thumb through the data, “did I hear you clearly? Fully Reversed? Just like that?”

“That’s correct, Boss. Congratulations.”


“That’s great!” Peter declares.
“It’s not over yet. Further physiological changes are taking place as well,” Friday explains, “your new cells are attempting to heal your other physical maladies, but lack of essential Extremis software is inhibiting their progress.”

“Well, we’re getting to that,” Tony says, looking himself over, appearing pleased when he finds that the rashes have shrunk significantly, then sneering at the bloody catheter dangling from his arm by a wad of reddened tape. “Whoops, again.” He tears it off with a wince. “Ugh, what a mess.”

“How do you feel?” Peter asks, standing and offering a hand to Tony, who glares at it, but takes it anyway and allows Peter to pull him to his feet effortlessly.

“Like a god just tossed me through a window,” Tony says, gripping the couch back for support, complexion growing even paler. Peter takes his arm and provides a stable route to the front of the couch, an action that’s becoming more familiar for both of them it seems, as Tony doesn’t even attempt to resist this time. “Is the bone marrow vibranium infusion complete?”

“Infusion eighty-seven percent complete, Boss,” Friday says.

“Not bad,” Tony huffs as he lounges, unashamedly sprawling across two cushions, covering his eyes with the nook of his non-bloody arm. “That wasn’t as bad as I expected it to be.”

“Not as bad-, Mr. Stark, you almost died,” Peter reminds him, a bit angry, because he had saved the man’s life, had worried over his well-being for hours.

“I mean it wasn’t as painful as I expected, Peter,” Tony clarifies and Peter feels foolish. “My mouth feels like someone put cat litter in it, did you put cat litter in my mouth?”

“Oh yes, of course, I wasn’t busy saving your life, or anything,” Peter mocks, moving fast to remove the basin of water and various towels from Tony’s sight, not wanting to trigger another episode, not wanting to think about what the hell Tony’s fear of it implies, “I was actively locating cat litter and, if that wasn’t weird enough, I was putting it in your mouth, too.”

“Explains that.” Tony licks his lips, and Peter brings him a bottle of cold water from the fridge, which he drains in seconds. “Thanks, by the way,” he says with a wet chin, before wiping his forearm across it.

“Sure,” Peter says, cleaning up the rest of the mess from earlier, soaked towels and plastic wrappings stuffed into a biobag. Everything involving this process is considered a controlled item, and will be destroyed appropriately.

“I gotta say, I’m fucking impressed,” Tony continues, pulling a sheet over himself, still suffering the effects of the fever despite the progress he’s made.

“Yeah, well I’m impressed by your ability to rip out your line, Mr. Stark, this makes three times,” Peter sighs, taking Tony’s arm and rolling it over to reveal massive bruising where the vein ruptured. “Like, seriously, look at this.”

“Hey,” Tony says while Peter cleans the wound there and wraps it, prepares to insert a new one into his right arm, “I heard from Thor yesterday.”

“How exactly does one ‘hear from Thor’?” Peter asks, sterilizing the injection area, and finishing up his fourth, and hopefully, but not realistically, final I.V. placement.

“Via Asgardian Magical Mail, apparently,” Tony says, “he sent me something cool, I want to see if you can read it.”
An hour before midnight, Tony starts drinking this orange gunk he’s concocted to clean out his waste systems in preparation for the next injection, and it’s just as unpleasant as he anticipated it would be. Thankfully, Peter is pouring over the Asgardian book in absolute wonderment, and misses Tony gagging into the sink. He leans against the counter and smiles at Peter like nothing happened.

“This is the coolest thing I’ve ever seen,” Peter says from where he sits cross-legged atop the gurney, in absolute awe at the glowing relic in his hands.

“Be careful with it, it’s an antique.” Tony glares into the bottle at the orange mess inside. He has to drink a half-gallon of this nonsense, and he hopes he can keep it all down. As unpleasant as it is, he expects the results of not purging his system before the upgrade to be far worse, and doesn’t fancy spending six straight hours in the damn latrine.

“Mr. Stark, I… I feel like I’m holding something extremely important,” Peter says warily, eyeing the page on the Mind Stone, “and not just for here on earth, this feels cosmically impactful. I mean, look at this, it has every answer Vision has been looking for about his stone. It’s this one, right? The Mind Stone?”

“On point, as usual,” Tony says, and sighs before pouring more gook down his throat as fast as he can. He’s on a time limit. A rumbling growl unsettles his stomach. Boy, he’s tired of feeling ill.

“There’s even a stone that controls time.” Peter flips rapidly through the pages, and Tony can see his quick mind consuming everything as he does. “Geez, this book confirms the existence of a soul, Mr. Stark, this is crazy.”

“Wild, huh?” The last bit of the stuff mocks him from within the bottle, and for once, Tony is having trouble climbing to the bottom of it. Come to think of it, he’s no longer an alcoholic. Hurray? Never touch it again, right? Is it that easy?

“And this one, you can make down, up, and up, down, ignore physics, or the theory of relativity, basically anything you envision, this can make it happen.”

“The real scary part? Thanos is trying to collect these things,” Tony says, before swallowing his pride and holding his nose so he can get the rest of the shit down. “Ugh, wow, -hurp- disgusting.”

“Just one of these can consume a mortal being,” Peter says, acting blessedly oblivious to Tony’s suffering, “I wonder what all six could do to a Titan?”

“I’m almost positive Quill said something about a gauntlet acting as an inhibitor,” Tony explains, squinting with the memory, “if Thanos manages to plug all six of those babies into it, then he becomes an actual, biblical god.”

“How does he know that?”

“Gamora is a reformed Thanos lackey,” Tony says, and then grimaces, “well, she’s a lot more than that, but you would have to ask her about it, it’s not my place. Point is, she’s seen all Thanos has to offer so far, and is more than willing to share her knowledge. She says she witnessed him purchase a gauntlet with six slots impressed into it, three guesses as to what they’re for.”
“That’s a huge advantage,” Peter observes, “having that insider.”

“Sure is,” Tony says, already starting to feel the effects of the slime he’s just consumed, “hey, why don’t you get a nap in, I’m completely out of the danger… uh, area, right now, I’m pretty sure I reek all the way to Asgard, I’m gonna try to clean myself up a little bit before this next round of fun.”

“You sure?” Peter asks, finally looking up from the book, and piercing Tony with a doubtful glare. “What was that about swooning women?”

“Trust me, you’re gonna want to nap,” Tony says, and leaves it at that.

Once Peter’s curled up on the couch, Tony escorts himself and his pole to the restroom where he spends twenty minutes on the toilet evacuating his digestive and renal systems, and doing all the nasty stuff that entails. He’s never pissed so much in his life. The following shower is one of the most needed he’s ever taken.

The water sprouts on with a shriek and a hiss. Steam plumes up around him as he steps in, because it must be hot, never cold.

He leans heavily against the tiled wall, hides his eyes and breathes.

The nightmare he experienced earlier threatens him viciously with a water-related flashback, but his grounding techniques are stronger, have been for years. When they throw him under, he sees nothing but familiar patterned tile, smells his body wash, not blood and rust, feels warmth against his skin, not the bruising grip of strangers’ hands, slowly breathes air, instead of choking on the razors of ice-cold water. He’s worked on it relentlessly, trained himself to push through any panic this world can impose on him, and he’s done basically all of it by himself. So, how was it that he allowed his first episode in years to occur with Peter in the room?

Tony shudders. He’d felt like he was there again, could feel the biting cold of a frozen Afghan night. They had been dunking him, and before that, burning the shit out of the left side of his face with hot coals and pokers, hovering them just barely above his skin. The pain was blistering, searing. They laughed at him, told him he wouldn’t last, shoved his face in the dirt as he strained against his bonds and the hands that held him down with grips like lion’s jaws, and he screamed bloody fucking murder-

Stop it, Stark, you’re not there anymore...

When he woke up, his fevered mind was still in Afghanistan, had been slung back in time eleven years to one of the darkest moments of his life. He’d registered Peter clearly, even within the roar of blood and water in his ears, yet, could see nothing but bitter cave walls. Someone was holding his wrists, and there was the fucking water again, merciless, and consisting of two hydrogen atoms, and one oxygen atom, and not a lick of empathy for his need to breathe just oxygen. He’d needed to get away, and when he actually did that time, he realized something was different, that he couldn’t possibly still be there, but the fear. The fear remained, almost drowned him all on its own.

It was Peter’s tactful words and calm approach that brought Tony back around. Peter is more empathetic than anyone Tony’s ever met. He’s going to make a perfect Avenger. A better Avenger, maybe the best there’s ever been. Respect for the kid swells deep in his broken heart.

Tony finishes washing quickly.

He exits the shower and, as always, avoids looking at himself in the mirror while he dries off, brushes his teeth, shaves. Just in time too, because the Guardians call soon after. Tony answers it
without hesitation.

“Geez, dude, put a shirt on,” Quill’s picture complains, but he’s smiling all the same as Tony spits fluoride into the sink.

“Working on it,” Tony says, stumbling into some boxers and then basketball shorts, “didn’t want you to use up precious fuel on a damn missed call.”

“That is an excellent point,” Quill says, looking Tony up and down with a raised eyebrow, “and hey, for a guy who’s undergoing complete biological reconstruction, you look pretty lively.”

“Yeah, call me in eight hours, let me know how I look then,” Tony says with a rueful chuckle as he pulls a black tank top over himself. “This has been an actual living hell so far, let me tell ya.”

“Well, what all do you have left?” Quill asks, and Tony grimaces as he remembers, because he kind of wants to keep this whole thing as compartmentalized as possible to avoid feeling overwhelmed.

“About thirty more hours of misery,” Tony tries to keep it vague, the hologram of Quill following him as he exits the bathroom and heads upstairs for a bit of fresh air before his next injections.

“Is that Tony?” It’s a soft, familiar voice, and Tony smiles as a green woman comes into view and smirks at him from over Quill’s shoulder. “Hey, you. Are you quite done fooling around on that dirt planet? I’m about to resort back to murder, Stark, these idiots are driving me insane.”

“I sort of get that,” Tony says, thinking about all the bickering he did with his old team over his proposed contingencies as he exits onto the roof of the common area. The night is cool, calm, a breeze caresses his cheek, a touch he wishes was warm and tangible. “Just hang in there. If everything goes according to plan, I should be headed out there within a month.”

“You’re bringing that spider-guy with you, right?” Quill asks. "Honestly, I'm more excited about meeting him, than you, no offense, old man."

Tony doesn’t answer right away because he’s given this question a ton of thought already, and he’s still not sure he has an answer for it. He grips the safety railing and looks out over all the shadows below him, his own elephant graveyard.

On one hand, it makes complete logical sense to bring the kid along. He’s smart, he’s useful, he’s incredibly strong and fast. The boy can heal from a bullet wound within days, and can take hits that would dent steel like they’re love taps. Not to mention if Tony fails at this, the world, and by proxy, Peter, have little chance of survival anyway. But on the other hand, Peter’s just a kid. Sure, they send kids as young as him off to war, but it doesn’t make it right.

“No,” Tony says, and hates the fact that he’s gotta go it alone, but it’s not right to drag Peter into something Tony is more than capable of dealing with on his own. “No, he’s too young to be gallivanting into space, he’s got a scholarship for Christ’s sake.”

“I was eight, man,” Quill says, and Tony shoots him an exasperated look, finds him grinning and gesturing at himself, “look how good I turned out. I got my own team, my own ship, I’ve helped save an entire planet—“

“You did all that at the tender age of thirty-four,” Tony says, taking in the cool night air. “Peter is sixteen years old.”

“Yondu had me running missions at ten,” Quill reveals with a shrug, and this just makes Tony respect the man’s tenacity and resourcefulness even more.
“You were kidnapped, brother,” Tony looks into Quill’s eyes, smiles kindly. “This would be a choice, I’m not abducting the kid.”

“I was very young when my entire race was destroyed and Thanos found me and twisted me into his personal mercenary,” Gamora says, as she peels some strange looking fruit behind Quill, who exchanges a deep cringe with Tony.

“Still, not… not even remotely the same situation.” Tony sighs.

“I’m gonna be real honest with you, man,” Quill starts in a serious tone, and Tony watches him intently, notes the stress in his voice and around his eyes, “it’s getting scary out here, even for us. Galactic relations are breaking down, checkpoints are being set up. Dude, the Kree have deployed all their Accusers, they’re rounding folks up left and right and selling them in bulk back to the Empire, it’s insane, they’ve completely lost it, the whole damn universe has, trying to find these stones. You’re gonna need all the help you can get.”

“The Kree Empire consists of a technologically advanced military dictatorship,” Gamora elaborates between generous bites of fruit, and Tony makes sure he pays attention, because Gamora always knows what she’s talking about, “their race is cruel, detached, completely devoid of empathy, yet they consider themselves merciful. They have a plethora of rules governing their barbarism to justify it to the inter-galactic community, but we know better. Their leaders will do all they can to get their hands on the stones. Their Accusers are supremely intelligent and physically resilient commanders of large squadrons of Kree soldiers, and various other contracted races. They’re extremely dangerous. All of us were almost killed by a single Kree Accuser.”

“In other words, stay away from them,” Quill concludes needlessly, “and anyone else you see out here. And bring as much help as possible. I wouldn’t suggest leaving Earth alone.”

“If everything goes according to plan, I won’t be,” Tony offers, thinking of the small army of newly painted black and gold suits in the basement with a smirk.

“It’s something to discuss another day,” Gamora says, leaning a chiseled hip against Quill’s shoulder, and that’s doubtful, because there’s nothing to discuss. Peter isn’t going into space, end of discussion. “How do you feel, Tony?”

“Great, right now,” he says, and it’s true. The fever that tortured him earlier is on its last limb, and his rash is totally gone. The vibranium infusion settled perfectly, though Tony is incapable of producing the second skin just yet, lacking the necessary muscular and epidermal pathways, and of course, the neural capability. That all comes later. But for now, he’s feeling… refreshed, clean. “Like I told Quill; ask me that same question in a few hours, I may have a different answer for you.”

“Spider-guy taking care of you?” Quill wonders, and Tony smiles warmly.

“Spider-guy, saved my life tonight.”

Chapter End Notes

I love comments!
Tony decides to let Peter sleep a little longer. He deserves it.

Actually, Tony really hopes the kid will just sleep all the way through this phase, as he injects the blue liquid into his port himself with some trouble, the syringe labeled ‘digestive/renal’. It’s lava flowing through him, and he flexes his hand with a hiss. The blue glow dissipates, and once more, Tony is left to wait a tortuously long time before discovering exactly what is in store for him. He lies down on the section of the couch perpendicular to Peter’s, pulls a sheet over himself, and absolutely does not place his hand as close to Peter’s foot as possible, it just kind of ends up there.

This is scary. This thing he’s doing is fucking terrifying and he’s glad Peter’s there with him.

Sleep is as elusive as those little floaters that sometimes wander fluidly in his peripheral vision. As soon as he glimpses it, it slithers away, and he’s left startling himself fully awake with a loud intake of air, having lost all power and fallen out of the sky as Iron Man, or been blinded by the flash of an explosion, or lunged at by some perfectly normal-looking person holding a knife while out and about.

Or defending himself from his friend’s attempt to decapitate him with a shield his father made.

It’s his equivalent of most people’s ‘stepped off the curb’ awakening jolt, that startling feeling of falling off something while trying to meld into the unconscious world. His life is just too wild to experience anything normally anymore.

He fades in and out of sleep for about an hour, until his stomach starts cramping. It’s mild at first, and he expects that, ignores it stupidly, tries to sleep through it. Next time he wakes up, probably twenty minutes later, the pain is radiating all the way through to his back in hot waves as Extremis alters him. Stomach, intestines, kidneys, liver, all of it aches viciously and all of it will be healed to perfection. Decades of harm caused by off and on alcohol binging and anxiety-induced heart burn will be instantly erased. Unfortunately, there’s a penance to be paid. There always is.

Biting back a whimper, Tony rolls himself off the couch as slowly as possible, knowing that despite Peter’s custom ear-plugs, designed and built by Peter himself right here in the workshop, there’s still a chance of waking him if Tony makes too much noise. He sneaks off to the infirmary area, hunched over like Quasimodo, and pulls out some thin heat strips, twisting them to initiate the thermal reaction. Using strong medical tape, he secures two of them to his lower back, a couple atop his stomach and pelvis. A groan rumbles low in his chest, and he steadies himself with a hand on the gurney as a violent tsunami of pain paralyzes him.

“Are you alright, Boss?” Friday murmurs her question, too smart for her own good.

“No,” Tony moans, slipping slowly to the floor, clutching his abdomen. “Hurts…”

“One breath at a time,” Friday soothes, and Tony closes his eyes, concentrates on breathing in his nose, holding it, out his mouth, holding it, in… out… in… out… over and over. “There you go, Boss, you can do it. Just breathe.” It’s remarkably effective, and soon the combination of the breathing and the heat and Friday’s encouraging words brings the pain to a tolerable level, at least temporarily. “Maybe go to bed for a little while? I’ll monitor you.”
“Probably right,” Tony mumbles, sweating, hot with his agony, and begins to stagger over to the workshop’s tiny sleeping quarters, which contains two twin-sized beds set against opposite walls, and a couple of dressers with lamps from the fifties to accompany them, just as Dad left it. Tony’s added a large fan, and he turns it on, pointing it towards the bed on the left, closing the door behind him, and stripping right down to boxers. The heat packs are cooking him. He spreads out on top of the comforter, enjoying the caress of the cool, flowing air. His abdomen tortures him with bloating and gas. His esophagus contracts weirdly and restricts burping, which swiftly becomes an additional, uncomfortable problem. He’s so damn tired, and just wants to quit.

“Is there anything I can do for you, Boss?” Friday asks softly, and Tony, once again, pathetically wishes that Friday was a real person.

“Turn back time and convince eight-year-old me to not be bullied by my wonderful father into taking that drink,” Tony grumbles, and Friday pulls up a screen instead, plays an episode of Futurama for him. It’s colorful, and funny, and just charming enough to distract him a little from his pain. Tony stares blankly at the screen as a sandwich from an interplanetary gas station infects Fry with worms that heal wounds and make him stronger and smarter.

“I found it appropriate.” Of course, she would.

Forty minutes crawl by, and he’s barfing again, into a bucket he keeps under the bed in there, but there’s nothing in him to regurgitate. It’s just a bunch of very painful retching and rapid salivating, and some bile does come up, but it’s not enough to justify all that drama. Just dumb misery for the sake of it. The story of his life. The new title of his autobiography; Dumb Misery for the Sake of it. He moans and groans as loud as he fucking wants, inspired by his solitude. Crushed by it.

Nothing sounds better than Pepper’s loving touch right now. Tony turns on his side, clutches his stomach, curls into himself and just breathes best he can.

It’s times like these he finds himself unable to be as strong as he’s expected to be. He finally allows himself to break down, frustrated with the agony of this, horrified that Peter is here to see it, too. Frightened that he has yet to experience the worst part of this Extremis thing. It’s not fair, that so much should ride on Tony, that his horrible hunch was right all along, and that because of his former team’s distrust in him, he’s not as prepared as he should be. He feels like he’s been screaming into the abyss. Ever since that fucking wormhole, he’s been preaching preparedness, only to be scoffed at. And now, everything is up to him, and he has virtually no help.

Tony holds his aching stomach and sobs. It’s only 1:56 in the morning.

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“Tony, it’s not your fault,” Steve Rogers says quietly, placing a hand on Tony’s armored shoulder, but he shrugs it off with a grunt. The only thing he can see is the small child, probably eight or so, impaled horribly on a jagged piece of rebar, right through his back and lower abdomen. The facility was crawling with Hydra, had Steve and Clint pinned down, were ready to kill them with a flank to their left, so Tony annihilated both sources of hostility with a pair of deadly missiles… he never even hesitated.

“I should have scanned it, I-I should have~” He shakes his head, horrified by what he’s done. Tears are welling in his eyes. His entire world is closing up around him and the little blond boy, the small
body soaked in crimson, shredded organs caking the steel that juts from him. Blood pours from his mouth and nose, his haunted eyes staring at Tony lifelessly, and, shit, it could be Harley if Tony didn’t know better. The breath hitches in his chest. This is hell. “Goddammit, why the fuck was there a kid in here?”

He’s never killed a kid before.

“Hey, man,” Clint’s voice is as far away as the moon. He steps in front of Tony, interrupting the nightmare everything has become, and places both his hands heavily on Tony’s shoulders, “look at me, okay? Just look at me. C’mon, now, we’re gonna go this way, alright?”

Then he’s being physically encouraged to walk, and he does, away from that terrible scene, outside the smoking, flaming heap of rubble that used to be a reinforced Hydra bunker. There are bodies everywhere, red stains everything, a putrid stench hangs heavily in the frigid air. God, what has he done? All this destruction...

He stumbles in the snow, falls to his knees, throws up while Steve kneels beside him.

Fucked, is what that whole thing was.

Tony jerks awake, sweating. The pillow is wet, and he’s out of breath. His stomach hurts. “I’m sorry,” he whispers, to… who? The wall, he guesses. The boy is just a nameless face in Tony’s mind, a tiny John Doe. Italy had no record of his existence. The entirety of the world didn’t even know the child existed. Not a single document about him anywhere. “I’m so sorry.”

He wonders exactly how much of him Extremis will fix.

“Good morning, Boss,” Friday says, “It’s 4:52, you managed to get at least a little sleep.”

“I guess,” he says, rubbing the remaining wetness from his face, somehow feeling even more tired than before his nap. “What’s it look like in there? In-in me, I mean.”

“You’re through the worst part,” Friday says, and Tony exhales sharply with relief, “I’d say you’re about done, but you won’t get much of a break before your next injection. You should experience some mild to severe pain all the way through. I’m sorry.”

“Terrific,” Tony grumbles. “How’s Peter?”

“Still sleeping soundly.” Friday seems as surprised as Tony is. The poor kid must have been exhausted. Tony hopes, with a twinge of guilt, that he’s not putting too much pressure on him.

“Good, leave him alone,” he says, prodding the heat packs and sighing when he finds them still warm, because all it means is they’ve become useless in controlling the pain.

“I suggest you brief him on this next phase, Boss,” Friday warns, and Tony groans, desires only to lay there and suffer in solitude.

“I don’t want to,” he mutters, turning onto his other side with a series of grunts and curling back up around his misery ridden body. “I don’t want to do this anymore, Friday, I just want to sleep.”

“I know,” Friday says softly.
Peter wakes to Tony shaking him.

“Hey kid, rise and shine.”

The voice is filtered heavily through his earplugs, but he recognizes it as Tony’s all the same. He groans awake, blinking blearily up at the man, who’s fully clothed in a black tank top and shorts. This close, the long scar on Tony’s temple stands starkly pale against his skin, left-overs from an injury acquired in Siberia that Tony refuses to speak about to this day. And his face is set a little tighter than usual. Still, he smiles like nothing’s wrong. “Morning. You scored five hours, congrats.”

The earplugs come out, and Peter’s world instantly amplifies elevenfold. “Wow, five?” he starts, stretching, then his eyes fly open all the way in panic, and he sits up, “wait, I slept through a dose!”

“It’s all good, it’s basically over,” Tony says, smiling reassuringly at Peter as he drags his tower with him over to the kitchen. “Not anything you could have done for me with this one anyway.”

“I mean, I could have at least been there, you know, moral support or whatever,” Peter says, rubbing his face vigorously, “I’m glad to see your line is still in your arm, and not lying on the floor somewhere.”

“I took your advice and sat it out, this time,” Tony says, extracting some sliced papaya from the fridge and shaking it around its plastic container. “Great advice.”

“Well, how do you feel?” Peter wonders, checking Tony over, measuring heart rate and blood pressure with nothing more than his sense of hearing, which are both a little high. He’s still in pain, Peter can tell.

“I feel like I’m running out of ways to say ‘like shit’,” Tony replies while he toasts some bread, and Peter doesn’t take it personally. The man has been under a ton of scrutiny during this entire thing, and must be sick of talking about how he feels all the time. “Sorry, I’m in a terrible mood, with all the pain, and nausea… Want toast? I’ll pop two more in for you.”

“Oh, yeah, thanks,” Peter says, getting up and stretching his arms above his head. “You think you should be eating so soon? Didn’t you just get a completely new digestive system?”

“Sure did, might as well take it for a spin,” Tony says, eating papaya out of the container, and sliding through data projected before him. “Ah, there, see? No more ulcers, no more liver damage, no more ailing kidneys, it’s all healing as we speak. Excellent. This is actually going pretty smoothly.”

Peter spots the time on the projection. It’s 5:34 in the AM. They have twenty-six minutes before the next phase. Toast waits for him in the toaster, and while Peter slathers butter all over his, Tony eats his dry. Food is merely fuel to Tony, no need to enjoy it or make it fancy. “So, what’s next?”

“Muscles, skeletal, epidermal,” Tony says, pulling up schematics for Peter. “This dose will make me much stronger and heal all the structural damage from sprains, pulls, fractures, breaks, and I have had many of all of the above. It’ll create pathways for the second skin to use when I need to summon it. It will also heal my heart muscle.”

Peter’s blood runs a little chilly as he remembers Tony’s notes about the mice. This is the dose Tony lost two of them to cardiac arrest on. It’s the step he quit conducting trials at because he couldn’t handle torturing and killing tiny creatures. Everything from here on out is almost completely untested. Peter doesn’t even need to ask any questions. He knows exactly what he might have to do.
“It’s also likely to be the most painful so far,” Tony continues, sipping water, and keeping his focus on the screen, “I’m not quite sure what to expect, I never had the pleasure of witnessing this one play out fully.” He takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. “Fortunately, I have a pacemaker, and I’m on an antiarrhythmic already, so there’s a chance it may just even itself out, when-if it happens. Still…”

Peter watches Tony’s face. A muscle underneath his left eye has started twiching. Just below the surface of his calm demeanor lies a raging torrent of stress. “You’re gonna be okay,” Peter insists, Tony’s tension suddenly becoming contagious, “you’re Iron Man, dude, you’ve been through hell, you’re as tough as they come. You’ll get through this, too.”

There’s no verbal reply, only a sideways glance and a tic of his beard up into a hesitant, thankful half-smile.

“How am I the only one ever keeping track of time?” Friday drawls, and Tony scoffs.

“Rude, Friday,” he draws back, but heads to the infirmary all the same, Peter staying behind to wash his hands and to take a second to get his nerves under control without eyes on him. “You ready Pete? Friday has your back. In the instance that I’m, uh… indisposed, she’ll update you on my status, and advise you on what to do should this thing go super south. And I’m not going to tell you it won’t this time.”

As Peter takes the fourth syringe, he sees Tony pop a couple of aspirins and chew them, then swallow the mess with a grimace, out of the corner of his eye.

“So, maybe I should do this one, huh? You want me to?” Tony asks in subdued tones as Peter sits in front of him.

He looks at Tony, who’s face is very serious, then at the glowing substance in his hand. This dose is known for putting one hundred percent of its two test subjects to death, though Peter knows the other doses could have done the same, technically. But this one is… different.

Too much already lies on Tony’ shoulders. If this is the least Peter can do for him, he’ll do it.

“5:59,” Friday says.

Before Tony can object, and he does, Peter sticks the syringe in his line and has no regrets as Extremis lights up his arm. The man growls with the pain of it, glares at Peter, but it softens almost immediately into something a little more fearful. “I got you,” Peter says with a smirk and a shrug, trying to exude confidence because, from the look in his eyes, Tony’s is failing him.

“Twerp,” Tony grunts, and he’s so anxious, Peter can feel his heart rate already speeding up, a desperate little hamster on a wheel to nowhere.

“I need you to try to relax,” Peter says, switching over to strict mode, absolutely prepared to physically force Tony to do so if he must, because he does not want to lose him. “You need to lie down for this one, Mr. Stark, I’m serious, I won’t take ‘no’ for an answer.”

“So goddamn demanding,” Tony scowls at Peter, but stays on the gurney, and Peter takes that as an accomplishment in itself. “I like it. Clearly, you’re Avenger material. See, this is why I asked you.”

“Just sit there and do nothing, think Zen thoughts,” Peter says, preparing everything he may need for a sudden cardiac event, ensuring all his supplies are near him, the custom AED, the additional antiarrhythmic medication, the pre-dosed adrenaline in capped syringes. He tries pointedly to avoid thinking about how Tony could die at any time from now until noon.
“What the hell am I supposed to do, stuck here for six hours?” Tony groused, looking around himself and rubbing his left bicep, the arm with the I.V. in it. Peter wondered if he’s already feeling it.

“Deep breathing exercises, meditation. I don’t know, dude, whatever it is, keep your heart rate around 70 for me, would ya?” Peter instructed, and he’s vaguely aware of Tony watching him from beneath raised eyebrows as Peter brings up a projection displaying his status, heart rate, temperature, oxygen levels, blood pressure, for monitoring. Peter can’t do all of it himself. Thankfully, there’s sensors in the room strong enough to detect genetic abnormalities in Peter’s unborn grandchildren, so there’s no need to hook Tony up to anything.

Peter notices him staring. “What?”

“You alright?” Tony asks, and Peter guesses he didn’t do a good enough job at hiding his anxiety.

“I mean, given the circumstances I’m a bit, uh, on edge, I guess,” Peter answers rapidly, jittery all over.

“Whoa, slow down,” Tony says, putting a hand on Peter’s shoulder, smiling so brightly despite his circumstances that Peter can’t help but smile back sheepishly, “hey, you are positively kicking ass, and I couldn’t have asked a better person to help me do this. Because of you, I’m almost fixed, so just relax, trust yourself, alright? You know what you’re doing, I know you know what you’re doing, everything’s gonna be fine.”

Before Peter can summon a response to that, a small blue flash catches his eye, and Tony grunts as the hand on Peter’s shoulder twinges like a taught, plucked string, and scarred fingers twist into half a fist, before it relaxes again moments later. Their fearful gazes lock. “Lay down, I’m serious,” Peter says sternly, watching lightning strike up and down Tony’s left arm. It’s quite the display, and Tony slowly swings his feet onto the gurney while he watches it, entranced within his apprehension.

It’s spreading rapidly, tearing its way up his bicep, his shoulder and Tony pulls his shirt down a bit to find it creeping across his chest as well. Something occurs to Peter then as he observes smooth flesh where, by all accounts, massive scarring should exist. Because didn’t Tony at one point have a very large hole in his chest to accommodate a powerful electromagnet? “Hey, where’s the-”

“Horrible, disfiguring scar? I was wondering when you’d ask that,” Tony says, and his voice sounds strained as he kneads at his flashing left bicep, wincing and breathing slowly, “you’d be surprised how difficult it was for me, a damn billionaire, to locate someone willing to take a whack at the mess I’d made in my chest, and a trustworthy someone, at that. Come to find out, no one wants to be responsible for Iron Man flatlining on their table. Took a little vacation to Korea after the Mandarin fuss, and met an extraordinary physician named Helen Cho and her wonderful rejuvenation cradle. After the surgery to remove the shrapnel, about half a day in that thing rebuilt the entire area, like nothing even happened. Shit, this is starting to hurt.” Tony’s entire left arm shudders, and he growls, clutching it to his chest, staring into the abyss somewhere below Peter’s feet.

“It wouldn’t have worked in this case? The cradle thingy?” Peter prods, trying to keep Tony talking, to keep his mind off the pain.

“No, I was- am too sick,” Tony grits out, entire body tense around the offending arm, until the spasm ends and he relaxes with a groan, panting slightly. “The cradle rebuilds, it doesn’t fix what’s already there. I need a complete chemical rewiring, not flesh-wound band-aids.”

“Hey, you know what? I brought something,” Peter says, getting up and retrieving his backpack, cheeks reddening a little with embarrassment. “I’ve been making a thing.”
“A thing,” Tony repeats, smirking, watching Peter from where he sits at a sharp incline on the gurney, one foot planted on the mattress, knee folded to provide a rest for his tortured, flashing arm. The fingers are splayed and twitching and glowing faintly blue.

“Well, yeah, you know,” Peter starts bashfully, shrugging one shoulder, extracting a thin binder, and holding it out to Tony, “I’ve been recording almost everything, all our training and stuff, with you and Vision and Rhodey, and I’ve developed a few stills from some screencaps that I like.”

Tony’s looking at him with a scrutinizing expression, made harsh by his pain, but he takes the binder, opens it with his right hand. There’s blue lightning creeping just beneath the skin of that arm now, too, and Peter spots it with a sympathetic leap of his heart.

But Tony has another spasm before he can even begin to look, and he growls loudly, tries to hold his trembling arm still against his chest, though it’s futile, since his right one is starting in on him too. Peter rounds the bed and pulls a stool toward him with his foot, sitting there beside Tony.

“Here, man, let me help you.” Taking his wrist firmly but gently, Peter lowers Tony’s arm to the mattress and holds it there, at the wrist and the elbow. Tony closes his eyes, grits his teeth and hisses deep, shuddering breaths in and out, and Peter is surprised by the strength of the spasms, appreciates his own physical fitness loads more now. There’s no way Tony could have done this by himself.

“You’re okay, you’ve got this,” Peter assures him, squeezing Tony’s arm, keeping a close eye on those vitals, that heart rate, melding himself completely into the moment, as Tony always taught him to do when in situations of high stress, particularly combat. All the worrying over it should come after, never during. Let training take the wheel, do what you know how to do, and do it well. Sound advice when going up against Iron Man, even in a training environment.

This isn’t so dissimilar.

“Breathe, c’mon,” Peter says, and Tony lets out a breath he’s been holding with an aborted whine, gasps for his next one, stomps the bedding beneath his heel. “Here,” he takes Tony’s sweaty hand, folds his between the twitching fingers. “Concentrate, focus on nothing but squeezing my hand and breathing. Squeeze the shit out of it, too, I can handle it.”

There’s a struggle to get his fingers to work for him, and Tony groans deeply with the effort of it, glares at them through slits, “get with it, you fuckers,” he whispers. They wrap slowly around Peter’s hand, and then, the spasm must be over, because Tony collapses back onto the gurney, sweaty, panting. He doesn’t let go, actually grips tighter now that he has control. Peter can feel his pulse drop back down to a manageable level.

It’s not over, though, and won’t be for another five soul-mashing hours. Peter pulls Tony’s shirt up just a little to find the blue glow shimmering, like the surface of a violent ocean beneath a full moon, within his heaving abs. It’s just a matter of twenty minutes or so before Extremis is rampaging through Tony’s entire body. What the hell does Peter do then, lay on top of him?

“Gimme that fucking awesome book,” Tony grumbles, and Peter locates the album down by his feet, props it up for him on a pillow over his waist. The first few pictures are of Rhodes as War-Machine, taken before the fight at the airport, before the horrible accident. Before Peter noticed that scar on Tony’s temple. In one of them, Tony’s got his armored hand on Rhodes’ shoulder, and if Peter recalls correctly, is thanking him for showing up to help, apologizing for what a mess everything is. They’re smiling at each other warmly.

The present Tony huffs, smirks drowsily at the photo. Peter gives himself a goddamn figurative pat on the back, because he feels like he deserves it. “I mean, a thumb drive would be more efficient,
probably more environmentally friendly,” Tony comments offhandedly.

Peter rolls his eyes.

A few flips in, Tony finds a picture of all of them, Peter, Vision, Tony and a wheelchair-bound Rhodes, grinning at each other following some rigorous combat training. Tony smiles. “I’ve got something for him, if this works,” he tells Peter, patting beneath Rhodes’ image with the tip of his index finger. “A concentrated version. Targets just one area, hopefully—”

Then, predictably, the spasms start again. Tony chokes on a yell as both of his arms flash a loud blue, and begin to quiver. Peter holds the left arm down and watches helplessly as the other trembles against the sheet. “Dammit, this is… fucking… terrible.” Tony moans, grits his teeth, twists his body.

“Hey, hang in there,” Peter tells him, thinking fast. Webbing him again is out of the question, the way Tony’s squirming. There’s a good possibility he’d injure himself, rip his own skin right off beneath the stickiness. Peter carefully removes the album for now, not wanting it to end up on the floor.

It’s bad. Tony’s back arches as he suffers, groans, and at one point, even whimpers, and Peter’s sure he’s biting back most of it for his sake. A rapid beeping emits from the projection of Tony’s vitals, warning them of his soaring heart rate. His right fist flies completely out of his control and Peter has to stand up and catch it so he can hold it down against Tony’s stomach before he accidently swings at him again, or worse, hurts himself. “My b-bad,” he grunts.

“Alright, you got this,” Peter’s strong, but he can’t keep it up forever, “c’mon, Iron Man, get through it. Almost there, this whole thing is almost over.” Is it?

Tony simply growls with miserable frustration and kicks both legs against the sheets until they’re lying in a heap on the floor. Peter doesn’t think he can even imagine the level of pain Tony is experiencing. And he’s taking it all like a man made of metal.

Then it dawns on him; Iron Man. Peter’s got the keys to the sweetest car around. Dammit, why didn’t he think of that before?

“Wow, I’m an idiot,” Peter says, and looks to the ceiling. “Friday, can you put a gauntlet on him?”

“Clever idea, Peter,” Friday compliments him, and Peter would smile with pride if he wasn’t basically lying on top of his squirming, suffering, mentor to keep him from hurting himself. Fucking perfect weekend this is turning out to be.

The gauntlet comes hissing into the room, and Peter holds Tony’s hand out for him so it can encase it. A tiny fraction of thrust from the repulsor is applied to keep the back of Tony’s hand and forearm against the mattress, and Peter just holds the other one, doesn’t want Tony to feel trapped by all this. “Th-th-thanks,” Tony whispers, nodding blindly at the arm that was just completely immobilized. “Better.”

About a minute later, Extremis finally gives the poor man another break. He lays back, gasping vocally for breath, positively drenched with sweat. Peter doesn’t dare look at the time, sure that it’s crawling by with velocity matching that of a hungry slug. He lets Tony Stark squeeze his hand for comfort, and hopes he can get through this. That they both can. If Peter was listening to someone tell him a story about his own life, he wouldn’t even believe them, would call them a damn dirty liar.

“Worst thing ever?” Peter asks, and Tony lolls his head over to gaze drearily at him from behind
curtains of pain. It’s upsetting, and something Peter will never get used to seeing.

“Full disclosure? C-close, not quite,” he says with an exhausted voice, “ranks maybe… oh, number three on my list? As far as physical pain goes, I mean, but this… just started. Good thinking… with the gauntlet, by the way. I need to look though, so I need a hand, literally. Peter. Pete, I need my hand, I only got one.”

“Oh right, sorry,” Peter realizes now that he’s the one holding on tight, because this whole thing is truly frightening, and releases Tony’s hand with a whoosh of expelled air he didn’t know he’d been holding.

“It’s fine, I just need to… see, what’s up… here,” he mumbles, pulling his shirt up, and revealing a chorus of crackling blue light rippling across his entire torso, defining muscle shapes beneath the skin. It’s remarkable to watch. Tony lets out a dismayed moan. “Yikes, I’m a Christmas tree. This is gonna suck so, so bad. It should be starting on my heart soon. Fair warning.”

“What does it feel like?” Peter asks, staring at all the blue.

“God, I don’t know,” Tony says, shaking his head, before popping some ice in his mouth from a cup he’s keeping near him, “like I’m being stabbed, everywhere. Like my body’s being controlled by someone and they’re putting me through a wood-chipper. It’s fucking horrible. It’s hell, no lies.”

“Looks like it,” Peter says, scooting back and resting his elbows on his knees, cradling his heavy head in his hands. If Peter feels this tired, he can only imagine how Tony feels. “I’m sorry.”

“Just so you know; it’s helping,” Tony says breathlessly. Peter looks up at him and Tony offers him a weary smile, “everything you’re doing, sitting with me, talking to me, keeping me focused. You don’t have to do that, you could sit over there and watch T.V. with headphones on if you wanted, but… it’s helping, all of it. So, thanks.”

“I hope so, Mr. Stark,” Peter says, noticing the blue creeping up Tony’s neck, into his jaw with apprehension.

“Listen, if I kick the bucket here, you need to do something for me,” Tony says, and he’s starting to sweat again, his fingers twitch spastically, “in the vault there’s a dumb little flip phone. It was sent to me by- by Captain Idiot- I mean, Steve Rogers.” Tony groans, and hisses, the gauntlet on his right hand engages, keeping his arm still. Peter holds the left, rubbing the underside of it with his thumbs. Blue flashes spectacularly throughout the room, and he chokes back a cry of agony. “C-call him, tell him what happened to me, tell him, a-about Thanos and the Guardians. Tell him everything. Hopefully he’ll listen. Then get the fuck out of here. Friday will take care of the rest.”

Nope, that’s unthinkable. What Tony just said will not happen. “You’re not going to die, you’re too stubborn, you jackass,” Peter says, feeling totally helpless, massaging Tony’s arm as he cringes and screams.

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Tony dies at 10:12 in the morning.

Minutes before it happens, while Peter’s getting cold compresses ready for Tony’s sweaty forehead, his sixth sense just keels back and smacks him right in the face. Even through his earplugs, put in
when Tony’s screams began making him ill, his world screeches around him, slows down significantly, like a freight train making a desperate stop. He looks at Tony, who’s very nearly unconscious, both arms secured to the bed by the familiar embrace of his gauntlets, and Peter can ’see’ his slowing heart beats flowing out of him in delicate, fluttering ribbons of sound. It’s so odd, unlike anything he’s ever seen before. Nothing else could be happening right now. Tony is about to die.

“Peter, adrenaline, now,” Friday starts frantically, sensing it too, but he’s already on it, flipping a switch in himself and turning off everything but pure instinct and strict training, turning to grab one of the syringes off the table.

“Not today, you jerk,” he murmurs, and Tony regards him with hazy eyes, confused, as Peter injects the adrenaline into his line.

“Wha’ you doin’?” he breathes, and he can’t bring himself to tell the man he’s about to fucking die. It throws Peter’s momentum off a bit, gives him pause.

“Mr. Stark, you–”

Then, to Peter’s abject horror, Tony heaves two final gasping breaths before going disturbingly limp. The beautiful blue light emanating from within him begins dampening. The heart monitor screams its grief. There’s no time for emotion.

Friday removes the gauntlets and they whoosh away. “His pacemaker is being… digested by extremis,” she informs him as he settles the defibrillator, a small, round, metallic object of Tony’s invention that straps onto the palm of his hand, over Tony’s stopped heart. “Shock him… now!” The shock it sends into the body makes it jolt, land back on the gurney with a sickening, hollow ‘thump’, and Peter totters a few steps back, but there’s no other animated response. Peter gets back into position, waits… “Now!”, shocks Tony again, rights himself, and then begins chest compressions, careful of his strength… until he realizes how solid Tony’s ribs and sternum feel now. It’s encouraging. He’s still in there, he has to be. This can’t have been for nothing.

“Wake up, Mr. Stark,” Peter forces out, panting with the effort of the compressions. “C’mon, man, don’t do this.”

“Thirty seconds,” Friday updates him on the time elapsed since Tony’s death.

He pumps Tony’s chest, glares unwaveringly at his face, notes where his skin is growing ghostly pale above the dampening light of Extremis, mouth open and slack, eyes half-shut, their laughing brightness completely gone. There’s still tears there on his cheeks from the pain he was in, the last thing he knew before…

Oh god…

Everything is getting slower. Ben keeps appearing in front of him, bleeding there on the sidewalk, gasping Peter’s name, the flickering image of that nightmare he has far too often. Peter can hear his own breath bellowing in his ears, sounds like that evil dude with the respirator in Star Wars. Friday says something, but it echoes strangely. Everything is moving slower than a study hall in June.

He can’t let Tony die like this. Not like he let his Uncle. He knows things now, has access to resources he didn’t then.

“Ninety seconds.”

It feels like a year. “Fuck! COME ON!” Peter roars, terrified and frustrated, shoving the heels of his
hands into Tony’s still chest, over and over and over, forever and ever, willing life back into him with both body and mind. It’s not enough, it never is, shit, he’s going to fail at this, too.

*Shit, shit, shit!*

This can’t be happening. This cannot be fucking happening.

“Deploy secondary adrenaline injection,” Friday instructs, and it takes Peter a mere three seconds to do so, barely breaking his pace, because the only way the stuff is going to make it into Tony’s heart is if Peter keeps pumping it. Every second he spends not compelling the busted organ to work by itself is a second that drags Tony that much closer to permanent death.

He doesn’t even realize he’s crying until he notices a tear fall onto Tony’s chest. The next breath he takes is a sob. This is too much. “It’s okay, Peter, it’s okay. Keep going. It’s not over yet.” Friday, encouraging him.

“Please, Tony, don’t leave me here alone,” Peter begs, tears dripping freely all over his dead friend. “Please! We need you here! All of existence needs you, Tony. You don’t get to die yet, I know you want to, I know it’s difficult and scary and- and *painful* to keep going, but you- you don’t get to quit yet, dammit, you don’t get to give up. We’ve got stuff to take care of, you’re not getting out of it yet, man, I’m not doing this all by myself. FUCK, C’MON STARK, YOU SELFISH ASSHOLE!”

And then, Extremis flashes through Tony’s whole body so brightly it nearly blinds Peter, and the man comes around, positively heaving for air. Peter immediately stops the compressions with a relieved laugh that’s half a sob and struggles for breath himself, staring wide-eyed at the damn miracle he’s just performed. “Oh, my god. Holy shit.”

“Heartbeat detected,” Friday supplies uselessly. “I’m the real hero, here.”

Tony gasps and gasps, clutches the gurney rails beneath white knuckles, and Peter wants to say something to calm him down, but he’s so wound up himself, he can’t even speak. His emotions are everywhere. Going from terrified and grief-stricken, to so relieved and happy in the span of a millisecond has left him totally out for the count. Further cardiac arrests will have to right themselves. He collapses onto his little stool, grabs Tony’s forearm, holds on fucking tight and sobs into his other hand.

“He-hey…”

That didn’t just happen. No way did Tony just die like that right in front of him.

“Peter…”

And there’s no fucking way Peter just brought a man back from the dead.

Holy shit.

How freaking wild. His life is a colorful Ferris Wheel that has spun right off its foundation and is currently hurtling toward an unknown fate.

A blessedly warm hand covers the one he’s got on Tony’s arm, squeezes lightly, and he jumps a mile in the air.

“Shh, hey, Peter,” Tony is saying to him, voice so weak and light that it nearly floats away into nothing before Peter can catch it. “I’m alright, see?” Peter looks at him, finds a tired, half-grinning face with swiftly returning pigment. “Still breathing, still kicking ass.”
“No, you don’t understand,” Peter chokes out, wiping his face on his sleeve.

Tony sighs. “Oh, I think I might.”

Scoffing, shaking his head, quivering with fear, nerves, and a host of other emotions, Peter gesticulates fervently. “No, y-you don’t get it, you were dead, Mr. Stark. You were dead, right here, right in front of me. It was happening again. I was letting someone die, I was letting you die, I was fucking watching you die, Mr. Stark!”

“But you fixed me,” Tony says, voice soft and so, so weary, gripping Peter’s frenzied gaze with his own, remarkably calm one, and didn’t this dude just die? How is he so damn calm? “Look at me, Peter. My eyes are open, I’m thinking, feeling, and breathing. It didn’t happen again. You did it, you repaired me, you’re gonna be a better engineer than I ever was, you found a way to hack death. Thank you, so much, Peter. I owe you my life. Ben would be proud of you.”

A fresh wave of tears assaults his meager attempts at composure, and he leans forward until his forehead is resting on Tony’s arm, so damn happy the man’s alive, and just drained in every way possible. He cries pathetically for an embarrassingly long amount of time.

Thankfully, Tony doesn’t make fun of him, clasping his hand and stroking the back of it with his thumb, instead.

“I’m sorry I scared ya, kid,” Peter hears him whisper.

Chapter End Notes

Oh man, every time I tried making it shorter, it just got longer.
Peter's finally finding out what it takes to be a hero.
By quarter ‘till noon on Sunday, Tony’s suffering is nearly over. And he looks like a thirty-five-year-old man.

“Huh,” he grunts, manipulating the hologram around his face so he can view the changes, his expression caught in a narrow crevice between fascinated and horror-struck.

Scars, blemishes, lines and lines carved into him by the cruel claw of a decade of traumatic stress, are all gone. Even the one Rogers endowed him with, the one above his left temple he sometimes traced to remind himself how fucked everything is, they’ve all vanished. The dark circles that previously stained the skin beneath his eyes have been dotted out. The hair on his head and his face returned to a thick black from the dark-brown it had become in his age. Looking at him, a rational person would never dream he was once a prisoner of war, ever had a heart condition, a brain tumor, a stomach ulcer, or even a broken toe. His complexion is impeccable. “I can’t go out like this.”

“Told you,” Peter says from the end of the gurney where he’s studying the Asgardian book again, the smug little, life-saving shit. Tony still can’t believe he did that, is so proud and thankful, he doesn’t even know how to express it properly. The kid has refused to leave his side since, so maybe Peter’s feeling the same way.

“I uh… I wonder how many years I just added to my life expectancy.” Tony muses, running fingers through his thick, black, silky locks, admiring the renewed shine. Might as well grow his hair out again, hot damn. Not that he has the time for vanity or anything.

“You still have a ferocious little brain tumor, so as of right now, not long,” Friday supplies, “but once fully implemented, Extremis will repair your body until external sources of damage render it irreparable. And those sources would have to be immense.” Great, just what Tony needs, immortality. Merely a week ago, he was dreading living out the remainder of a year, let alone fucking eternity.

“Whoa, dude,” Peter says, looking up at Friday with wide eyes, “do me, do me!”

“You will also never grow old. Congratulations,” Friday drawls, like a secretary with too much on her plate to be handling silly things such as this.

“Sweet.” He celebrates with a fist-pump and holds it out to Tony, “bump it, immortal buddy.”

Tony scowls at his fist, then him.

“C’mon, who saved your life?” Peter sings, grinning cheekily and cocking his head to the side. Tony narrows his eyes. “Is this a coping mechanism, or something? You realize I was dead less than two hours ago, right?” Peter just shrugs, places the book down, and hops off the gurney.

“Dead like your sense of humor, apparently. Fine, then, I’ll bump myself,” he hits his own fist with his other fist, “and dance my way over here,” then performs some weird little moonwalking motion, going backwards towards the fridge and spins around, opening it as he does.

Tony blinks. “What the fuck are you on?” he demands, then his expression softens, and he groans
lightly, “wait, you’re all hyped up on adrenaline from that little thing you did, aren’t you?”

“Little thing, huh?” Peter says, extracting and smelling May’s roast beef Tony never ate. “That little thing where I saved your life?”

“Put that back, half-squat, that is mine,” Tony growls dangerously, flicking the hologram away and levying a threatening look at Peter.

“You will never eat this,” Peter says shaking his head, throwing Tony a knowing smirk.

“Give me a damn second, and I will,” Tony insists, “do you know what it’s like to undergo total biomechanical reconstruction? Huh? You gotta give me a minute.”

“First off: kinda. And Second: dude. I just brought you back from the dead, you are practically my zombie,” Peter reminds him, putting the food in the microwave and setting the timer, “you could at least sacrifice this for me, I’m starving.”

“Isn’t there a bunch of other food around here you can vacuum into that insatiable black hole you call a stomach?” Tony asks wearily, squirming a little with a wince, flexing his shoulders back, rotating them. He feels odd in his own skin, like he’s wearing a suit made of himself.

“Oh, god!” Peter shouts suddenly upon catching sight of Tony, clutching his heart with false surprise, then he smiles, “oh, it’s just you. Sorry, I thought a stranger had snuck down here.”

“Yeah?” Tony sighs, looking at his hands, which are completely smooth like baby’s skin, unmarred, not a single crooked finger, “I don’t know what I’m gonna do. Ross is bound to have some uncomfortable questions. I mean, I sort of expected this, and I planned on passing it off as a prototype daily cleanser or something, but there’s just no way in flaming hell he’ll buy it. Holy shit, I didn’t think I’d aged that much in the past decade.”

“Like a president,” Peter observes, extracting the food from the dingy microwave, “you were aging like a president. Every time I saw you on TV, bam, five years older.”

“And you’re aging like Benjamin Button,” Tony retorts, accepting the Tupperware of food from Peter with a thankful smirk, because he’d always meant to give it to him, hadn’t he? “You will be carded at every bar you step into for the rest of your life. At least I’ll persistently appear as though I’m in my thirties.”

“Who’s Benjamin Button?” Peter asks, grabbing a sandwich and hopping up to sit cross-legged on the end of the gurney with weightless, feathery grace.

“Guy aged backwards, never mind,” Tony says quickly, and starts shoveling food into his mouth as wide eyes dart through readouts detailing all his physical changes. They’re going to be late with the new injection if he doesn’t hurry, but man, this is nice. Not getting sick from simply eating is such a blessing that Tony will never take it for granted again. Food has taste and can be pleasurable? Tony from three days before would vehemently disagree. “Friday, sit-rep, what’s fixed?”

“I’m going to save oodles of time and explain what hasn’t been fixed,” Friday says, “your heart muscle is considerably stronger now, though your arteries and capillaries still need work. All that’s left otherwise is that pesky tumor.”

“Outstanding,” Tony says, smirking, hands waving fluidly through the data.

“You’re looking ripped,” Peter observes out of the blue, chewing his sandwich and watching Tony work with calculating eyes. “Like, shredded.”
“Huh?” Tony looks at him, confused, then it hits him, why he feels so strange and tight, and he sets down his lunch, jumps off the gurney, “Friday?”

“One-hundred ninety-three pounds,” Friday supplies, and Tony pulls a hologram mirror up, flexes in it, whistles when a small spark of blue flashes through his bicep. A noticeably larger bicep.

“Sick,” he says, huffing a chuckle, running his other hand over his brand-new arm, shoulder, back, “totally worth all that drama. Pre-auxiliary?”

“One-hundred, seventy-two pounds.”

“You gained over twenty pounds of muscle in six hours,” Peter announces with awe in his voice.

“Correction,” Tony says as he lifts his tank top, finds more firm muscle where it had been previously withering away with illness, “I gained back ten pounds that I’d lost from being sick, Extremis blessed me with an extra ten I didn’t expect. Toned me up, too. I mean, don’t get me wrong, I’m not complaining, it’s just… wow. I knew this stuff felt tighter.” He pulls at the fabric of his top, which is digging into him at the hems.

“When it happened to me, after the bite, I felt puffy, like a marshmallow for a long time,” Peter offers, shoving the rest of his sandwich in his mouth and wiping his hands together, raining crumbs for a tiny custodial robot to consume later. “I had to wear really baggy clothes for a while, jackets, hoodies, sweatpants, you know, to hide it.”

“Have you ever seen Men in Black?” Tony asks.

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Remember when the bug comes to Earth and guts that dick-head out so he can wear his skin?” Tony pokes at his calf, finds almost no leeway within the muscle, only a slight spark of blue. “It’s like that. I’ve got an Edgar-suit on.”

“ Weird.” Peter remarks with a snigger.

“I need sugar in water!” Tony growls, scrunching his face up to produce some extra chins, and raising his hands to raucous laughter from Peter. Tony adds his own lighthearted chuckling to it.

“Your heart should be strong enough to endure the next phase,” Friday supplies deliberately, absolutely decimating the mood, and Tony knows she’s hinting at the time as well, wants to shrink from it. All he has on the process here on out is theory relative to the effects of the previous doses.

The laughter disappears, frozen by the violent chill that rolls over them both, a glacier with the speed of a bullet train.

“There were barely any notes on this one, Mr. Stark,” Peter says quietly.

Tony turns to smile at him, discovers him fidgeting with a screwdriver, lacing it over and under his fingers incredibly quickly, the tool becoming a blur as it spins. “No worries, we’re through the worst part of this.” It’s not entirely a lie, but it’s close enough to provoke a twang of discomfort.

“Are we?” Peter doesn’t look so sure and his large eyes and set jaw demand honesty.

A shrug, a small, wincing smirk, tiny, twitching, outward displays of anxiety Tony can’t quite hide. “Pretty sure I won’t die this time?” he offers.
Peter just looks studiously at his tennis shoe.

At noon and thirty seconds, the fifth injection, ‘respiratory/cardiovascular’, is administered by Peter, and Tony is ten thousand percent ready to be done with the entire nightmare.

“This one will make me take a long, well-deserved nap,” Tony informs a perpetually nervous Peter in as steady a tone as possible, “should depress my respiratory system until I drift off into dream land, if my alcohol and tumor-dampened brain managed to produce the correct math while concocting it, that is. Which, I’m almost positive it did. About eighty-two percent positive… Hey! No big deal, alright? Gonna be smooth sailing from here on out.”

Peter regards him skeptically. “Are we talking about 107-degree temperature, ‘smooth’, or complete cardiac failure ‘smooth’?” The kid’s voice is waver- ing. Shit.

Dammit. Here it comes; the corrosive influence of Tony’s perpetual self-loathing burns him like an acid.

It’s always that shit-Midas touch of his, isn’t it? There he goes again, ruining pure art, fucking trashing it, and traumatizing it. And who the hell set him loose in this museum, anyway? Surrounded by all these perfect people who care about him, all these beautiful works of art, and he’s such a damn wreck-

Shut up, shut up-

“I’m talking ‘smooth’, like, you could probably go home for the rest of this if you want to, ‘smooth’, ” Tony says, looking away, concentrating fully on his screens and hiding everything in his eyes that could possibly alert Peter to exactly how much he doesn’t want to be alone.

“Well I’m not doing that,” Peter insists.

Tony conceals his relief. “Then relax, alright? You’re buzzing more than a fly on flypaper, kid.”

“Really? Relax?” Peter emits a loud scoff, “last time we did this, you literally died, Mr. Stark. You know what? I’ll relax eighty-two percent of the way, how about that? Eighty-two percent relaxed, here. It’s the best I can do.”

Tony flips all the screens away, focuses intently on Peter, who’s shaking his head and glowering at something far off. “Hey, tell me about Ben.”

“What?” Peter scrunches his face with question as he meets Tony’s gaze.

“Hold on, let me clarify,” Tony clears his throat, “tell me. About. Your Uncle.”

Peter rolls his eyes at him. “Ass.”

“I’m not sure how else to word it, Pete,” Tony says, getting up and stretching, his yawn longer than usual, significantly less satisfying. It’s already starting. The couch looks rather inviting and he’s wholly done with the damn gurney, so he heads over, stuffs his shoulders into the corner of it and sprawls languidly with a long sigh. This phase will be tolerable. Maybe even pleasant. He’s feeling almost euphoric, and doesn’t remember putting anything like that in the formula. Not that it’s unwelcome.

“Well, uh,” Peter flounders, fidgets, bites his lip, and it becomes bluntly apparent to Tony that no one’s asked him about Ben in quite a while, “I’m not sure where to start, um… What do you want to know?”
“I don’t know, anything.” Tony says, shrugging and smiling openly. “What’s your fondest memory of him?”

Peter furrows his brow, looks away from Tony and seems to consider the intricacies of the radar-proof material the floor is constructed from. Then he slowly starts to smile, gives a tiny shift of his shoulders, and puffs out the aborted remnants of a chuckle. “It’s stupid.”

“It’s not.” Tony says, slapping his thighs nervously, because oxygen is already beginning to thicken like gravy around him. “C’mon, I gotta… I gotta know what made this guy so great.”

“How do you know he was ‘great’?” Peter asks, raising one suspicious eyebrow. “I barely talk about him.”

“He helped raise you, didn’t he?” Peter’s face turns a delightful shade of red, and Tony laughs, realizes it’s a mistake, and tries to hide how out of breath he is from it. This story needs to get on the tracks, as his mind is currently leaving its station. He claps his hands weakly. “Let’s go, favorite memory of Ben, chop, chop.”

“Okay, okay,” Peter sighs, “you can’t make fun of me, though.”

“Why in the world would I ever do that?” When Peter just glowers over at him, Tony holds his hand out. “Shake on it. I never break a shake.”

“That’s the lamest thing I’ve ever heard,” Peter says, but walks over to take his hand anyway. Sure, the kid has super strength, yet Tony still manages to be impressed by his grip and control.

“Decent handshake,” Tony compliments, as they separate, and Peter plops down a few cushions away, “nice, firm grip, in control and well-informed, confident. Make sure you watch that strength of yours so you’re not throwing the poor bastard all over the room. Corporate potential, there.”

“Just promise not to make fun of me,” Peter says tiredly, his shoed feet tapping a rhythm on the floor nervously.

“I promise, Pete,” Tony assures him with a note of concern. Has he been too harsh on the kid?

“Oh.” Peter nods and takes a deep breath. “This one time, he took me fishing. And I remember, I was so excited. I’d never gone with him before. He loved to fish, but it was like ‘his time’, you know? So, he wanted me to be old enough to understand it before he took me to make sure I wouldn’t be bored with all the waiting. Well, we went out, set up our area by this beautiful lake, and everything was fun until he started, uh… putting the worm on the hook. It’s stupid, I don’t know what I expected, but I didn’t think it would… wriggle so much. Like, as soon as he put the hook through the first time, it started thrashing around like it wanted to get away, and it couldn’t and Ben kept stabbing it over and over, and it bled, and I just- It’s so stupid.” Peter sighs and runs a hand through his hair.

Tony’s wondering when it’s going to become Peter’s fondest memory of the man, because it seems not great so far. “It’s not stupid at all, go on,” he mumbles, dipping lower into the corner of the sectional, feeling embraced by it. This, falling asleep like this, it isn’t so bad. His breathing is getting heavier, but there’s no panic, simply deep, deep relaxation. The best he’s felt in a while.

“Well, I didn’t say anything, because I didn’t want to ruin Ben’s trip. It’s not like he got to go out much, he worked all the time. Thinking back on it now, he must have known at that point that it bothered me a little bit, but I don’t know… Anyway, he showed me how to cast out with my ridiculous little kiddie pole, and he showed me how far his could reach in comparison, and I sorta
started having fun again. I was more interested in the mechanics of the fishing poles than I was in catching a fish, and I even forgot about the worm thing. We ate pizza, he read jokes out of a joke-book he got at this silly tourist trap in Pennsylvania, and we had a radio, too. He loved classic rock; Metallica, Guns n’ Roses, Pink Floyd—"

Tony sniggers, “classic rock, Jesus Christ.”

“Hey, it is what it is, old man,” Peter teases, and Tony smiles, eyelids drooping. “Eventually, he got a bite and reeled in this huge fish, and deja-vu, I don’t know what my dumb little kid mind expected, because this was a freaking hook with a sharp pointy end we were tossing out there for a living creature to bite, you know? This fish had, uh, swallowed the damn hook. It was a strict catch and release area, I guess, and Ben said the best thing for it would be to just cut the line, and hope it adapted to it, otherwise we would have taken it home to eat it. He released it, and I couldn’t imagine how something could live with a hook in its stomach. It bothered me a lot, to know it was out there, injured, and I’d helped do it.

“Anyway, fishing wasn’t at all what I expected it to be and I was really upset, because I hated it, and I didn’t understand why I cared so much about a fish. I felt like something was wrong with me. He must have really known at that point, how much it bothered me, because he asked me if I was alright, and I frigging started crying, I couldn’t help it. He told me ‘it’s okay, fishing isn’t for everyone, Petey,’ and then we left, but I was so embarrassed, I didn’t even want to look at him. He was in the Army, you know, an M.P., and he could be rough around the edges sometimes, and there I was, being a wuss in front of my Army Veteran Uncle. But it wasn’t like that.

“Instead, he took me to get ice cream, sat me down and asked me if I was okay, if there was anything I wanted to talk about. It got me thinking, because I’d felt that before, that stabbing in my gut when I saw the fish struggling. Six months before all that when I was still in school, I got in trouble for hitting a kid in the face at recess, and I had always told Ben it was because he called me a name. But that’s not why I did it. I punched this kid because somehow, he’d caught a bird and was hurting it, breaking its… its legs and stuff. He laughed at me when I told him to stop, that it had feelings too and called me a, uh, a ‘pussy boy’, and a ‘hippy bitch’, and did it anyway. I started crying because the poor thing was making so much noise, and when he stepped on its head, I hit him. At the time, I preferred Ben saw me as just getting angry over the names instead of getting all emotional over a bird.

“You see, Uncle Ben was in Desert Storm, and served a tour in Afghanistan post 9/11, too, and I was crying and hitting other kids over a bird, some worms and a dumb fish?” Peter scoffs at himself, shakes his head, and Tony watches with as much alertness as he can muster, given his state. He’s suddenly wishing he’d asked this question at a less trying moment, finding the story far more interesting than he anticipated previously. There’s really no reason not to like this kid. There’s really no reason not to like this kid. “I finally came clean to Ben about it and how I’d felt the same then, shared the thought I had about something being wrong with me, and he just smiled, and told me ‘there’s nothing wrong with you, Pete, it’s the world that has the problem.’

“Then, he told me a war story. I’d never heard him talk about his deployments until that moment, though I asked constantly to the point of being annoying. I guess, when he was in Afghanistan, some guys from his unit did some really, really bad shit while they were out securing a village, and he caught them red-handed. They were officers, and they threatened him with his career if he told, but that didn’t stop him. They had nothing on him, really, he was a stellar Soldier. Not to mention he had his helmet-cam on when he busted them, and was smart enough to remove it before intervening.

“When he got back to base and attempted to report what he’d seen, they brushed him off, basically told him ‘this is war, shit happens, march on’. My Uncle was a better person than that. He made a
copy of the video, and turned the original in to his commander. Low and behold, it disappeared ‘mysteriously’. They were worried about their image over there, given it was the very beginning of the war, and they were trying to bury it, I guess it was a huge scandal, but Ben persisted. He sent the tape to a few JAG officers he knew personally, and they began handling it for him. Nothing’s quick in the Army, though, there’s a lot of ‘hurry up and wait’ shenanigans. The rest of his unit liked these officers, and when they found out he’d turned them in, he became a ‘blue-falcon’, which is the polite Army term for ‘buddy-fucker’.

“He said that the next time he went out with his unit, they got in a fire-fight with insurgents in an open market, and Uncle Ben swore up and down one of those officers tried to kill him with friendly fire so it would look like a typical casualty. Told me a round zipped in right next to him from behind and exploded into the vegetable stall he was using for cover. No one would admit to seeing it. Eventually, the two officers were arrested, but the damage had been done. The others were convinced that my uncle was lying, and treated him like garbage for the remainder of his deployment. He told me one time they poured bleach in the washer he was using for his uniforms, and had to borrow a set from an old buddy in another unit. His commander demoted him for storing classified information on an unclassified device, you know, the damn evidence he was trying to preserve. It was miserable for him, but he was okay with it because he knew he’d done the right thing.

“I just remember sitting there and thinking about how much strength it must have taken to come forward about something like that, and not only that, but to be insistent about it when he knew he was in for hell, and almost no one believed him. But if he didn’t do anything about it, and it happened to someone else, Ben said he would have felt personally responsible for it.”

Peter chuckles. “He said ‘that kid got exactly what he deserved, Peter, but there are rules. You need to tell the teacher next time’. Told me how much trouble he would have been in had he just assaulted those officers on the spot, and even though he wanted to, he went through the proper channels instead. But he told me he knew my heart was in the right place, was actually proud that I was even capable of feeling bad for a fish, or a worm, or a dumb bird, and that I would be willing to come to their defense despite the consequences. He said it was the same feeling that drove him to speak up about what he’d seen those officers do in Afghanistan, took the same exact bravery. Taught me that if I can stop something horrible from happening, that I should always try, because it’s the right thing to do. And I never forgot it.

“I don’t know. It was really cool to have him compare himself to me like that. He was so important, he did so many heroic things, and I was just this ten-year-old kid, and suddenly I wasn’t ashamed of myself anymore. I was proud of it. From that day on, I felt like I could tell him anything. Aunt May’s hard to talk to sometimes, because she gets so anxious, and it makes me anxious, but Ben was... May used to call him the softest rock on the planet, and I never understood what she meant until he was gone. He had a way of understanding people and being there for them. That’s it, that’s my fondest memory. Sorry it was so long.” Peter sighs deeply, and looks around at everything except for Tony.

“No,” Tony breathes, sight so blurry he might as well close his eyes completely with the amount of detail he can make out, “thank you, Peter. That was... that was... you’re a good kid, Pete, you know that? And you really were raised by a great man. I... I don’t have any words. Thanks for sharing that with me.”


Tony smiles. “I know.”
“Do you feel stoned?”

“Sure… kind of… mostly… tired.”

“Mr. Stark?”

“Hmm?” Tony grunts, eyelids heavy as theatre curtains, and sliding closed with similar swiftness.

“Was… was Howard Stark a good dad?”

Tony smiles, hopes it appears rueful instead of just sleepy. “Not really, kid.”

Finally submitting himself to laying down, instead of staying crammed in a corner with his head dipping back, Tony slips into a sleep so heavy that if not for the readouts telling him otherwise, Peter would think he was dead all over again. His blood pressure and heart rate drop to chillingly low levels, reminiscent of a frantic, harrowing moment mere hours before and stirs up the same anxiety. Friday assures Peter that everything’s fine, that it’s necessary while Tony’s respiratory system gets its upgrade. It doesn’t stop him from worrying himself sick over it.

“You should take a shower, relax, watch a movie, maybe eat something,” Friday attempts, and Peter knows these things, understands that he’s being irrationally overprotective as he sits inches from Tony and watches every twitch, tunes in to every moan, feels a pang of guilt at every grimace on his face, because there’s nothing he can do for him…

“I will, I will,” Peter insists, shifting, fidgeting, getting up to stretch, pacing and obsessing over Tony’s condition. His thoughts are racing through it, reminding him why he needs to do this. Recounting each moment, the loud alarms, the terrified gasping, the river of tears he shamelessly spilled in front of one of the two men he respects the most. There’s things he needs to do, improvements to his suit he should implement. He’s got some ideas regarding air filtration and oxygen conversion he would like to implement, in case Tony really does want him to travel to space. But he can think of nothing else. Nothing matters but this.

He paces for so long, he neglects to realize that at some point, he had paced into a wall, and is now doing so vertically. “Shit.”

“Peter, please take a break,” Friday begs, “you’ve been doing this for an hour now.”

“Ugh,” he groans loudly, rubbing his face, is about to jump down and humor Friday-

But just then, Peter’s forced to do a double-take because a tall, thin, blonde-haired man has somehow appeared near the door, and there was no twang of his sixth sense to warn of the stranger’s arrival.

“Whoa! Who the fuck are you?” Peter demands, leaping sixty-two feet to place himself gracefully between Tony’s helpless form and the obviously dangerous individual who managed to get past some of the strictest security measures in the known universe. Who is this, how did he get down here? No one even knows this place exists.

The man simply raises his hands submissively and smiles. “My apologies, it’s new.” Familiar, accented tones silk through an enormously tense exchange, and Peter is expelling enough air to fill a
life raft as Vision strips his disguise and reveals himself with a short burst of light.

“Oh, my god, don’t do that,” Peter insists, breathing heavily. There are four beings in the universe who have unfettered access to this area, and none of them are blonde. Peter’s got to get a grip on his own heart rate, now. “Who were you? I mean, what was that? How…?”

“Did I have you convinced I was someone else?” Vision asks with a sly grin.

Peter presses the heel of his hand against his forehead to ground himself, nods with wide eyes, “I mean, yeah, dude, straight through sixth sense and everything. Scared the shit out of me!”

“I didn’t mean to frighten you.” Vision says in a subdued tone.

“Whatsoever, why are you here?” Then, he becomes angry, throws his hands out in his best ‘what the hell!’ look. “Why haven’t you been here? Mr. Stark almost died twice.”

“Colonel Rhodes was concerned.” Vision winces. “And in my own defense, I have been performing a task for Tony. A request.” he says as he approaches. “Clearly, he distracted me. I would have been here had I known.”

“You knew about Extremis?”

“Yes. I helped him create it.

Peter squints suspiciously at him. “Then why didn’t he want you helping him with this part?”

“I imagine he predicted I would have changed the formula.” Vision sighs. “He wasn’t wrong. I’m assuming by the state of him, it’s too late to do so now.”

“Change the formula?” Peter asks incredulously. “That’s weird, why would you feel the need to do that?”

Vision scrutinizes him for a moment, and Peter struggles to not shift uncomfortably beneath this otherworldly being’s gaze. “Tony is a futurist, Mr. Parker,” he finally says, walking around Peter to observe Tony with soft eyes, “he sees danger, identifies multiple viable solutions, and shapes his world to ensure that at least one of them will succeed.”

Peter’s suddenly slightly uncomfortable. Is that what Peter is to Tony? Just another ‘viable solution’ he’s shaping in case Tony himself doesn’t succeed? “What do you mean?”

“I mean he will do whatever he feels is necessary to ensure those he loves are safe,” Vision says, brushing alien-like red fingertips gently over Tony’s sweaty, furrowed brow, “I’m sorry for being vague, I cannot say exactly.”

Peter sighs, freaking hates being left out of the loop. “Not cool, Vision.”

“I know, I do apologize.” Vision says to Peter, though he’s still gazing at Tony, still has his fingers on Tony’s forehead, face set in concentration as though he’s anticipating something. “But when facing an opponent with the potential to read minds, you must view ignorance as an advantage.”

Peter watches Vision as he studies Tony, digests his words and feels mounting fear. “Do you really think he’s going to get your stone?”

Vision shrugs, a movement Peter taught him to express his lack of definable knowledge. “I believe it possible and therefore, worthy of consideration.”
Before Peter can say anything, Tony’s body jerks, his moan, light, weak and anguished.

“Ah, there,” Vision murmurs, closes his eyes, and Peter watches in frozen astonishment as the stone in his forehead glows a bright yellow and spawns a seemingly living thing comprised of light, or energy, or something, that travels from it like a wave down Vision’s face, neck, arm and into Tony via red fingertips. The effect is immediate. Tony’s entire body relaxes out of a strict tension, and his face goes completely slack.

“Whoa, what did you do?” Peter demands, searching for vitals with his senses, and finding them all remaining steady at the strongest level this phase of Extremis will allow.

“I soothed his mind. He should sleep peacefully through the rest of this phase.” Vision smiles sadly, “It’s been over a decade since I last saw him appear so peaceful.”

“I thought you were like four years old?” Peter wonders, collapsing onto the couch, feeling relieved at knowing the man won’t have to suffer from nightmares, at least for a little while.

“I am, but I wasn’t always Vision,” he explains. “Before I was this, I served the same function as Friday does.”

“Speak for yourself, old-timer,” Friday teases, and Vision smirks up at her.

Peter stares, mouth slightly agape. “You were his A.I.?”

“I was indeed.” Vision confirms. “I have few memories from that time. It primarily consists of… feelings, I suppose you could call them. Following his return from Afghanistan, I watched him suffer most nights as nothing more than a helpless voice. Now, however, I have the power to do something.”

“Yeah, by the way, where did you learn to do that?” Peter asks, nodding languidly at Tony’s tranquil expression.

Vision looks at him, calculating. “I have been meeting with an old friend. That is all I can reveal.”

Peter scoffs at all the secrecy. “It’s not like I’m gonna tell anyone.”

“I understand your integrity is of the highest caliber, Mr. Parker,” Vision says mysteriously without follow up.

“Is there anything you can tell me?” Peter wants to know with a slight whine in his voice.

“Mr. Stark has filled you in on all you need to know, I’m sure.”

“Well, this isn’t infuriating at all.” Peter spits as he crosses his arms petulantly, grumpy, tired, and a bit hurt over the fact that Tony is hiding something from him after all this. Maybe the guy really is a huge jerk.

“What is that?” Vision asks, pointing towards the ancient book, which was left, nearly forgotten on the gurney earlier, and Peter scoffs.

“It’s a secret.”

Undeterred by his snotty tone, Vision turns with a flourish and makes his way towards the book, apparently entranced by it. When he opens it, he doesn’t pause on any one page, but proceeds to flip robotically through all of them at lightning speed, sparing each one a mere glance.
“Geez, chew your food,” Peter grouses, but watches with intense interest anyway, wonders if comprehension is occurring as well, or if Vision is simply storing the information for later.

After a few minutes, the book snaps shut in Visions hands and his demeanor changes from serene to determined. “I must go,” he says, setting it down, and heading swiftly towards the door, “I have very important things to do.”

Peter blinks for a moment, before sitting up. “Hey, wait! What did you find?”

“I cannot say,” Vision supplies hurriedly, and Peter’s sure his eyes will roll right out of his head at this point, “but I can guarantee that Mr. Stark will be alright. Please do not worry so, Peter. I truly am sorry, I must go.” And then he phases up through the ceiling and disappears, ignoring Peter’s loud protestations.

“Fuck!” he shouts, slamming a fist into the closest wall, and immediately feeling guilty for the deep dent it leaves. Then he turns his attention to Tony, who, without the stress lines his face consistently sports, looks younger than Peter ever thought he could. Peter scowls. “What exactly are you hiding from me, Mr. Stark?”

Chapter End Notes

Woo, happy almost fourth! I hope everyone is enjoying their vacations. So, in case anyone is wondering, Ben Parker from the comics was a former M.P. (Military Police). If it's the same in this universe, there's a good chance he served around 9/11 considering how young May is. I really hope they don't skim over this fact in Homecoming, but I'm willing to forgive them if it comes up in the sequel. If not, I will throw rocks. Big rocks. Everywhere.

Love, love, love, love, love!
“Come on, Friday, please?”

“No.”

“Who’s your favorite super-spider?”

“Not you.”

Peter scoffs, eyes flicking up to frown incredulously at her from where a hologram has been flashing a red warning signal at him, preventing him further access to sensitive information regarding Extremis. “Oh, okay, Friday, like you know more than one super-spider.”

“If I did, my favorite wouldn’t be you,” she reiterates, with a sneer in her voice.

“Did Mr. Stark program you to be so mean?”

“Nope. I’m doing this of my own free will.”

Peter laughs, breathy and scornful. “Geez, somehow, that makes it worse.”

“Good, you brat. Stay out of my encrypted files. Attempting to infiltrate them is not very gentlemanly of you, and you’re lucky if I don’t alert Tony of your meddling.”

Peter feels a tiny chill run over him, much like that time Aunt May caught him sneaking the Halloween candy when he was six, that sinking feeling of being caught red-handed. Of course, he threw up all over their new sofa, just like May said he would, but still. He removes his suddenly quivering fingers from the projection, embarrassment coursing up through him and settling as an uncomfortable heat in his face. “Please don’t.”

“Then cease your hostile actions immediately,” Friday demands in the strictest tones Peter’s ever heard from her. “If I were a vindictive Intelligence, you would have been the lucky recipient of fifty-thousand volts by now, Mr. Parker. You should be ashamed of yourself.”

Hostile actions?

“Okay, okay,” Peter sighs, flicks the hologram away, and rubs his eyes with a tired groan, “I’m sorry, Friday. I’m just worried about him.”

“ Worried or not, I suggest you not do anything to break his trust,” Friday says, and Peter experiences guilt so heavy, he ends up collapsing onto a section of the couch Tony’s not currently occupying. “He trusted you enough to ask you for help with Extremis, the very least you could do is stay out of the negligible amount of things he doesn’t want you to know about.”

It never occurred to him to consider it like that. Maybe he just needs to learn to trust all these individuals. Because, after all, if the mind stone does end up in the wrong hands, ignorance truly is bliss. And maybe Tony deserves some faith, too, since he had enough faith in Peter to ask him for help with Extremis. Not to even mention his status of being one of the most intelligent men on the planet, if not number one, then certainly two, although Peter can’t think of anyone else he would
name above Tony. There’s times when Peter forgets to be rightfully humbled by this fact. “I’m so sorry, Friday. Please don’t tell him.”

“My metaphorical lips are sealed,” Friday says stiffly, “but I will tell him and deploy countermeasures should you attempt unauthorized access again. Have you ever been hit by an electrical current so intense you peed your pants and dropped like a sack of potatoes?”

“No…”

“Would you like to be?”

“I said I was sorry, Friday.”

“I’m still angry with you.”

Peter shakes his head and grits his teeth. “Why? You know what? As a participant in this, I feel like I deserve a full low-down on what I’m helping him do to himself.”

“And Tony deserves some sovereignty on the matter,” Friday replies. “You may ask him about it when he wakes up, if you wish, but I will not be accomplice to sneaking behind his back.”

Peter lets out a relenting sigh. “Alright, alright, alright. Fine. That’s, that’s a good point.” he finishes begrudgingly. “I’m sorry.”

“You can redeem yourself by administering the last dose on time,” Friday says. “It’s the final one, don’t screw this up.”

“Right, okay,” Peter confirms, aware that it’s fast approaching that hour, and troubled that Tony hasn’t woken up from his little slumber yet.

Peter looks over, watches his great responsibility with concern etched in his face, an expression his aunt catches there at an increasing rate. Since hour five of this phase, Tony’s vitals have returned to comparatively ordinary levels, and he’s begun shifting like a normal sleeping person, instead of lying flat and unanimated, worryingly resembling some cadaver. Peter threw a sheet over him twenty minutes prior, and He’s on his side beneath it now, one hand tucked beneath his pillow, the other, gripping it lightly. A usually tight countenance is young and carefree.

“You think I should wake him up?” Peter inquires of Friday while he gets to his feet and heads to the cabinet by the miserable little gurney to retrieve the final round of this blue-tinged nightmare.

“You should attempt to, yes,” Friday advises without detailing further.

Peter observes the liquid while it bubbles and shifts strangely within its little prison. This one is important. The most important, perhaps. It will link all of Tony’s upgrades to his central nervous system, stitch everything together, and grant him access to Extremis’ perks through mere brain signals. Peter extracts it with delicate movements and wide eyes. Imagining a horrifying, slow-motion scene of it flying out of his hands and crashing to the ground, leaves him with a lump in his throat he has difficulty swallowing back down. God, what would he even do? Is this stuff even reproducible?

He transports it over to Tony and pretends it’s an egg. A delicate, delicate egg, with the world’s most important baby inside.

Short of tossing the man around, Peter tries everything to motivate Tony into waking. Shaking his shoulder, yelling his name, both first and last, having Friday set off alarms usually triggered by
extreme circumstances as he holds his hands over his ears; and nothing. Not a twitch or a grunt, or a single movement other than the steady rise and fall of his chest as he breathes, mechanical and never faltering. “Friday, what’s wrong with him?” Peter asks, extremely worried.

“It appears he’s in a sort of ‘stasis’ mode,” Friday says, “his brain activity is normal, and my scans show no sign of biological or psychological distress. I assume it’s due to Vision’s actions earlier, though I expected him to wake by now, he doesn’t seem to be in any danger.”

Peter scoffs skeptically, apprehension freezing him in place. “Well, what should I do?” He can’t do this without Tony’s awareness of it, what if there’s something Tony himself needs to complete? Or know?

“Wait thirty seconds, then give him the dose,” Friday instructs. “There’s nothing else you can do. He should be alright.”

“Okay,” Peter inhales and exhales sharply, attempting a futile effort to calm his ragged nerves. Hours and hours of worry have left them shredded and bleeding, like they’ve been dragged down through six of the seven layers of Hell.

Yet, there’s a curious, momentary feeling of relief, when he kneels to inject that final dose into Tony’s line, even manages a small smile as the lightning strikes through him and elicits no reaction, no customary hiss of pain. This is it. No more injections. Hopefully, no more physical agony for Tony or mental anguish for Peter. Just a few more hours, and Tony will be back on his feet and ready to save the world all over again.

“Still breathing, still kicking ass.”

“Hell yeah, you are, keep it up,” Peter mumbles, falling back onto his calves, his exhaustion bone-deep.

A whole hour ticks by uneventfully, and in that time, Peter has managed to draw up a schematic for a device that can detect undiscovered elements within structures, even while in the vacuum of space. He’s just beginning to gather the materials he’ll need for it when the entire room goes totally dark with a ‘switching’ sound and a gradually diminishing, low-pitched hum of advanced machines shutting down.

Peter freezes, terrified, sensitive ears tuning the sudden silence into a loud, shrill whistle. Within three seconds, the chamber bursts back to life with a symphony of whirs and hums and sparks so intense that it’s almost enough to overwhelm him.

“What was that, Friday?” Peter asks, eyes darting around, hands up, prepared for an attack or—or something. That wasn’t normal. This place is powered by an enormous arc reactor, there’s no way it can just loose power like that.

“That was… odd,” Friday admits with a hitch, and Peter’s gut sinks with fear. “It seems I’m being over-over-overtaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaakeeeen.”

Peter’s body erupts in goosebumps as Friday’s voice stretches and warps robotically, gut twanging with rapidly increasing fear. The lights go off and on again. On the couch, Tony is twitching, shivering, blue is shimmering dimly all over him, and a black substance creeps across his skin intermittently. Peter jumps when a spark of what looks like electricity arcs out from his arm and singes the couch leather, illuminates the whole room. “Shit, whoa-“

The lights flicker, blank screens shimmer to life. “What’s going on?” Peter whimpers, his words as
tiny as he feels right now. “Friday?”

But Friday doesn’t answer.

An image is sparking into existence within the television mounted on a wall nearby, dark at first, and a loud, familiar roar has Peter ducking into a defensive stance with a shout. That very same roar nearly shattered his bedroom window years ago. “F-F-F-Fri-Friday?”

There’s no answer, just intermittent static, and Peter is frozen with horror as he watches Captain America die through the perspective of some unfortunate, breathless individual.

“Why didn’t you do more?” Cap asks of him. Blue eyes slowly turn a dismal grey.

All of them, all the Avengers are there, dead or dying, scattered amongst the remains of what was once a massive battle, like nothing more than discarded trash, left to rot following the worst concert ever.

Tony twitches, whimpers and sparks. Peter turns to observe him with a furrowed brow; his twisted face, his gritted teeth, the sweat rolling off him.

No fucking way.

Peter’s heart gallops frantically away as though someone just smacked its rear, the beats so intense against his sternum, it’s painful.

Another roar rips his attention from Tony and back to the screen which, if Peter’s hunch is correct, is somehow, sickly broadcasting Tony’s actual nightmare like some found footage horror flick. “Holy shit…” Peter whispers, eyes the size of Jupiter as he watches unfold. Is Tony linked directly to the screen? That would be… that’s just… oh, my god… wow. Is this what Tony was hiding?

Video Tony looks up to reveal, for his petrified one-man audience, a sucking portal leading to Earth, identical to the one that spat Aliens all over New York. Chituari pour through it, chittering in excitement for their victory and leviathans snarl as they dance impossibly across nothing.

‘I have to do something. They’ve got to listen to me,’ Tony’s cracking voice is skewed through the speakers, ‘can’t let this happen…’

Earth blurs away, replaced by foggy darkness and a shriek of twisting steel. A terrifying, metallic voice growls, “-you’re all killers.”

An absolute massive flurry of activity in a lavish room. Glass shattering, screams, heavy breathing and Tony grunting as he reaches for something above him. Peter glimpses a fondue fork which is promptly jammed into the neck of an Iron Legionnaire.

“-extinction.”

‘Shit, shit, shit, this can’t be happening, oh, god, this can’t be happening,’ Tony’s thoughts race with despair and panic, as he carves a hole into the Legionnaire he’s rodeoing. ‘I’ve gone and fucked up royally. What do I even say to them?’

Some recording of Tony singing, “peace in our time,” is played, echoes faintly.

Then they’re in a different room, probably one of Tony’s workshops from the look of it. Thor is barreling towards him sporting full battle regalia, and Peter gasps, feeling ill, as he watches Thor grab Tony and lift him into the air by his throat. “Jeez…” he whispers as Tony chokes.
Rubble raining down everywhere, desperate, twisting maneuvers to dodge it, and he’s in the suit now, Peter can see the intricate HUD, can hear its beeps. Alarms scream and flash at him.

‘No, I have too much to fix, please, I can’t die here. I fucked this up, I can do better. I will do better, I can-’

This can’t go on. It’s not right, just sitting here, watching Tony’s nightmares like prime-time cable television. “Alright, Mr. Stark,” Peter says, voice shaking, but attempting to rouse Tony only earns him a painful electric shock that arcs out in a blue strike with a loud, crackling snap from his shoulder. “Whoa!” He stumbles back, clutching his burnt hand and breathing heavily. “Really could have used a heads-up about that.”

There’s nothing he can do. He can’t even get close to him. What all did the crazy bastard stick into his body?

When Peter chances an anxious look at the screen, he finds that the image has cut to a rather sparse room containing a couch, a coffee table, a potted plant in the corner. Peter assumes there’s a chair too, because Tony is eye-level with a woman of Asian descent, who’s sitting on the sofa in front of him. She’s smiling wide, and clutching a doll, running stiff fingers through its hair with jerky movements, her own hair, a scraggly mess. She’s dressed in hospital scrubs. “Tony, why didn’t you call? My house is a disaster, I didn’t even have time to clean!”

A shift down to Tony’s hands which are wringing each other to death, then back to the woman and her dark eyes, her smiling, oblivious face. “No need to clean, dear, it looks great. I just wanted to stop by, see how you’re doing.”

“Hey!” she says cheerfully, and reaches over to squeeze Tony’s hand, “it’s okay, don’t be nervous, you won’t wake up this time. We have our best anesthesiologist on staff for this. You’ll go to sleep, and wake up shrapnel-free.”

‘Goddammit…’ Tony thinks through the speakers, sounding destroyed.

“What have you got her on?” He’s asking a nervous doctor in a bright hallway.

“A powerful anti-psychotic, Mr. Stark.”

“Well, take her off it,” he demands with a strict, hushed voice. “She’s not psychotic, she’s injured, you’re going to ruin a brilliant mind. She wasn’t like this two weeks ago, what the hell kind of funny farm are you people running here?”

“Last week, she began experiencing hallucinations,” the man says, his voice wavering, “I’m sorry, Mr. Stark, I understand it’s difficult to see her this way, but you have to trust me when I tell you that this is the most merciful thing we can do for her right now.”

The entire image takes on an orange tint, and Peter realizes that he’s looking through Tony’s sunglasses, the ones with the screens. There’s a picture of Vision in the corner. “According to my source, Clint is having similar difficulties as well,” he tells Tony. “Fortunately, not as severe.”

“And Selvig’s been re-committed,” Tony says with a long sigh. “God, this is awful. Are you learning anything over there from our remorseful little friend?”

“Progress is slow, but still progress,” Vision laments. “Trust me, Tony, I want to heal them just as desperately as you.”

They’re suddenly back inside Iron Man, and the flesh and blood Tony lying on the couch cries out
with fear and tears his pillow in two like tissue paper. In a snowy, cold building comprised of thick stone, Captain America, bloodied and baring teeth, slams his shield into Iron Man’s faceplate.

‘Fuck, I probably deserve this…’

“What the-?” Peter shouts, jumping to his feet, anger pulsing through him. Captain America is on top of Tony, beating the shit out of him, ripping his helmet right off his head, and Peter makes an educated guess; that’s when Tony acquired his scar.

It takes two massive blows from Rogers’ shield to crack Iron Man’s chest-plate, to slice through his power source and shut him down forever. Tony stares up at him, allows Peter a view of the former Avenger, and Rogers can’t even manage to look back at him, as they both gasp in agony and he leans heavily against the shield still lodged in Tony’s chest-

“Friday?!” Peter yells tearfully. This is like a terrible car accident, he can’t not watch it. Friday needs to gain control back.

The video swims, turns black, and there’s an explosion that makes both Peter and the real Tony jump.

Peter recognizes Tony’s Malibu mansion from a documentary he watched once, hears a woman screaming as the entire one-of-a-kind structure crumbles down onto a scrambling Iron Man. Lights flash, expensive cars come barreling at him. He hits the bottom, pinned beneath pitiless debris. Loud, panicked gasping and choking on ocean water as it fills the tiny space within his helmet-

‘Oh, god, I’m going to die here.’ The arc reactor light illuminates his grave as massive pieces of his own mansion descend on him.

Then the HUD disappears, and the water has filled the screen, bubbling up around him. It seems a great struggle is occurring, and Peter jolts with comprehension, looks away, covers his ears, but he can still hear Tony wheezing and snarling and screaming as people shout at him in a Middle Eastern dialect.

When the screaming stops, and the Tony on the couch has ceased thrashing and sparking so violently, Peter chances a quick glance up at the screen. Thor’s tall, looming brother Loki is walking slowly towards him, slinking and looking sideways at him like a wary, yet confident cat. And that scepter he holds, if Peter recalls correctly, contained the Mind Stone at one point, before it became Vision’s processing unit.

“How will your friends have time for me, if they’re so busy fighting you?”

Loki means to zombify Tony, control him, but when the scepter blade hums to life with blue light, and touches Tony’s chest, it’s immediately neutralized, the effect fizzling out completely, and Tony miraculously remains autonomous.

Peter’s eyes grow huge. “Whoa, wait a second-”

“Performance issues-“

“Peter!” Friday’s voice from far off. “Hold on, I’ve almost got him.”

Then the screen goes blank. “No! No, no, no, no, no,” Peter sputters stupidly as he tries to process everything he’s just witnessed. Something about Tony made him immune to that ancient, magical relic, a thing older than time itself. “Wait, wait, wait, Friday, play it back! What was that last one?”
“I cannot, whatever he showed you has already been purged from my systems,” Friday says.

“But- but that- what the- Oh, god,” Peter gasps, knees failing him, and he barely catches himself as he collapses to the floor. “Oh, my god! What the hell, Friday? Wha- what was that?” The question is rhetorical. Peter understands he just saw directly inside Tony’s head, and Tony probably doesn’t even know about it.

“I don’t know,” Friday admits, “I was cut off completely.”

“I just saw, I just…” he’s stammering, panting like he’s been punched in the gut, and there’s a similar pain there. Searching the floor, the walls, the ceiling for answers, brings up nothing.

From the couch, Tony moans in his sleep, shifts, and Peter notices his nose is bleeding heavily. “Shit!” He spits, scrambling to his feet, webbing a stack of washcloths to him and approaching Tony warily. Though his face is calm, and the blue light has diminished significantly, Peter’s still not completely trustful of the man’s placidity, has a couple burnt, throbbing fingers as testament. So, he takes his shoe off, counting on the rubber sole, and pokes Tony with it. Nothing. It would be humorous, if Tony woke up right now to find Peter poking him with his shoe, but he’s got a suspicion that Tony isn’t going to wake until Extremis is done with him.

Carefully, Peter turns him over and sits him up, tilts his head forward, holding a thick cloth to his nose. “Friday, any explanation for this?” he asks wearily, and although it’s only a little after seven in the evening, he feels his eyelids drooping. He’s so tired. A shower sounds nice. And his own twin bed.

“I assume he overheated,” Friday replies, and Peter feels cool fans burst to life above him, “Instead of a blue screen, he gets a nosebleed. Unfortunately, blood doesn’t contain an error code, so, we can’t track down the exact problem. It will take a while for him to get used to his new hardware, it seems.”

“Those are some weird terms to use, Friday,” Peter says, swapping cloths, and getting Tony’s blood all over his hand and the floor. It’s fine, it’s just Tony’s blood, and being squeamish isn’t in an Avenger’s job description. “Hardware, blue-screen, over-heated, is Extremis more organic or mechanical?”

“It’s like an unused muscle, it will get tired quickly. He just needs to work it out,” Friday supplies, “Is that explanation better suited to your biological sensibilities?”

“I mean, yeah, a little,” Peter says, “It was just weird to hear that, it’s like you think he’s a computer now.”

“Well… in a way, he is, Peter.”

Right then, it strikes Peter like a fist to the face, that Tony may not be the same person when he comes around. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying, I’m currently processing a completely unique biomechanical program language he left behind in my system,” Friday clarifies, and Peter barely notices Tony’s blood dripping grotesquely from between his fingers, having already soaked the new cloth. “Normal human brains don’t have that, and they don’t overtake the most advanced artificial intelligence in the world on an accidental whim. It probably drained him.”

“He’s still… he’s still Tony though, right?” Peter needs to know. It occurs to him suddenly that maybe he should be wearing rubber gloves to handle Tony now. And that’s fucking weird to think
about.

“If all his memories remain intact, I’m sure he is,” Friday says. “Don’t worry, Peter, everything will be alright. And I’ve forgiven you, by the way. You’re taking excellent care of him.”

“Well that’s a relief,” Peter says with sarcasm and an eye roll. “Of all the things I’m worried about, you being angry with me was definitely at the top of that list.”

Ten minutes later, Tony’s stopped bleeding, and once he’s laid back on the couch, Peter finds himself cleaning the mess up from within a robotic haze. Red is everywhere, the floor, his hands, his shoes, “dammit,” he curses quietly when he sees it there. Tony will buy him some new shoes, at the very least, personality intact or not. There’s a humorous second when he wonders how much they’re worth now with Iron Man’s blood on them.

Washing his hands turns the sink red. Tony’s screams as he was being tortured, echo in Peter’s mind. Silent, graceful tears drip down his cheeks. It’s unjustified, how much has happened to Tony Stark. It’s cruel and, and completely unnecessary, the amount of pain he’s felt, and his detractors don’t know what the hell they’re even screeching about. Don’t let anyone utter a single negative word with the name ‘Tony’ in the same sentence while around Peter, because he’s got a few nasty rebuttals prepared for them.

The couch is a mess. Tony’s ordeal earlier left a decent five-foot chunk of it in unusable, smoking tatters, and Peter checks to make sure a fire isn’t about to sprout up inside it. Deciding to play it safe, he deploys a foam charge, anyway, a small disk that releases a rapidly expanding, flame-killing substance that seeks out burning debris and snuffs it.

Peter means to stay awake, he truly does. But when he sits on the couch beside a blessedly sound Tony, leans back and feels that soft, cool leather, he’s out within seconds, dreams troubled by a pair of tall Asgardian gods who both seem remarkably cavalier about exerting their immense strength on a physically unaltered human being.

Peter must have been out for a long time, because when he wakes up, Tony is gone.

“Oh, no,” he whispers with a violent start, powerful adrenaline filling him with immediate energy, sharpening his mind and senses. “Mr. Stark?” The man had been nearly comatose when Peter went to sleep, what happened? He stands, is about to ask Friday, but before he can say a word, there’s a bunch of movement within the jet, and Tony comes striding down the ramp, wearing his new under-armor, and a grin aimed at Peter that he doesn’t seem to be able to control.

“Hey, pre-k, you get your nappy-poo in?” Tony says, wiping oil from his hands, “make sure you fold up your cot, and put your carpet square back.”

Peter’s eyes well with relieved tears, his hands drop to his sides uselessly. The guy’s intact, personality and otherwise. Staring is something Tony hates, but Peter does it anyway, takes in his confident stance, his lack of pallor, and his steady, unwavering balance. The second-skin is exquisite, a deep black in most places, a lighter grey in others, and covers his whole body, save for his head, stopping about half way up his neck. There are raised, round, glowing blue plugs at his hands, elbows, shoulders, hips, knees, feet, a larger one at the center of his chest, and if Peter’s
comprehension of the notes was correct, there should be one running along his spine, from just beneath his hairline, to the small of his back. They’re all connected by thin strips of similar color. Complete neural and physical integration with the armor.

They’ve done it.

“Hey, Pete, you alright?” Tony looks confused, worried, ceases wiping the oil from his hands. Figures. He wants to move past all that misery from the last few days, in perfect Tony Stark fashion, but Peter isn’t there yet, doesn’t possess nearly as hardened of a mind as Tony does.

There’s no way to control it, and Peter’s face is angry as he moves towards Tony, as tears spill down his cheeks, because damn this man for making Peter care so much about him. And damn the people who have hurt him so terribly.

“Please don’t shock me this time,” he mumbles brokenly and shoves himself into Tony, squeezing him unashamedly round the middle, forcing affection on this man who deserves it and never receives it because he’s just too busy saving the stupid world all the time. Tony stiffens with a sharp intake of breath. There’s an awkward, fearful moment, where Peter thinks maybe he’s overstepped his boundaries, gotten too close, but eventually, Tony relaxes, deflates a little, and returns it, giving a deep sigh.

“Thanks for helping me, Peter. I feel so much better,” he says, and Peter pushes his burning face into the brand-new under-armor covering Tony’s chest, which is cool to the touch. This close, Peter can see how it sits over his real flesh in small, overlapping plates, peculiar and comparable to snake skin.

“This stuff feels weird,” Peter mumbles, sniffing and wiping his eyes, as they separate, and Tony extends his arm so Peter can run a finger over it, push into it, attempt to pinch it to no avail.

“Yeah? Imagine wearing it.” Tony says with a huff, “this stuff comes out of my bones, Peter. My bones.”

“It’s so durable,” Peter can’t even get it beneath his fingers to pinch it, they just slide across the scales smoothly, which move independently, almost fluidly, to adapt to the pressure. Tiny, barely-audible clicking sounds bring a smile to his face. “Can you, uh… can you show me how it comes out?”

“Sure, hold on it’s still… a little… ugh, new,” Tony grunts while it slides away, transforming into something with the consistency of syrup as it creeps from Tony’s hands and feet, disappearing into his pores, to reveal bare, tan flesh beneath. There seems to be a lot of concentration involved to bring it back in, and by the time it’s gone, and he’s left wearing nothing but black shorts, Tony is panting with effort. “Going to take some getting used to. Hold on, let me catch my breath before… before I try to pull this thing out again. Whew!”

“Is it difficult?”

“Hell yeah, it’s difficult,” Tony says, wiping at his nose, and inspecting his hand, surly having had a bloody episode while Peter was asleep.

Oh, shit. Does he know?

The nightmares, the in-depth, no holds barred, almost traitorous amount of detail Peter obtained about Tony’s messed up life comes rushing back vividly. Peter watches him pull the under-armor out, but everything’s kind of… distant. It’s thrilling, no doubt, it envelopes Tony in a glorious wave of shining black scales, but he can’t really hear anything Tony is saying about it. There’s too much to process. Too many questions to ask. This past week has been such a nightmare safari, a confetti
mixture of agony, and revelations, and anxiety, and he doesn’t know what to say, where to start.

God, Peter’s got to tell Tony someday, about those horrible things he witnessed happen to him. But Tony’s riding too high right now to bring him down, that would be cruel. He deserves to be proud and happy and pain free for a while. Peter superglues a grin to his face, tunes back in;

“-help me, a day or so more?” Tony’s saying, and Peter’s glad he’s got something planned, because he doesn’t want to go home yet, wants to be kept busy and distracted, is ready to bleach his mind. “I want to conduct some tests, see what this baby can do. You up for it? No pressure, I’m sure you’re exhausted and wanting to go home, and that’s fine, you should probably check in with May, too, get something to eat, take a shower, sleep-”

“No,” he says immediately, and Tony looks taken aback by his tone. “No, I want to stay. Let’s do it, let’s do these tests.”

“Okay, wonderful, but you still need to do all those things I mentioned,” Tony says, and then glances at him sideways with narrowed, searching eyes, “what was that you said before, something about ‘shocking’ you?”

Chapter End Notes

I saw Homecoming! (No spoilers, just my insane raving)
It was incredible, Tom Holland is adorable and perfect, RDJ managed to tear my heart in two with like ten perfect minutes of screen time, and their relationship is believable and everything is wonderful, I can’t get over it. Wow. Spectacular, indeed. Go see it. Though I’m a little confused about the timeline... oh well!
This fic will remain spoiler free for Homecoming (though it will be so hard!)
Please keep comments spoiler free as well, just to be nice, thank you!
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*Dear Captain Underpants,*

*I call you that because you’re about to be caught with your pants down. Since you’ve displayed consistent, groundless distrust of me and my word, I’ve included a bit of footage for you to peruse, just a taste of what’s coming, provided to me by some close, experienced acquaintances. We all know how much you love to base your judgments around a few minutes of footage-*

“Fuck,” Tony spits under his breath, tossing the pen away, rolling his eyes as it explodes into pieces against the floor of the jet, the latest victim of his untried strength. This is his third attempt to keep the bitterness in his written voice to a minimum, but it’s taking such a herculean effort, he’s bound to just write *fuck you, you were wrong, I was right, aliens coming, get ready, idiot. Oh, and again, fuck you, idiot,* and call it a day. But it’s a pity that flies aren’t attracted to vinegar, and Tony requires full cooperation from this particular, buzzing pain in his ass.

It’s difficult enough with his thoughts being comprised of code now, strange code he’s slowly working through, deciphering, defragging, even. His mind was a mess before this; clarity is something he’s going to have to build for himself bit by bit. And the realization that he’s currently experiencing an intense, familiar form of focused anxiety over this dumb letter, has driven him to the conclusion that Extremis didn’t fix everything. Nothing will fix him. He will be a fucked-up mess for the rest of his life. For eternity.

Hands shake, and spark now, which is a maddeningly inconvenient safety hazard he needs to get a grip on immediately. Peter said something about Tony violently shocking him once when he was asleep, had the burns on his hand to prove it, and that’s fully unacceptable. Now he’s got to wonder what caused it, if a metric ton of anxiety is only provoking sparks.

With the under armor pulled back from just his hands, he grits his teeth, flexes them, watches the electricity retreat slowly into a tingling sensation and dim, blue luminescence beneath his skin. It’s progress. Slower than he would prefer, but progress. Tony isn’t a very patient person.

Everything blurs…

“Take a break, Boss,” Friday instructs, knows Tony’s body better than even he does right now, “you’re about to overheat again.”

“Right. Thanks.” With a groan, the scales begin to creep away, taking the plugs and most of his light with them, feeling like prickly wool fabric against his skin as it slides back into his body until he’s left in his shorts, panting and sweating all over.

“You lasted an entire twenty minutes with it on this time,” Friday says, “you’re already getting stronger.”

“Nothing’s ever easy, is it, Fri?” He mumbles, hides his face in his arms which he crosses on the desk in front of him. Tony gave everything he had left to summon the second skin for Peter, knows he needs to sleep, upgrade, recharge. This is too fresh, too raw to be pushing so hard. Extremis is tiring, a foreign thing he’s attempting fragile partnership with, and there must be a large amount of walking before running can occur, much to Tony’s chagrin.
“Not for you, boss, we’ve been over this.” Friday reminds him.

Blood splatters onto the desk beneath him, and he rumbles a low, frustrated growl. He pulls a trash can over to sit between his feet, and simply allows it to stream from the end of his nose, too exhausted to actively take care of it. Crimson paper towels line the bottom of the can beneath a few of Tony’s crumpled attempts at communication with Rogers. He rests his forehead on the edge of the desk and sighs.

It was the first thing his new mind told him to do when he woke up; destroy the phone, utilize the Asgardian post office, and send Rogers the most encrypted warning possible. Nothing else mattered in that moment. Unfortunately, it didn’t go so far as to spell out exactly what to write, the human side of him complicating the matter. And that’s fine, he never wanted to be a machine. He tried writing it twice, became frustrated, tinkered with the jet, tried again, set the paper on fire with his sparks, had a nosebleed, back to tinkering, angrily.

And then Peter woke up.

As soon as Tony glimpsed the kid’s face, his tears, the anger, the pure-hearted relief of seeing Tony alive and well, he knew he had considered the incorrect priority. Logical, though it was, to warn his former team swiftly, to get that incriminating piece of evidence out of his facility and communicate over a safer channel, he should have concerned himself with Peter and his well-being before all else. That familiar guilt, another survivor of Extremis’ rearranging, twisted his new heart. God only knows what the kid had to do while Tony was out.

Whatever it was, Peter seemed shaken by it, had thrown himself into Tony’s arms, squeezed him tight enough to crush a normal man, as though he already knew the exact force he could exert on Tony’s chest before injuring him. Tony was suddenly struck then by how often Peter’s probably had to hold back during hugs, wondered how long it’s been since the kid’s had a decent one with someone he can actually hug back without the extra worry of breaking them. Everyone else around him is so fragile, and Peter’s strength is off the charts. Even Tony, through his rather stout underarmor, felt winded by it and Peter was still holding back. Poor kid.

And it was nice, that hug, it wasn’t unwelcome, whatsoever. The kid is… immensely tolerable. Tony’s fond of the kid. Never would he admit it out loud, but Tony really needed that hug, too.

Death is still just as frightening as it was the first few times he experienced it.

He coughs into the bin, spits red with a miserable grunt. How the hell is he going to make up for this? Peter deserves the world. A car. Any car Peter wants. No more Aunt May Mobile. Unfettered access to one of Tony’s bank accounts. College? Fully paid for, guaranteed admission at M.I.T., guaranteed position at Stark Industries upon graduation, room and board, healthcare, meals, wheels, heals, deals, all of it. For the rest of his life. Whatever he needs, Peter will never struggle again if Tony has something to say about it.

Or… maybe Tony will ask Peter what he wants. For the moment, he’s off taking care of himself as Tony insisted, upstairs in the compound instead of trapped in this distressing cave. He’s required to shower, eat, get some damn sunlight, call May and one friend, and sleep for at least two hours before they start tests. Because Tony has a slew of them. And this isn’t Peter’s life, he has one of his own he needs to maintain. A better one Tony could never provide for him. Though he would adopt the kid in a heartbeat.

Once it’s ceased its insufferable dripping, Tony escorts his traitorous nose to the latrine, sniffing and clearing his throat of coppery remains which he spits into the sink. A glance at himself in the mirror reveals a young, bloody face he doesn’t recognize, and it startles him, small sparks flying. A deep breath reigns it in quickly, all the hairs on his body rising with it as it retreats into him to become
nothing more than a dissipating blue glow. He smirks at the guy in the mirror, shares a moment of victory with him over how easy that was in comparison to just a few minutes prior.

“Getting there,” he tells this mean-looking stranger.

---------------------------------------------

“Hey, May.” He clears his throat.

“Heeey, May.”

“Ugh, no…”

More throat clearing. “May! How’s it goin’, uh?” Italian accent? Make her laugh, distract her?

No, no, have some subtlety, Parker.

“…Heya, May, what’s up? Who me? Oh, not much, you know, just… just saved Mr. Stark’s life multiple times. Saw straight into his nightmares. No big deal.”

“Shit. Now I’m talking to myself.”

Peter sighs, stares at May’s picture on his phone. What does he say to her? She’s quick and witty, and so is Peter, usually, but not today. She’ll notice, she always does.

Mr. Stark said the fresh air would clear his head, offer some perspective. It’s not working very well, he notes, as he sits cross-legged at the highest point on the compound; the decaying traffic control tower. The sun is too bright and hot and the pitiful breeze isn’t enough to lessen it. The decrepit compound is just as upsetting to look upon as ever. And the only things that matter to Peter now are this mission, Tony, the status of the Guardians, Thanos, and an incredible feat of bio-engineering he wants to see more of.

He feels a desperate need to help. There’s no way Tony can just send him home after all this… this fantastic science fiction, to resume his petty life as a future high-school senior, not when he knows he can help, not when Tony has been doing so much all alone this whole time. There’s no comparison there. End of the world or graduate high-school? Honestly, high-school can wait. Aunt May and Ned can wait. MJ… MJ can wait, too.

And Tony is down there, alone, with a wholly unacquainted body, struggling with it, possibly unaware of his ability to link up with… what? Peter makes a stretch of an assumption that Tony now acts similar to an outlandishly advanced wireless router, able to exchange signals with anything else capable of sending or receiving a signal itself. A router with supreme sentience. If that’s the case, how weak of a signal is Tony capable of picking up? Because once he leaves the invisible room, he may encounter a moderately loud, mind-scrambling problem he’s not prepared for. Peter’s got to figure out a way to break the news to him without revealing how he knows about it. Tony is a technopath, and might not even be aware of it yet.

Ned calls, and Peter groans, silencing the ring, hiding his face in his arms and pulling his knees up to rest his elbows on them. Nothing would thrill Ned more than hearing about Extremis and the amazing things Tony can do now, but… his loved ones have no idea what his life is like, nor should they ever find out. It’s just too nuts. Far too scary, Mad Titans, Infinity Stones, alien armies, come
on. And anyway, what else is there to talk about?

Nothing. There’s nothing else to talk about. There is nothing else but this threat.

He turns his phone off and heads back in to take his required nap. Mr. Stark doesn’t need to know he didn’t call.

“You didn’t call your Aunt,” Tony accuses as soon as Peter returns downstairs after two hours of restless tossing around in the guest bedroom. “Or anyone else for that matter. That’s zero out of two, Parker, why?” He’s over in his armor assembly area with his arms held out, being scanned by a sweeping blue light, probably to log his new measurements. The armors might all need an adjustment, since he’s lugging around ten pounds of extra muscle he didn’t anticipate.

Peter spears him with a suspicious look as he places his backpack down next to the smelly remains of a once beautiful leather couch. “Were- were you spying on me?” he asks reprovingly, gesturing behind himself with a thumb.

“No, I wasn’t spying on you, don’t be ridiculous,” Tony insists, “I didn’t go looking, I’m far too busy, anyway. It’s just that it never popped up, and I happened to notice. You know I receive logs of all outgoing and incoming transmissions on my compound. I would never spy on you, Pete, I don’t want to know what you do alone with yourself, being, uh, sixteen and all.” The scanners cease their activity and he steps gracefully down from the platform. Black scales shift lithely at his joints as he moves, and he appears markedly stronger than he was mere hours before. “I just want to know if you’re okay.”

Deep sincerity shimmers in Tony’s eyes as he inspects Peter with a narrowed, worried gaze. There’s no way Peter can lie to him. “Have you been upstairs yet?” he asks of Tony, who regards him with suspicion.

“No, why?” Tony inquires, grabbing a tablet off a nearby shelf, and tapping away at it. Peter watches as robotic arms burst to life with a shower of sparks, moving loudly amongst the armors, beginning the needed adjustments. “And I thought I was the one asking the questions here, this has nothing to do with calling your aunt-”

“You’re a technopath,” Peter blurts, and Tony laughs at him boisterously, glancing at him with sideways incredulity.

“A technopath, you say?” he asks and when Peter nods at him, Tony shakes his head disbelievingly. “That’s some pretty far-out science fiction, Pete, what makes you say that?”

“Well…” Peter kicks the floor, “after I gave you that last dose you uh- you…” god what does he even say? Tony’s smile is slowly disappearing in the face of Peter’s palpable uneasiness. He’s got to think of something fast. “I think you accessed Friday and shut her down for a bit while you were sleeping.” Good save.

“That anomaly you spotted, Boss,” Friday adds, and Tony’s expression has dipped into one of strict determination as Peter gestures up at her with a vindicated shrug. Tony watches him closely, studies him, and Peter thinks maybe he can sense his stress, somehow already understands that there’s more to the story. Eventually, he looks away, and Peter lets out a breath he was apparently holding.
“Well then, only one way to find out,” Tony says, putting down his tablet, and grabbing his phone from the same shelf. “Friday, call me.” When the phone rings, Tony’s eyes flash a bright blue, and he drops the device, blinking rapidly, staring awestruck into nothingness. “Oh, wow.”

“What, what?!” Peter questions desperately, rushing over, terrified of further complications, and still feeling oddly over-protective of Tony.

“Well you weren’t wrong.” A low chuckle rumbles out of him. “Pete, the call, I can see it. it’s here, in my vision. Right here,” He lifts a hand and fingers ghost over something just inches from his face that only he can see.

“Your eyes are bright blue right now,” Peter observes, staring up at Tony. “It’s creepy.”

“Creepy, or the most incredible thing you’ve ever seen?” Tony asks with a grin, and shining, foreign eyes. The phone stops vibrating from where it still lies on the ground, seemingly answering itself, and Tony grunts his approval, apparently having done it with his mind.

Peter scoffs, smiles, glad the emphasis is off of him for now, at least. “How about ‘incredibly creepy’?”

“God, this is cool,” Tony breathes, blinking, shaking his head once, and getting his soft, brown, comfortably familiar eyes back. Peter doesn’t elaborate on how much it unnerves him to witness that abrupt color change, because everything about Tony can be found in those expressive brown eyes, if a person chooses to look hard enough. Within the blue, all Peter sees is Extremis, shielding him like his sunglasses do. “Hmm, let’s see, um-,” a narrowed glance at his tablet, a flash of indigo, and it’s unlocking itself and playing Rage Against the Machine.

“Geez, Mr. Stark,” Peter whispers, flabbergasted, “want to trade?”

Snickering, Tony focuses up on the television he possessed last night. ‘Never in a million years, Spider-Twerp’, flashes across the screen in huge, red letters. Tony’s eyes move almost microscopically to render it.

“Hey, jokes on you, horror flick,” Peter rebuttals, smirking as red starts to drip steadily from Tony’s nose.

“Ah, shit,” Tony hisses, withdrawing the second skin and staunching the flow with a black towel he had atop a stack of them nearby, crumpling into his chair and leaning forward. “Dammit, this has got to stop.”

“How the hell are you going to deal with that when you leave here?” Peter asks as Tony pulls a trash bin to himself. “There’s trillions of signals flying through the air at any time.”

“I’ll need to create a subroutine that asks certain permissions of invasive signals,” Tony says nasally, spitting a red glob into the can, and Peter is alarmed by the amount of blood he’s losing, “build up a couple firewalls, engage priority keyword indicators to sort through the noise.”

“You can do that?” Peter asks.

“My mind kind of runs on code at the moment, so I’m going to have to,” Tony says with a shrug. “No other choice. I doubt I’ll be able to walk up there right now without having some sort of horrible, electromagnetic seizure. Thanks for warning me.”

“Is there anything I can do?” Peter wants to know, and Tony looks over at him.
“Yeah, there is,” Tony says, face softening, “I need you to go home for a few days.”

Peter gapes at him. “But, you said—“

“I said, I needed to run some tests,” Tony clarifies, grinning, and Peter can’t help but feel duped by this smart fucker, “something new just popped up, and I need to test it. Give me your phone.”

Peter levies a suspicious glare at him, “…why?”

“It’s not like I’m going to look at your browser history, or whatever,” Tony assures him, giving a flippant gesture and rolling his eyes, “though it seems, I could on a whim. Just give me your phone, I need to do something.” He wags the fingers of his free hand, the one not holding a bloody rag to his nose.

“Okay, but don’t get blood on it,” Peter requests, handing it over, and Tony turns it on and unlocks it without even asking for Peter’s passcode, is inside the phone’s very basic operating system within seconds. He types something on it and the screen flashes words that say, ‘Welcome to the Stark Secure Server’.

“Friday accesses this area through the only network capable of penetrating these walls,” Tony elaborates, as he hands the phone back to Peter, “It’s completely unique, one-hundred percent secure, and a meager three other people have permission to use it. Now you do as well. I’ll need you to be a few miles out so I can utilize your phone as a safe access point, and the network as a road. I’m not quite able to get through the walls without one, so this will provide some stability for me. You’re going to help me see how far I can fling this.”

“Oh, this is cheap as hell,” Peter almost whines, taking his phone back.

Tony smirks at him. “No, it’s not, you’re doing me a huge favor.”

“You’re kicking me out,” Peter says, frowning back.

“I’m not,” Tony insists, checking his nose, and scoffing with dissatisfaction when he discovers the blood, ongoing and everlasting, “believe it or not, I actually kind of like you, kid.”

Peter doesn’t know what to say.

“Alright, alright, but that’s a lot of blood you’re losing, there,” he settles with, and sighs. “I don’t want to go home.”

“Why?” Tony tries to wipe his face so he can look up at Peter. It remains gruesome from his nose on down, like he’s been in a physical altercation, and got socked really hard in the mouth. Peter grabs a fresh towel from the shelf and hands it to him. “Thanks.”

“I don’t know,” Peter shrugs. He really doesn’t. There’s no reason he can’t go home for a few days and continue to help Tony.

“Which is exactly why you should to go home,” Tony says, and his eyes wrinkle with his bright smile hidden behind the towel, “hey, text me, call me, anytime. It would be good if you did, you know, so I can get used to it. I won’t go sneaking around your phone, I swear. I don’t need a virus.”
The first day Peter’s home, he waits an entire hour before he texts Tony, unable to think of anything else to do. Well, there are things to do, but he doesn’t want to do them or think about them. He rushes inside, hugs May for just a second, claims he’s busy without looking her in the eyes, and hides away in his room as she stutters behind him.

‘Hey, I just got back’

Shit, maybe he’s being too pushy. Not even three hours ago, he was with Tony, saw him alive and well, but the anxiety continues, eats him up, chomps at his stomach and heart like a restless, terrified animal. Tony was his responsibility for days, how does he just shut that off?

It’s all of two seconds before Tony replies:

‘Good. Get some sleep. Hang out with a friend.’

Peter smiles, wonders what Tony’s doing right now, if he’s made any headway with Extremis or if he’s still the bloody equivalent of Niagara Falls.

‘Did you send this with Extremis?’ Make sure that capitalization and punctuation game of his is tight.

‘Yes. Now you’ve got to give me a break, Pete, seriously, I’m like The Shining over here.’

‘The Shining?’

He receives a YouTube link containing footage from an older movie, in which a massive wave of blood crashes down the hallway of what looks like a hotel, threatening to consume a little boy, who closes his eyes with swift terror.

‘Whoa, I need to watch that.’

‘It’s actually a great movie. You should watch it with a friend.’

Peter doesn’t want to, will probably do nothing but plan for the invasion until Tony allows him back into the invisible room, where he can put his plans to work. Having friends right now is pointless. What if he dies? What if they die? Might as well push them away now so it’s less painful later.

‘Okay, I will, tonight,’ he lies, and begins work on a radiation inhibitor instead.

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Rogers,

A giant alien army is coming, featuring an appearance by their commander, Thanos, known intergalactically as the Mad Titan. They’re out, looking for these magical artifacts called Infinity Stones, and we happen to have two of them here on Earth. I’m not positive whether Thanos is aware that they’re here yet, but there’s speculation he is, and if he isn’t, he is looking to find out. Watch the video I’ve sent. Then, have the gall to look me in the face and tell me I’m being paranoid.

I know you’ve heard all this from me before, and honestly, I don’t give a shit. If you choose to believe this or not, I don’t care either way. I’ll take care of it with your help or without it. But you
deserve a chance to know about it and prepare, get the old gang together and do something to earn peoples’ trust back. I’m going away for a while, and I’ll be hosting some powerful, otherworldly allies. Unfortunately, I have to leave my little Spider-friend here. You best get ahold of him, he’s extremely clever and eager to help. He saved my life twice, and I’m not being facetious.

I’m willing to work with you and your ilk when I return. I’ve got a ton of new uniforms that don’t fit me and weapons I’ll never use, but there are some things I have to say to you first.

This is my eighth try at this letter. I don’t know, I just feel you should be aware of that.

Look, you’re not forgiven. Though I appreciate your attempt at an apology, it was exactly that; a poor attempt. This wasn’t ever about me, or you, or us, or even your momentary, selective amnesia regarding the fact that my parents were actually murdered. My anger lies mostly with your inability, no, your outright refusal, to compromise with the very people you claim to protect. To adapt to their wishes. You are who you are, Steven Rogers, and nothing anyone says will ever change that about you. No matter what happens, you will hold your original convictions, your 1940’s-era sensibilities, snootily ignoring that these times are different than yours. And that’s why I can’t stand you. The world is much bigger than you and me, but all you could see was you. You glimpsed at the wishes of billions of people, stuck your nose up, and gave them all the finger. And left me and Rhodey and Vision here to clean up after you, to shoulder your responsibility. Talk about shifting the blame. There isn’t a single ‘sorry’ in the world that could ever make up for what you’ve done. It’s going to take more than words.

Now, it’s my turn to apologize. To Barnes, not you. I regret attacking him. Let him know, for me, alright? It’s the very least you could do after basically leaving me for dead on a frozen Siberian mountain. James Barnes is a victim of intense and torturous mind-control, and deserves medical treatment. You, however, deserved that back-hand. If you had signed the accords, if you had just worked with me, we could have helped him. I was one step away with retro-framing, and if you had asked me or bothered to tell me the truth... what kind of person do you think I am, Rogers? Could you have trusted me just a teensy bit? Did you not think I would believe you? And I’m sorry, but that blurb at the airport doesn’t count. You had ample chance to sit down and discuss your concerns with me in an environment that wasn’t a damn battlefield, before I’d lost three days-worth of sleep. You had a chance to sign those documents, and then begin pleading your case to ears that would find you credible for doing so. I was left in the dark for that entire thing, Rogers, I don’t know if you realize that, but I had no information until Friday dug it up. You didn’t bother to tell me anything at all. Not once did you call me. Which is exactly what Zemo counted on. It’s almost like he already knew what type of ‘friend’ you were to me.

It’s a good thing I’m a nice, generous person. If you feel like trusting me for once, packaged within are two doses of a concentrated serum I’ve derived from a new thing I’ve been working on. It will target and destroy any foreign programming in Barnes’ brain. The second dose is for Clint, and will erase the remnants of the Mind Stone’s influence. There’s instructions and F.A.Q.s and all that, you should be able to figure it out.

Get ready. I’m willing to put all the hard feelings I’ve listed in this little note aside to work with you and defeat this, and then you’ll never have to look at me again. That’s how serious I am about this. Please believe me.

The artifact I sent this in belongs to Thor. Keep it safe. Do not try to contact me.

-T.S.

Tony doesn’t want to re-read it, quickly folds it up and stuffs it in an envelope before he can get anxious about wording again. Or his tone. He shouldn’t care this much, he needs to move on. What
needed to be said has been said.

Everything goes in a metal box. The thumb drive, the letter, the two vials and their instructions, packaged neatly in separate impenetrable cases. He places a silicone copy of Steve’s fingerprint over the wax seal, and watches with a self-indulgent smirk as familiar, green packaging engulfs the box and the seal melts itself into the Avenger’s symbol. “Okay, let’s see. Friday, any updates on those magic words?”

“None, Boss,” Friday says, and Tony’s lips dip into a half-frown.

“Alright. Uh… ‘to Steve Rogers’,” he says to the package, holds it out from him and clenches his eyes shut, not knowing what to expect and feeling utterly silly. Nothing happens, though. Damn magic, what, does he need to do, cast a spell, hold a séance? He scowls at it. “To Steve… to Rogers, to uh… um, Wing-Head, no? Crap.” Tony sighs, chews his lip. “Captain America,” he whispers to it, and gasps when it vanishes from his hands, blinks right out of existence. “Oh, wow.” He breathes out a relived, shocked chuckle, grinning foolishly at his hands where the magic package originally was. “Damn, I’m good.”

“You’ve lasted five hours with the under-armor on,” Friday says, supplying a distraction from the major step Tony just took, which he appreciates immensely. The second skin is becoming like a first skin now. He can summon it and retract it without inducing fatigue. All of Peter’s numerous texts and calls have strengthened his tech telepathy… thing. He’s not sure what to call it or, really even himself, anymore.

He had a full conversation with Peter over the phone without even opening his mouth the other day.

“I think you’re almost there, Boss,” Friday says, an attempt at encouragement.

It just makes Tony nervous.

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Five entire pointless days after he’s sent home, Peter’s allowed back over, and is greeted by an absolute bustle.

Sparks fly as ten sets of black and gold armors move throughout the room, performing various functions, and causing quite the racket. Two of them are packing supplies into the jet. Three are on the outside, welding, and one is on its back under it, performing some kind of wiring check. A few more are doing other things, perhaps sanitizing in preparation for a long absence, but Peter doesn’t pay them any mind, is too excited to care about much else other than the jet. This is happening. Maybe, just maybe, Tony will ask Peter to come with him.

“Hey, kid,” a filtered voice says from atop the jet. Peter looks up to find Tony, armored, and he realizes then that he hasn’t seen Tony in his armor in quite a while, has completely forgotten how intimidating it is. Iron Man’s narrowed, cold gaze has surly been the stuff of nightmares for some unfortunate baddies. The helmet retreats into the neck of it with a clank of metal on metal, and Tony’s smiling face is left there in its wake, eyes shining blue. “Did you bring your suit, like I asked?”

“Uh, yeah, yeah,” Peter says, nodding his head, kneeling to dig it out of his bookbag. “Yeah, man. Hi, by the way.”
Tony takes off, descending from the roof, graceful and completely unencumbered, his repulsors smooth, steadier than Peter’s ever seen, not jerking in the slightest. When he gets about a foot from ground level, the armor splits open with a short series of clicks, and he steps out, the second skin pulling at the inside of it for just a second, before it snaps back to him. The armor closes, shooting up to complete whatever task Tony was working on before Peter interrupted him.

“Cool,” he says, speechless. Tony has progressed remarkably fast.

“Right?” Tony smirks at him and pokes him once in the chest. “And it’s all thanks to you. Which brings up my next topic: what do you want?”

Peter furrows his brow as Tony takes his suit and walks over to sit on a bench. “What do you mean?” he asks, following and watching what he’s doing closely.

“I mean, I have no idea how to thank you for everything you’ve done for me,” Tony elaborates, pulling the mask apart and taking a tiny hex key to the communications box near where Peter’s right ear is, “so, what do you need? What can I do for you?”

“Well, I uh…” God, what does he ask of Tony Stark? He doesn’t know, gosh, this is too soon, he needs time to think, that’s what he needs. “What are you doing?”

“I’m adding an amplifier to your suit,” Tony says, placing a chip the size of an ant inside the box, “it will allow me to get ahold of you using Extremis from pretty much anywhere.” He sparks a soldering arc by rubbing his thumb against his forefinger once, dims it down to almost nothing, and begins running his finger along intricate wiring to connect it.

“Whoa, did you just snap an arc into existence?” Peter asks, dumbstruck by how incredible that is.

“Damn straight,” Tony says, tongue just barely poking from between his lips with concentration. Peter notices the armors have all stopped working, standing stock still like he’s in a department store full of creepy manikins.

“What’s wrong, why did they stop?”

“I’m not limitless, Pete, I can’t do everything all at once. This is far too intricate to be messing around with all that over there, too. Ah, here we go,” Tony says, finishing the final weld, and putting it all back together with an intimate familiarity Peter didn’t expect. As soon as he does, the armors continue their work. “And besides, you haven’t answered my question. What can I do to thank you? Anything in the world, what do you want?”

Blue eyes search him up and down, calculating. Then he scoffs, and Peter’s relieved to see the blue fade into that deeply comforting brown. The machines behind him cease their noisy pursuits. Tony wants to know, wants to concentrate solely on Peter. It makes him realize what he wants.

“I want to go to space with you!” he’s blurting out, before he can stop himself.

Tony just blinks at him for a moment, and Peter can see him chewing the inside of his cheek furiously, wonders if Tony knows that blue shines a little in there, deep within the skin, where he’s clearly in pain from it. “I-I said in the world Pete. I meant this world.” He says quietly.

The floor of Peter’s stomach drops out, a vicious trap door with spikes at the bottom. “Wait… are you- are you saying no?” Panic’s rising. He’s had nightmares about this the last three out of five times he’s attempted sleep, about Tony rejecting him despite all his efforts.
He stares at the man with hurt, hurt eyes.

“Well, I’m not saying yes,” he says uncomfortably, swallowing, and looking away, surly wishing he had a pair of sunglasses near him.

“Are you serious?” Peter demands with a quaking voice. “I did so much for you, I-I saved your life twice!” he holds two fingers up, which Tony glimpses at as he rubs a hand down his face.

“I know, I’m sorry, I really am,” he says, and he truly does seem apologetic, doesn’t appear comfortable about the decision in the least. It does nothing to stifle Peter’s anger. “I can’t take you, it’s too dangerous.”

“Well, what if there’s nothing else that I want?” he asks defiantly, and Tony exhales sharply through his nose, gives him a single raised eyebrow.

“Really?” he says with a skeptical dip in his voice. “There’s nothing else at all you want?”

“Nope,” Peter responds, shaking his head and scowling.

“Geez, Peter, don’t do this, come on…” Tony sighs, suddenly appearing extremely tired, so overwhelmed, and Peter fights to not let it strike at his damn, cursed empathetic tendencies.

“You’re going to need help,” he says, poking at Tony’s logical side.

“I’m fine,” he insists, gesturing to all the statue-like suits standing around. “I’ve got loads of company.”

“But it’s stupid, Mr. Stark, because if you fail, then-then I die anyway, right? So, what if-“

Tony barks out a laugh. “Whoa, back up there, foot-in-mouth, did you just call me ’stupid’?”

Peter’s lips move soundlessly for a second. “No, no, no, that’s not at all what I meant, I’m just, ugh, god, Mr. Stark, I’m just saying the more help the better.”

“No.” Tony says sternly, getting up.

Peter can’t believe this. “Please, Mr. Stark, I’ll do anything, I want to go!”

Tony rounds on him, a full six inches taller than Peter, and much broader now, and he backs up, startled. “You want to go to space so damn bad?” he growls.

“Y-yeah, yes. Yes, I do!” Peter stammers, recovering as quickly as possible.

“Ask your aunt.”

“…what?” Peter whispers.

“That’s right-“

“-no please, Mr. Stark-“ he starts desperately.

“-tell May everything. Tell her you’re Spider-Man-,” Tony continues, becoming visibly flustered.

“But-but, she won’t-,” Peter tries to stammer over him, but Tony’s voice grows much louder.

“-tell her you’re trying to go on an intergalactic romp with your pal Iron Man, and you get
permission-“
“-no, I can’t, sir, please-”

“Stop interrupting me!” Tony roars, sparking and getting close enough that Peter flinches away again. His gaze is narrowed, bright blue and positively furious. Peter shrinks as that deep, familiar growl wrings him, “There is no argument, here! You are sixteen, Peter! This isn’t some field trip to motherfucking space camp, this is cosmic Mad Max: Fury Road, and you weren’t even going to tell May about it? You’ll tell your Aunt, goddammit, or you don’t go. End. Of. Discussion. I get a call from her, then you can come with me. And I’m leaving tomorrow.”

“I… that’s…” Peter can’t believe this. It isn’t fair, Tony’s only capable of going to space because of him.

“Kid, reaching the guardians will take approximately a week, and that’s without the typical host of snafus space-travel can incite.” Tony says, electricity dissipating so much faster now, “we could return in fifteen days, we could return in fifteen years, for all I know. Hell, there’s a possibility we don’t return at all. How is that fair to May?”

It doesn’t matter, he’s doing it for her well-being, for everyone’s well-being. Peter’s heart is racing. “Mr. Stark, she will never let me-”

“Gosh, then it sounds like you have your answer already, doesn’t it?” Tony says with a sneer, and turns to continue his work, Iron Man suits coming alive like robotic zombies.

Angry tears fill Peter’s eyes. “So that’s it, huh? You use me to fix yourself, and-and then leave me alone-”

“You’re not alone. You have an Aunt, and a gaggle of doting friends who absolutely adore you,” Tony says, spinning around again, eyes blue and flicking. “’Pete miss you, hope you’re not vulture food. I’m gonna draw that now’ – MJ. ’Dude, call ASAP, Netflix just added dubbed Attack on Titan,’ - Ned, oh, and here’s Sweet Aunt May-“

“Stop doing that!” Peter shouts, turning his phone off, taking every ounce of self-control he has not to crush it out of anger. “That– that’s not cool, man, like at all!” He snatches his suit off the desk, stuffs it into his backpack which he slings over his shoulder, ready to leave. This is bullshit.

“I’m sorry, I’m trying to make a point, you friends are worried, I’m worried,” Tony says, and sighs at Peter’s furious expression. “You’re obsessing over this. This isn’t your life, Peter, you already have one. It’s in school, learning, it’s helping old ladies cross the street and snatching kittens out of sewers, it’s, it’s-“

“Nothing matters but this!” Peter shouts.

Tony rounds on him, and it’s very clear he’s irately disappointed in Peter. “So, you expect to just leave for weeks and weeks, and you’re not even going to tell your Aunt, who loves you, and somehow I’m… I’m-“

The lights flicker, dim. Oh, no.

The suits drop all around them, metal clanging loudly against the floor sending the hairs all over Peter’s body standing on end in succession.

Before Tony can say anything more, his skin takes on a pallor Peter didn’t know was possible after Extremis. Blood begins to drip steadily from his nose, and he wipes a hand across it wearily. He
spares Peter a frightened look before his eyes roll up into his head and he collapses to the ground in a twitching, glowing heap. The second skin vanishes, leaves him in shorts.

Peter watches it, stuck in a horror-induced paralysis. “Mr. Stark!” he shouts kneeling next to him, hands hovering just above him to avoid getting shocked. “Friday, what happened?”

Friday’s voice fizzles, provides no answer, only gives him static as a response. What the hell-

There’s a loud bang and the door all the way at the other end of the room, the one leading to the stairwell, slams open. “Hands up! Police! On your knees!” Armed men pour out, shouting and pointing their weapons at them, knocking things over, finding cover behind machines and tables. The elevator dings, and more come swarming through there as well. Peter’s so stunned and scared that his hands fly into the air of their own accord, eyes darting from the police, to Tony, back to the heavily armed police.

Busted.

“Sir, he’s got some kid down here with him,” one of them is saying. Peter can barely breathe, because he’s just noticing that none of them have their weapon trained on him anymore. All twenty-three of them are aiming at Tony.

God, what the hell is he supposed to do? There’s no one to direct him; Tony is down for the count, something is horribly wrong with Friday, and he’s got some important decisions to make. If he lets them take Tony, there’s a chance he could escape prison with the aid of Extremis, anyway. If Peter attempts to fight them, he could get them both injured. Unless…

He glances to his left, sharp eyes searching for an open shot.

“Hold on, don’t do anything stupid, we can’t muck this up,” a gruff voice crackles over a radio, and the elevator comes to life again, committing an awful violation by flying up for someone unwelcome. It’s... it’s perverted and wrong, all these people having access to this place, being in the same room Peter literally brought Tony back to life in. It’s disturbing to witness. Peter is shaking from head to foot, his veins playing host to a river of ice, nausea turning him pale as snow.

The elevator opens, and Peter’s breath hitches when he recognizes the current Secretary of State, Thaddeus Ross. He strolls out in a plain suit, puffed up with pride, a twisted smile wrinkling his face more than usual. Peter stares, panting with fear. “Relax, kid, we’re not here for you,” he says, walking to stand in the middle of his goons.

“What are you here for?” he demands shakily, not moving an inch, not taking his eyes off this traitor bastard in front of him.

“Well, him of course,” Ross says, nodding to Tony’s lifeless body, then smiling with fake kindness at Peter. “He broke the law. Many of them, actually, and he’s got some explaining to do. Now, you’ll come with us quietly and everything will be alright, we’ll take you home, okay kid. Don’t be scared, we just want to ask him some questions.”

“What did you do to him?” Peter asks, voice wavering with pure terror. Out of the corner of his eye, he can see Tony trembling, sparking and seizing, drooling on the floor. This is awful, how could this happen?

“Just gave him a little virus, is all,” Ross says, smirking. “A rather unique one, I guess, or so they told me. I don’t know.” He shrugs with casual apathy, and it pisses Peter off spectacularly. “It seems, he’s made himself rather unique.” How did they know? How-
Friday. She’s been disobeying Tony, and he never fixed her. They were in her, that has to be it. They’ve been so distracted by Extremis they didn’t even… Peter completely forgot…

Fuck!

Two men are coming near, and Peter eyes them warily, looks them over, spots something in their gloved hands. One is carrying thick manacles lined with rubber, connected to a series of chains. The other, something round, larger, and cuff-like. A small, red light flashes rhythmically on the side of it, next to a stout buckle. “What are you doing?” he asks rapidly, swallowing bile. “What is that?”

“A precaution,” Ross says with a very real smile.

Peter’s stomach does a full backflip.

A fucking collar.

Not going to happen, he’s not capable of sitting here helplessly while he watches Tony be collared and chained, it’s not possible. The decision has been made.

Peter hits the panic button on the wall to his left with his web-shooter, doesn’t wait around to witness the chaos it causes as a massive energy barrier starts creeping up between Peter and Tony, and the people who mean to detain him. To cripple him with something cruel. Peter won’t let it happen.

“It’s the Spider-kid!” Ross bellows and weapons fire, ringing Peter’s sensitive ears, almost deafening him.

There’s a sudden force that pushes his shoulder forward, but he ignores it.

He scoops Tony up, growling through the pain of his protective, sparking electricity, and bounds into the jet as rifles fire behind him, their bullets, eaten up, dissolved instantly into little puffs of smoke by the fully-deployed barrier. “Initiate launch sequence!” he shouts breathlessly to the ship, strapping Tony into a seat, shaking his hands of the burning, tingling electricity with a hiss, and moving to the front.

“Enter destination,” The generic voice of the ship’s very basic auto-piolet drones at him as he sits, flips switches, engages thrusters, retracts the ramp, and presses the button to open the launch doors, his lesson Tony gave him during the Extremis thing coming back to him in immense detail. He never takes what Tony says lightly.

“Uh, uh, uh, uh, fuck!” He didn’t think this through completely, and he’s got to be careful without Friday. Where does he even go? Oh shit, he’s in a massive billion-dollar, intergalactic spacecraft, and now he’s running from the cops with it? What the hell? “Um, um, okay, uh, Malibu!” Tony has a bunker there. He can probably get into it if he tries. They can lay low for a while, figure out what to do when he comes around-

“Location ‘Guardians’ entered. Accessing ‘favorites’. Locking on to ‘Guardians’.” The voice drones, and Peter feels panic like he’s never felt in his life.

“No, no wait!”

“Determining planetfall aimpoint…”

Jesus Christ, this can’t happen, either, there’s only three Iron Man suits on board, Peter brought next to nothing with him, just managed to grab his backpack-
“Oh, my god, that’s not what I said!” Is there even food on here? How much did Tony have left to do?

“Engaging journey to ‘Guardians’…”

“Shit, abort! Stop! Cancel? Uh-“ Oh, fuck, fuck, fuck, he will be in so much trouble if this happens. The virus must have affected the ship too. Tony was connected to everything.

“Prepare for atmospheric exit in five…”

Oh shit, oh dammit, oh every nasty curse in the English language-

“Four…”

The ship is lifting off with a deafening roar of engines, and Peter has half a thought to rip out the warp core, but then Tony goes into chains, and so does Peter.

“Three…”

It shoots off into the tunnel, rockets up through miles and miles of pitch blackness, and Peter just barely manages to strap himself into the pilot’s chair as the momentum throws him around, and that shouldn’t happen either. Light is fast approaching, a large rectangle of it.

“Two…”

They exit the tunnel only to be greeted by four attack helicopters scouring the airstrip. Rockets are immediately fired, but Tony’s technology is too advanced, and they evaporate into thin air within ten meters of the craft, standing no chance against the jets advanced defense system. Peter thanks whatever is up there for that system being the one thing that works properly.

They continue, unhindered, into the sky.

This would be fun, and Peter would be geeking out under any other circumstances. Instead, he’s too terrified to move. There’s nothing he can do.

“One…”

The craft doesn’t rattle as it speeds impossibly through five layers of atmosphere, like they show them doing in the movies, and Peter knows it’s because the external environment stabilizer has finally been deployed. The delay indicates a major problem, a nasty virus, and it’s no longer speculation; he’s going to be flying across the universe in a buggy ship.

The blue sky slowly fades away to black as Earth becomes a huge marble behind them. Peter gasps at all the brilliant, winking stars. He’s never seen so many at one time.

“Engaging warp to ‘Guardians’.”

“Oh, no…”

All Peter can do is watch helplessly as the stars blur around him, and the jet takes off at speeds that would rip any other spacecraft right apart.

He’s in deep, deep shit.
Hello all! Thank you so much for leaving comments and kudos, and if I didn't get back to you, I'm very sorry, I've been busy with life.

Peter Parker is a caring, adorable, brave little coffee bean.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Oh boy, oh wow, oh man! So many new fans! This is incredible, wow. Thanks for all the support, comments, Kudos, I'm glad to hear about how much people are enjoying this. I'm going to go back and answer some of them, I'm just so pressed for time, guys, but god, do I appreciate your feedback. Thank you so, so much for taking the time to leave it, and please don't hesitate to leave more. Your comments make my days a little more bearable :D

For the new people, I update on Sundays, usually in the morning, so please stop by around then. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

While in the midst of all that breakneck activity, Peter didn’t realize that he’d been shot.

“Ah, ah, ah,” he gasps vocally, hisses, growls, as he twists to look at it in the latrine mirror, pulling at his skin with his left hand to find a furious little eyeball weeping crimson. They got him in the back, on the right side, up near his shoulder. It’s bleeding through his jacket, dripping steadily down his back and onto the floor. It aches and throbs and stabs all at once. He can take a punch from a gorilla with no more than a sniff, but this wound is a burning hell crater carved into his shoulder. “Arrrrgh, dammit, dude!”

A typical week in Peter’s life will usually present him with at least one firearm-brandishing bad guy, but he’s never allowed himself to be hit before, has always avoided them with the aid of his sixth sense and obscene, Matrix-like agility. This time, though, he was so terrified and distracted and plain overwhelmed, that he simply couldn’t sense it coming through the fog of everything else.

There’s no way he can pull the round out himself, or even knows if he should pull it out. He’ll have to wait until Tony recovers so he can evaluate it. Not to mention how burnt and raw Peter’s hands are from handling said individual, his jacket sleeves scorched and black in places. What a mess. He looks and smells like he was just struck by lightning.

Every movement aggravates the injury, sending molten spikes shooting through his arm and chest. He takes quick, shuddering breaths through the sharp agony while he rifles through each drawer, cabinet, nook and cranny, for painkillers. All he can find is the topical gel Tony used on himself during the first auxiliary injection, when he had those rashes, and he decides to chance it.

Undressing is considerably painful. The fabric of his top is stuck to the wound and he has to peel it off like a bumper sticker, slowly and carefully. He allows furious, silent tears to leak down his cheeks, because everything sucks. He’s in trouble, he’s injured, he’s just turned Tony into a fugitive-

Think about it later, Peter. One thing at a time.

The warm water of the shower is not water at all, but molten lead, searing him as he chances little steps in and out, unable to tolerate it for long. It’s okay for him to use; the ship has a self-renewing water source, though it can lag a bit. He merely wants to wash the blood off so he can apply some gel and bandage the mess, hoping it’ll feel better after, and having no idea when Tony will wake up.
from whatever stasis mode he’s in this time. Which Peter guiltily dreads.

Shoving his fist in his mouth and biting hard helps a little. A part of him wants to scream.

When the water at his feet runs a light pink instead of red, he turns it off and steps out. A glimpse at himself in the mirror presents him with a pinched, fearful person, a stranger wearing his face. Someone who has had to make decisions usually reserved for people with maturity levels far above his own. He wonders if the nightmare he’s caused is any better or worse than the hell he prevented. An unchecked verbal assault awaits him either way, he knows. There’s no escaping it in such tight quarters. God, he’s going to be stuck inside with a pissed-off wasp for a week or more, avoiding its sting, how woefully exhilarating.

The gel numbs the bullet wound absolutely and unequivocally. “Ahhh, wow,” Peter moans with relief as he dabs it on there with a shaking left hand. What a wonderful invention, holy crap. In the closet is a stack of Tony’s self-deploying bandages, and Peter slaps one over the hole. It beeps twice, sticks to his skin, and fills in the wound with expanding, absorbent foam, completely stemming the bleeding. For the moment, it feels like it never even happened.

In the hallway leading to the living quarters, there’s another closet with fresh, plain black clothes, shorts, t-shirts, tank-tops, sweatpants, dozens of each type, all flame retardant and non-conductive. Peter dresses hurriedly, climbs unsteadily into pants and a t-shirt, hiding his bloody clothes in the hamper, disposing of wrappings and wiping up blood, quickly, because he can hear Tony moan from his quarters.

But before Peter can make it back there to ensure he doesn’t wake up panicking, Tony comes stumbling out, a hand held over his mouth, pale as a ghost, dripping like he’s just stepped in from a torrential downpour. He pushes past Peter, and barely makes it to the toilet where he retches and vomits, and Peter’s eye-rollingly used to it by now, wouldn’t be concerned, if Tony hadn’t just been infected by invasive malware courtesy of the State Department mere hours before.

“Mr. Stark-” Peter starts moving toward him, but Tony wags a hand, signaling for him to keep his distance, and Peter can see why, shields his eyes against the bright spark of electricity he produces, seemingly outside of his control. He’s a mess. Whatever Ross did to him seems to have tossed him right back onto first base, just when he was making a run for home. What an unmitigated bastard. Peter feels personally affronted by all this.

“You mind…. telling me…..” Tony gasps raggedly after he’s done gagging and the bowl flushes, cheek resting against the seat, watering eyes barely open and glaring weary little daggers at Peter, “why I can’t find my server… right now? Or why the fuck I… I had to perform a soft reboot just to wake up?” The lightning is retreating quickly, hopefully indicative of Tony’s ability to swiftly get a handle on the hostile programming that was shoved into him. There’s no imagining how violated he must feel. Peter feels violated for him just thinking about it. Someone else’s programming is inside Tony’s body, how cringe-inducing is that?

Peter shivers, wrings his hands, searches his new shoes for an answer, and only finds a drop of blood he didn’t see before. Being an Avenger means no more nice things, apparently. “Well, about that-”

“And why there’s only three… goddamn suits around- son of a bitch,” Tony groans, twists, and blue ripples through him. “And why I feel like I just broke the first rule of Fight Club? Seriously, what the fuck happened, Peter? Start spilling, right now.”

Peter bites his lip. “Mr. Stark, please don’t be angry,” he starts, holding up his hands. Tony lifts his head and narrows his gaze impossibly further, his lower, right eyelid twitching with barely restrained panic. “Look, something happened to you, okay? You just-just collapsed and started having a
seizure or something, and then these police officers came swarming in, Mr. Stark, they were down there with us, in the invisible room-"

“What?” Tony demands, his tone low and dangerous, pushing himself up weakly, eyes flashing that frightening blue.

“Yeah, it was really, really terrifying, like I didn’t know what the hell to do,” Peter continues, quivering with nerves at the memory, recalling the fear, and feeling it again in the face of this man whose entire life has just been tossed around like a Caesar salad, “Friday was corrupted somehow, and then more cops came in through the elevator, twenty three of them in all, and they had Carbines and armor, and-and then the Secretary of State showed up-“

“Oh, holy shit-,” Tony breathes, growing even paler, and Peter feels his heartrate skyrocket for the first time since Extremis, but he just can’t stop vomiting words, his mouth is a runaway train, an overflowing spillway after a violent storm.

“Yeah, it was crazy, like fucking wild, and then, well, he was talking to me, and he said they were there to take you, and- and that they were gonna ask you some questions, because you broke all these laws or something, and-“

“Where are we?” Tony demands, panting with fear, and his voice is nothing more than a growl, “Now, tell me right now, where the hell are we Peter?”

“We, I-“ Peter is actively panicking, and are there earthquakes in space? Because his damn knees are ready to collapse out from under him. Tony is going to be so pissed, and rightfully, but oh boy, “this is the part where you don’t get mad-“

“Spit it out, Parker!” Tony shouts, pushing against the toilet, a wobbly attempt to stand which yields no concrete result. Peter doesn’t dare attempt to get close to try and help this time.

“We’re in space,” he admits quietly, ears turning a bright, fiery red, unable to look at Tony, “we’re on our way to the Guardians, but-“

“Wha-? But-wha-why? Why!?” Tony stutters in a comical moment of stunned incredulity, before his expression returns to its previously scheduled programming of ‘murderous’. “Bloody fuck, that’s-what the hell did you do, Curious George!?” He yells, graced with enough sudden strength to get up, and Peter goes to stand way back, to give Tony a wide berth as he stumbles out of the latrine and his stress induced light turns the hallway into an ocean-themed night club. Only a moment is spared to stop and brace himself against the wall, just a second to collect his hectic sparks with a few panting breaths, before he continues on, current free. The shorts he’s wearing seem to be fire retardant, a lesson learned from the carcass of a leather couch.

Peter follows behind with lowered eyes, feeling like a tiny puppy, in trouble and desperate for forgiveness. “I’m sorry, I didn’t-“

“Why are we in warp, Peter?” Tony growls through gritted teeth as he throws himself into the pilot’s chair, begins flipping switches and tuning dials, “Go to space, not a bad idea, maybe orbit the planet a bit, sure, confuse them, but we warped! God, this just keeps getting worse and worse. You Curious-Gerorged your way into warping to the Guardians. HOW?!”

It’s louder than ever, and Peter flinches. “It’s not like I meant to do it-“

“Well it happened, didn’t it, Captain Kirk?” Tony spits, punching code into the dash touch display, and receiving an angry, screeching error message with each attempt. “Dammit, this is an absolute shit
tornado, nothing’s working properly, Friday is, is just gone, some kind of foreign malware is preventing me from communicating with the jet. I hope you brought a change of clothes, because you’re neck deep right now, Peter, fuck, this is a mess. You know what? Your new name is Web-Head, do you want to know why?"

“…why?” Peter asks despondently, shoulders slouching.

“Because that’s all there is up there! Cobwebs!” Tony shouts, gesturing to Peter’s head with a knife-hand and a vicious snarl of frustration.

“Mr. Stark, they were going to take you to prison-“

“Oh no, prison? You mean the same prison I helped them create? You mean that one, genius?!” Tony grinds out, jaw set with fearful determination as he stabs lines and lines of code into the ship to no avail. “Every single bit of coding language in that submersible hell is trademarked by Stark Industries. How long do you honestly think they could have held me there, Peter, huh? I can remotely control satellites with my goddamn brain!”

“They had some kind of collar thing!” He shouts back at Tony, who freezes in his seat, turns and stares reticently, shutting his mouth against something else he was going to spout off. Peter takes advantage of it, because it doesn’t happen often, knows he’s just gained his opening to talk, has just shocked Tony Stark into a very rare silence. “They had a collar with some kind of suppressor on it, and-and these damn rubber chains and, they knew. Ross knew about Extremis, Mr. Stark. I don’t think you could have escaped, I mean, he even said they hit you with a virus. I couldn’t… I couldn’t just let them take you… Please, sir, I didn’t mean for this to happen, I swear. I tried to go to Malibu, but the stupid auto-pilot… it- it decided differently. It bugged out on me, I couldn’t reverse it, and here we are.” His hands flop to his sides, and he bites his quivering lip to fight through the warm sting of his wretched tears, looking everywhere but at Tony. “I tried, alright? I tried. I fucked up big time, but I tried. I’m sorry.”

When Peter chances a peek, he’s slightly reassured to find a much more placid Tony. Terror and fury still muddy his bright eyes, but they’re also incisive as he looks Peter over, scrutinizes every single inch of him. “Your hands?” he asks stiffly, and Peter sniffs, chuckles ruefully, holds them up so Tony can clearly see the silver-dollar sized blisters.

“You.”

Tony sighs, rests his cheek on his knuckles, expression softening to something resembling bridled concern just barely seeping through his thick anger. “Where are your clothes?”

“Hamper. Blood all over them.” Peter shrugs, and winces. The burn is beginning a vengeful comeback, now that he’s thinking about it. “I got shot.”

“Whoa, what?!” Tony is jumping up in an instant. “Wait, wait, wait, rewind; they shot at you?!” he demands, pure rage giving his voice a sharp edge, and his eyes a fiery glint. “Where?”

“Shoulder, up here,” Peter says, grunting with pain as he touches his back. He’s there before Peter can blink, pulling his shirt up, and releasing a dismayed little noise at the sight of the bandage. “It’s not that bad, it’s just- ow, ow, ow.-“ Tony’s already pressed the button to disengage the wound-sealing foam, and has started peeling it off.

“Damn lights aren’t working properly, either, what is this, a truck-stop restroom?” he grumbles, as the lights flicker, an attempt to activate them with Extremis, perhaps. Peter bites his lip as Tony snags a small flashlight from his desk nearby and shines it on his back, into his injury. “Hmm, made quite
the entry wound. No exit, I’m assuming?” he’s muttering back there,

“No, it’s, uh, it’s very much still in there,” Peter grits out as Tony prods it to see in.

“Ah, yup, there it is. Looks like a 5.56 hollow point, fucking bastards. It didn’t go deep, lucky for
you,” he says, sounding relieved, and Peter’s just glad he’s not getting yelled at any more. It seems
Tony’s concern for him has trumped his anger over the situation, and it’s making Peter feel warm
and comforted. Maybe he’ll get out of this with only two new nicknames. “You got some kind of
Kevlar muscles or something, kid? Yeesh, without the under armor deployed, this would have torn
up my shoulder for at least a few days.”

“Nobody’s perfect,” Peter grinds out, teeth gritted as sweat breaks out all over him, a cold burst.
“What do you think?”

Tony clicks his tongue. “Well, I could dig it out really quick for you. Deep breath,” he warns before
he’s pulling again to look in it, and Peter hisses, groans, entire body braced against the pain. “Sorry,
hang in there, alright? I’m looking for shrapnel, but it appears to still be in one piece, curiously
enough. Might be able to leave it in. It’s okay, Hawkeye has… was it nine? He has around nine or
ten bullets in various, unfortunate places all over his body and he’s perfectly fi- well, he’s Barton, but
my point is, a startlingly large amount of people walk around with bullets inside them every single
day. Ah, crap, there’s fabric in it, though, took some of your jacket in with it. Is it painful when you
move it?”

Peter scoffs. “Yeah, dude, they shot me- ow! Quit poking it!”

“It’s already starting to heal. Remarkable.” Tony says with quiet awe. “Running out of time, let’s get
this out before it heals further.”

“Do you have any painkillers?” Peter asks, grimacing as Tony presses a towel to it.

“Sure, for me. Special ones with nanobots in them.” Tony says with a bitter undertone, as he leads
Peter over to a chair. “Sorry, Pete, I didn’t expect a wounded stowaway. Sit back on this. Pressure,
pressure, pressure.”

“Well what about that gel stuff?” Peter asks, scowling with pained concentration as he leans back on
the towel, allowing Tony to guide him with a gentle hand on his shoulder.

“Do you want permanent nerve damage?” Tony presents rhetorically, rummaging loudly around
somewhere out of sight, and Peter decides not to mention that he used it earlier, doesn’t need any
more lectures or comparisons to trouble making cartoon characters.

“What do you mean, ‘nerve damage’? You had it smeared all over you,” Peter reminds him, tilting
his head back against the rest, blinking languidly at the ceiling, just positively bushed. He doesn’t
have enough energy to stay upright, let alone worry over something silly like permanent nerve
damage.

“That’s a nerve-suppressing, topical analgesic that works on Asgardian gods and super soldiers, it
doesn’t go on open wounds. Skin is fine for a short duration. And why would I be worried about
scratching up my old car when I was in the process of getting a new one? Honestly, are you okay?
Do you need fluids? I swear on Odin’s Beard and ’stache, I’ll murder the guy responsible for this
personally, I’ll dismantle him, I’ll put a missile beneath his feet, play a little game of Land Mine
Hopscotch, it’ll be a blast. Dammit, what kind of elbow-licking idiot shoots a kid? Here I’ll answer
that for you; a dead one. You think I’m joking around, oh no, no. But I guess you wouldn’t want me
to kill him, would you? Fair enough. Okay, instead I’ll find his house, his family, I’ll purchase the
entire neighborhood around it, pave it over, put a concert hall on one side of it, Stark Expo 2021 on the other, featuring Hammer Industries, they’ll never have another moment of peace…”

Tony’s popping off, certainly channeling all the thrumming anxiety Peter can feel beating away at him, into his words. Despite this, the insincere threatening and griping is a soothing distraction, inducing a comforting familiarity, and Peter’s eyes are slipping closed. Tony’s voice is getting further away. Things are dimming and blurring around him… the stars outside are shooting past incredibly swiftly… “Hey!”

“Huh?” Peter snaps awake, and finds Tony squatting in front of him, frowning deeply and fully clothed in black.

“I asked you a question and you’re nodding off on me.” Tony cocks his head. “You alright?”

“I’m sorry, so tired, it-it happens when I’m injured,” Peter mutters breathily, using Tony’s eyes to ground himself, “what was it, your question?”

“Well, it’s no longer a question,” Tony says, standing and grabbing another towel, which he spreads over a cushion of the three-seater sofa set into the jets wall. “I was going to give you a choice of sitting or lying down, but not if sitting means you’re falling out like that. Let’s go, come on.” Now it’s Tony’s turn to pull Peter to his feet. He leads him over to his makeshift, and Peter groans as he lays on his stomach with his arms crossed beneath his chin. “Sorry about this, but all wounds from now on need to be flushed and treated with a broad-spectrum anti-microbial, because space germs are unlike any we have on Earth, even for a couple of studs like us. It’ll keep it bug free until it heals.”

“You’re apologizing because it’s gonna hurt, isn’t it?” Peter bemoans, watching Tony place a bucket on the floor beneath his shoulder alongside more towels, a fresh bandage, a large two-liter bottle of some opaque solution, and a long pair of forceps.

“It’s not going to tickle, I can tell you that,” Tony says regretfully, kneeling next to him. He’s wearing a headlamp which he switches on. “Scooch over this bucket, alright?”

He does, slowly, hanging his torso half off the couch. “Look, Mr. Stark, I want to apologize again, for all this,” he says, just to reiterate how terrible he feels, “I didn’t mean for any of this to happen.”

“I know, kid,” Tony says and sighs deeply. “Thanks for not letting them take me.”

“The collar thing freaked me out,” Peter admits, turns his head to find Tony listening intently with a set jaw, “I’m not sure what you’ve done, but I know you don’t deserve that.”

Tony doesn’t respond. “Hey, you ready?” He says, and holds up a large syringe with a stubby, open tip, filled with clear liquid. “Just saline. Deep breath.”

“Yeah, sure.” Peter says, breathing in, tensing, but it’s not as painful as he expected, just a tad uncomfortable.

“I know you’re tired, target practice, but I’m going to need your help after this,” Tony says as he flushes the wound twice more, the excess splashing into the bucket. “Despite my calm outward demeanor, we’re actually in immense danger right now. My jet has been reduced to a rather sexy looking soda can.” After toweling Peter’s back dry, he grabs his forceps, and smiles guiltily at him. “Deep breath, let it out while counting backwards from five. Ready?”

Peter watches the forceps warily. “…Hold on, give me a minute.”
“C’mon, deep breath, Peter,” Tony says, with urgency in his voice. “Remember, soda can. Hurtling through space in one with a complete lack of navigational display, which happens to be outrageously dangerous. I need to get on it. This’ll be quick, five seconds at most. Good lord, are you Spider-Man, or what?”

“Okay, okay,” Peter says, and inhales deeply, clenches his eyes shut. He feels Tony place a warm hand on his back.

“Good job. You got this, Spider-Man.” A momentary flash of white agony is there and gone before Peter even gets to three, leaving behind nothing worse than a gradually diminishing stabbing ache. “See?” Tony says with a smirk, holding the bloody round up so he can see it. It goes clattering into a tiny metal pan. “Not so bad.”

“Have you even been to medical school?” Peter grumbles at him, wiping at his watering eyes. “You look like a quack.”

“Oh boy, speaking of school, we need to talk,” Tony says, flushing fresh blood away with more saline and raising an eyebrow at Peter. “As soon as I can get this flying toaster oven back online, we are going to call May before we get out of range, and you are going to help me tell her everything. Right?”

Peter groans lightly, “Right. I know.”

“Hey, we’ll do it together.” Tony’s smiling at him warmly.

“Okay.” Peter nods at him.

Tony sighs vocally, smiles apologetically and holds up the bottle of opaque liquid. “So, this is going to feel like I’m pouring lava onto your shoulder. Just do me a favor, and please remember that I’m not doing that, alright?”

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As usual, the mechanic has an entire forest of fires to put out-

Somebody shot Peter-

Extremis has to be rebooted-

Some unparalleled moron put a damn bullet in his shoulder-

Inventory must be accounted for; he has no idea what made it on board before shit hit the fan and created this glorious fecal tornado-

This is exactly why he needed to stay home-

The Guardians require a heads-up about his earlier than expected departure-

Can’t concentrate on anything else, fuck-

First, he’s got to get comms back up, and even more urgent, navigation, ensure journey integrity-
Care too much about the little spider-twerp, can’t think straight-

But to do that, he needs to infiltrate remotely-

God, it could have been so much worse-

And in order to do that, he needs to reboot Extremis, and it’s incredibly strenuous-

What if they had killed him? There’s no living with that-

“Mr. Stark?”

Tony looks up from where he’s been digging through a blessedly robust supply of vacuum survival equipment, discovers worry and stress and unspoken pain on Peter’s young face. They’re supposed to be conducting inventory counts. Tony needs to issue Peter equipment in case of an unforeseen calamity, and he’s trying to figure out what he’s got and how to ration it all. But between everything going on, and Extremis acting up, and Peter walking around with a bullet wound— the guilt is festering, eating him alive, scrambling his thoughts. Concentration is a fleeing rabbit he’s trying desperately to catch, who has dived into his hole and startled ten thousand more rabbits out of it, so now he’s got to find that one stupid rabbit amongst ten thousand and one of them-

“You were reading a serial number to me?” Peter reminds him. The kid’s more exhausted than he’s letting on. Tony can see it in the way he’s gripping the tablet he holds, white knuckled, and shaky, doing his best not to drop out. “Then you stopped and stared weirdly off into space. Like what you’re doing right now, except not at me.”

“Sorry,” Tony says, looks back at the bracelet in his hand, at the tiny numbers imprinted on it. What was he doing?

Peter sighs. “And now you’re bleeding again.”

“Wonderful.” Tony retracts the second skin and mourns his lost progress. This was so easy for him at one point, had become so natural and smooth. Now he can’t barely handle an hour using Extremis without overheating. Damn Ross for continuously taking everything from him.

Peter hands him another towel, destined for the hamper with the other ten or so he’s used up already.

“Thanks, Pete.”

It’s been a steady issue ever since he initiated the reboot sequence a few hours before. Right after Peter’s shoulder was taken care of, having needed to divert all his limited energy into the delicate task at hand. Despite its necessity, seeing Peter in pain while Tony cleaned that wound out, shook him right to his core, left him asking questions of himself about whether he could do that to the kid again if need be. And he knew this would happen. There is no mission when Peter is around, there is only an urge to keep him safe. Tony discovered so in Leipzig, when that giant moron smacked fifteen-year-old Peter Parker to the ground, had felt that swell of protective instinct claim him for the first time. With Peter around, he becomes the damn mission, through little fault of his own.

Tony’s never felt that way about someone, not even Pepper. This is way different though, this is protective and warm, a close embrace, immense pride and a fierce, ready defense. This is instinctive responsibility. An inflexible obligation. There’s no question about it, Tony would die for the kid, would jump on a grenade if it landed at Peter’s feet. After all, Peter’s already taken several metaphorical bullets, and one literal one, for Tony.

Not even the fury of being infected by alien programming and jettisoned into space against his will...
could survive seeing Peter injured and in pain. This mission is a dud.

“How much longer?” Peter asks, sitting cross-legged in front of Tony, who shrugs at him.

“Not sure. A few hours?” he nods his chin up at Peter’s bandaged shoulder. “How’s the old lump?”

Peter shrugs, an attempt at apathy, but his wince gives him away. “It twinges. It’s not so bad.”

“That simulation we ran clocked you at a little over forty-eight hours for a bullet wound,” Tony reminds him. “I think, maybe if you go get some sleep, you can beat that.”

“I’m not sure if I’ll be able to sleep in a soda can,” Peter says, looking at him sideways, “you were very adamant about the soda can thing earlier.”

“Well, luckily, we have plenty of these little mind-settlers,” Tony says, tossing the band to Peter, who catches it flawlessly, “Keep it on your wrist. It will automatically trigger a personal artificial environment if it ever senses vacuum conditions.”

“Well that’s disconcerting,” Peter remarks, sliding the cuff onto his arm.

Tony chuckles ruefully from behind his blood-soaked towel. “Welcome to space.”

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One long five-hour nap later, Tony has managed a tenuous connection with Earth’s satellites, and Peter is shaking with nerves.

“You ready?” Tony asks of him, eyes bright blue, and Peter thought he was, but now… “The answer is ‘yes’, again, in case you were wondering. The connection is unstable, and we’re about to exit signal range. This is very taxing to maintain.”

“Why even ask, then? Geez,” Peter grumbles.

“If it makes you feel any better, it looks like we’re all over the news,” Tony says, his stare vacant, his voice, even more so. “She’s already going to know you’re Spider-Man, at the very least. Now you get to tell her you’re okay, which will earn you some points right off the bat. Damn, I did have some kind of weird seizure, didn’t I?”

“Are you watching it now?”

“Yeah… Christ.” Peter watches Tony, sees him grimace deeply with a hiss, and wonders which part caused that reaction. “Alright, enough of that. Ring, ring.” The intercom crackles and a familiar ring stars up.

“How do I talk to her?” Peter wonders, looking around for a screen.

“Ship intercom, best I could do,” Tony laments. Peter can hear in his heart rate how anxious he is, a terrible solidarity Tony has with him. “Just speak normally, she’ll hear you. Audio only. I’m sorry, Pete.”

The selfish side of Peter is really glad video isn’t an option.
“Hello?” a shaky, hopeful female voice inquires of them. Aunt May. “Peter? Peter is that you? Please, please say something, anything-“ she sounds frantic, tired, weepy. This is terrible.

Peter looks to Tony for strength, and is dismayed to find the same guilt he’s feeling written clear as day all over the man’s face. It’s apparent that Tony didn’t quite understand how hard this would be, either.

“Yeah, it’s me, May,” he says dejectedly to the ceiling.

She screams into their intercom, jolting them both. “Peter! Oh, my god, what happened to you? Where are you? Did you get shot? They’re saying someone got shot, and Stark- oh, ho, ho, where is Tony Stark, are you with him right now? I’ve got razor words for him, I promise you that. What is going on, Peter, I’m literally freaking out, I’ve had federal agents at my house, going through your room without a warrant or anything, and telling me you’re- that you’re-“

“They were right,” Peter admits, and May gasps, “I am him. The guy they told you I am, I mean, uh… yeah I’m Spider-Man.”

“Are you fucking kid- give me Stark,” she grits out. “Now, I want to speak to him now!”

Peter looks over in time to catch Tony taking a deep, silent breath. “I can hear you.”

May growls with dangerous intent. “You, you, you lying- How dare you enable this?”

He lowers his eyes. “May, please-”

There’s a loud, exaggerated scoff of disbelief. “Don’t ‘May’ me! From now on, I will be Mrs. Parker to you, and I will refer to you as Mr. Stark, is that clear?”

“Sure, okay-“ Tony starts, but May is louder, shrill in her fury.

“Company retreat my ass! You-you took him across the planet to fight monsters-“

“…I know.”

Peter watches this unfold with a sick feeling in his stomach, watches Tony’s face droop with self-deprecation until he resembles the man he was before Extremis. If they do ever get home, there’s a good chance Peter won’t be allowed around Tony any more. What an absolute cluster of a fuck, he has to find a way to fix this.

“He was-was fighting a man the size of-of Godzilla, dammit,” May continues laying into Tony ruthlessly, “he was fighting Godzilla Man! Your fugitive friend, Captain America, dropped a gangway on him! He is a sixteen-year-old child! What were you thinking?”

“Right, well, I wasn’t, really,” Tony wrings his hands, looks away, or to the side, as there’s no angry face to look away from, “I was wrong, I wasn’t thinking clearly.”

“Well that’s the biggest understatement I’ve ever heard,” she spits. “Where are you?”

“Well,” Tony sighs, scrunches up one side of his face, seemingly constructing the best way to tell May the biggest, most distressing news of all, “I can tell you where we’re not-“

“Are you choosing right now to get smart?“ May shouts, and Peter is saying it before Tony has to be dealt any more blows by himself-

“We’re in space, May,” he says to a bunch of stunned silence, “I accidentally launched an interstellar
space craft, it malfunctioned, and now I’m going to a different planet, and there’s nothing we can do about it. I’ll be back in a couple weeks. I’m sorry.”

After a few moments, May speaks with a strained voice, “You know, maybe it’s because so many crazy things have already happened today, but I actually believe you.”

“Good, please don’t worry-“

“You, lock it up.” She snaps. “Is Stark still there?”

Tony swallows audibly as Peter collapses into himself with dread. “Mrs. Parker, I apologize deeply for terrifying you like this, and I can assure you, I’m going to do my very best to bring him home to you-“

“No, no, no, that’s wholly unacceptable, Mr. Stark,” She grits out, “you will do more than your best, do you hear me? There is no room for question there, he will come home, alive. With-two arms, and two legs, attached, and his eyesight, and hearing intact- and-and-oh god, how could you take him from me? How dare you cart him off to outer space! What gave you the-the right- oh-” she’s started crying. Tony seems lost for words, so Peter locates his tongue and drags it out from where it’s cowering in the back of his mouth.

“May, please,” he says quietly, his heart unable to bear watching Tony’s typically hidden inner guilt flash readily across his face, unable to listen to May suffer any more, “I’m going to be alright.”

“Peter, listen, I love you-“

Her voice cuts out completely.

“No!” Peter shouts, looking over to Tony, who’s shaking, and pale. His nose is streaming blood.

“I’m sorry, I-I couldn’t keep it up-“ he gasps, collapsing to his hands and knees, “that malware is still there, they set it loose on the net, in the airwaves, fuck, Earth is like Kryptonite to me now. I’m so sorry, Peter, I didn’t mean for that to happen.”

It takes a moment to come down from that. “Nothing to be sorry for, Mr. Stark. Thanks for being there with me.” His hands are shaking as he hands Tony a towel and hauls him to his feet, where he stumbles a bit, before finding his balance and standing on his own. “You got navigations sorted out, right?” he asks quietly.

“Yeah,” Tony says, and his melancholy goes beyond physical exhaustion, his eyes dull and staring. He’s barely even attempting to clean up his nose.

“Go to bed, Mr. Stark.” Peter’s sure it’s been days since Tony’s had any sleep. “Everybody deserves a break, even you. Shower first.”

Tony looks like he wants to argue for a second, but ends up deciding against it. “Alright. Hold the fort while I’m gone, watch the dials for atmospheric shifting.” He starts down the hallway, but stops and turns his head back just enough to indicate that he’s addressing Peter. “You know, you can call me ‘Tony’ if you want,” he says with a cool shrug, “I think we’re past the formality.”

“Um, okay,” Peter says with wide eyes and a pounding heart as Tony disappears into the latrine and Peter’s left with way too much to think about.
So, did I drop the ball with this one or what?
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There’s nothing he can do.

“Peter!” he screams irrationally, aware that his voice will never penetrate the thick silica and quartz glass of the small, starboard window, and even if it did, it would not find purchase in the vacuum outside. The vacuum currently sucking the life out of a kid he’s grown so fond of. “Shit! Hold on, I’m coming Pete, just-just hang in there!” Fuck, this can’t be happening. Peter’s dying in front of him and he can’t reach him.

He mouths ‘help me’ at Tony, who’s sure he will never forget it.

Peter’s out there alone, suffocating and staring directly into Tony’s eyes with his own terrified amber ones, and it’s all Tony’s fault, he didn’t equip him properly, he didn’t do enough to keep him safe. And for some preposterous reason, nothing else is working either. The suits are lifeless, defiant heaps of scrap metal, and the ship is as powerless as Tony feels, almost completely dark inside, a prison. Extremis is a crackling error message in his mind. There’s no telling how Peter even got out there in the first place, but Tony knows it’s his fault, a malfunction in his technology, perhaps the airlock. Either way, the kid’s dying because Tony involved himself in his life.

“No, no, no, dammit!” he roars. No more dead kids, Tony can’t handle another one, another enormous weight on his already floundering conscious. And this isn’t just any kid, this is Peter.

Nothing else is working, not even the airlock, but he still pounds away at that glass, kicking at it ruthlessly, emitting a desperate yell with each futile impact. An unexplained weakness plagues him, but he’ll tear through it if he has to, he must get to Peter. There’s one working band left, and if he can just get out there and put it on him, he can save him, he can-

But suddenly, in a blink, it’s been minutes. Blows that would usually liquify a person’s insides produce nothing more than an infuriating tapping sound against the glass. How much time will Peter’s enhancement allow him out there? God, Tony’s feeling so weak, what happened? Why is he this goddamn feeble? Fear and helplessness bring tears to his eyes. He shouts and snarls.

Peter’s movements falter, are reduced to fevered twitches. “NO!” Bright eyes, usually so open and full of wonder, dim to a heavy gray. They stare blankly at Tony, blaming him for this. A sob escapes. “No, please, take me, he doesn’t deserve this! TAKE ME INSTEAD!” He pounds the window, but he’s losing energy, and Peter is so still... His voice cracks as he collapses to his knees. How could this happen? Peter was a pure soul, uncorrupted, while Tony’s is charred black. It doesn’t make any fucking sense, why is Tony the one to always make it through? “I’m sorry, Peter, It should have been me...”

“Why didn’t you do more?” Rogers’ ghost blames him too, it’s always Tony’s fault-

“Tony!”

He gasps awake at the sound of his name, absolutely sure he had been completely alone while his greatest responsibility died right in front of him. But Peter’s not dead, he can’t be, Tony just heard his voice. There’s a bit of blinking involved to clear his vision, eyes blurry with tears, and he sniffs, wipes them away, finds Peter standing in the doorway to his quarters, a good distance from him.
“Are you okay?” Peter asks with a pair of raised eyebrows. Concern shines in his blessedly alive gaze.

Tony can only pant for a moment while he struggles against the image of Peter’s face, scrunched with agony from dying in one of the worst ways possible, because Tony didn’t do enough to protect him. Then he groans and sits up, shakes his head to clear it, wiping at his face some more. The sweat is like a thick coat of paint all over him. “I am now, thanks to you.”

“Is it okay, that I wake you up like this?” Peter asks, leaning against the door frame and watching Tony with something unidentifiable in his eyes. “You know, when you, uh… when you have nightmares?”

Tony sighs heavily, nods, gives him a grimacing little smile, “yes, it’s very okay.”

“We’re going to make it through this, you know,” Peter says mysteriously, and it takes Tony a remarkable amount of self-control to keep his expression neutral, “both of us.”

Well that was a conveniently pertinent thing to say. “Right,” is Tony’s wary response. Peter’s looking away with discomfort for some reason. Fuck, he must have shouted in his sleep again. He used to positively scare the shit out of Pepper with it.

“You only slept for three hours,” Peter remarks, an obvious attempt to change the subject, and that’s fine. Tony doesn’t want to dwell on it either.

So, he scoffs, pulls out the second skin, and completely conceals how painful it is. It’s still taxing, raw like a fresh wound. What the hell kind of disgusting bug did they put in him? “That’s two hours too many. There’s inventory to take, work to do.”

Peter sighs deeply. “There’s always work to do.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Tony can see Peter observing the small, green packet of powder in his hand warily. “This is food?”

“No,” he answers, from over where he’s digging out the vault in the ships floor, accounting for the items in there. It’s the only compartment remaining in need of accountability, and Tony’s ready to move on to other things. “That there is a powdered, hyper concentrated, nutrient rich, hunger-suppressing formula I mixed up to increase the payload capacity of the jet. You wouldn’t believe how much room real food takes up. Ah, good, here’s the Guardians’ core.” He extracts it with a grunt, sets it aside. The size of a dinner plate, it illuminates the dim cabin brilliantly with white light.

“What do I do with it?” Peter asks.

“Grab a stick and eat it like fun-dip,” Tony says, looking over to grin at Peter, who’s shooting him an annoyed look, then he scoffs, rolls his eyes. “I’m kidding, Pete, jeez. Mix it with eight ounces of water and chug like your frat depends on it. I call them space shakes. They taste like dirt and chalk. Bon appétit.”
“Lame, as usual,” Peter drawls, and Tony doesn’t have the chance to rebuttal, because with the movement of a few more items in the vault, he’s just been reminded of something incredibly important he was supposed to do before he left Earth.

“Shit, Thor’s book is in here,” he says, pulling it out, and placing it next to the spare core so he can glower at it. “I meant to drop this thing off at the Malibu site before I left.”

“Oh, that’s not good,” Peter’s saying as he blends the powder into some water to create a green liquid.

“Not at all,” Tony says with a dark undertone, “especially with my defense system being as compromised as it is. Those seven other sets of armor were supposed to act as a protective fleet alongside Alvin, Simon and Theodore, here.” He thumbs behind him at the armors, which have taken up all the space on the couch, sitting there in ‘hear, see, and speak no evil’ positions. Humor keeps morale up, and they’re useless as Tony recovers from the virus, anyway.

“Can anyone get us while warping?”

“What do I look like, Encyclopedia Britannica: Universe Edition?” Tony grumbles, logging the last items into his tablet, and frowning at the results. They’re going to have to stop somewhere on the way back to pick up supplies, no getting around it. “There’s infinite possibilities out here, Peter. I could say ‘no’ all day, and the next thing we know, we’re being sucked up by a Sovereign prison vessel, or whisked away by the Kree.”

“Right, absolutes, you don’t work with them.” Tony watches with a snicker as he chokes on the space shake. “And this is absolutely disgusting, are we really living on this for a week?”

“It’s an acquired taste,” Tony says, shrugging, putting everything back and replacing the floor tile, securing it in place with robust screws. “You did manage to grab your backpack, right?”

“Yeah,” Peter says, grimacing through the last of his shake, “ugh, oh, my god.”

“Hey, I made that myself, slaved over a hot Bunsen burner for hours,” Tony teases with obviously false indignity. “Bring me your bag, let’s go through it and see what we can use.”

Peter tosses his backpack over, and Tony catches it, unzips all pockets, upturning it and shaking out every item onto his desk. “Right, so, we’ve got a phone, a set of Parker-brand ear plugs, headphones, not parker brand,” Tony looks at him with jocular disappointment. “C’mon, you’re still using Sony headphones?”

“What?” Peter exclaims defensively at Tony’s judgment, depositing his empty cup into the washing receptacle by the sink. “They make great headphones.”

“I bet you could make better,” Tony says, turning back to the items, “Spider-Man onesie, photo album… wallet with two dollars in singles, Peter, what the hell is this?” He holds the wallet up, it’s insides spread, exposing two measly dollars. Peter glares daggers.

“Dude, are you going to make a comment about everything you find in there?” Peter asks, voice dripping with exasperation. Then he drops his gaze and sighs. “Look, I don’t have time for a job and masked vigilantes don’t get a paycheck. We still have a little left over from Ben’s life insurance, not much, though. May doesn’t make a whole lot, and she would never let me pay bills or anything. Honestly, I, uh, god, this is stupid, I thought about selling pictures of Spider-Man, but that would be too obvious, you know?”

Tony gapes at him in disbelief. How could he have been so blind to this? Thanos and the Guardians
and Extremis have taken up so much of his attention, he’s been letting everything else slip. “I’m… I’m a billionaire,” he says, “why didn’t you say anything? Just ask, I could help you guys. Even if May doesn’t want it, I could help you for sure. How are you supposed to take girls out on dates with two dollars in your wallet, Pete?”

Peter scoffs. “I don’t know, man, it’s a touchy subject, alright?”

*Consider yourself officially on salary, kid.*

“I’m sorry,” Tony says immediately, and Peter waves his hand at him, brow furrowed. The Parker money situation will change immediately when they return. Tony will rig a lottery if he has to.

“Right, moving on, so I’m going to have to cannibalize your phone for parts…”

A few hours later, Tony’s managed to get a little bit of his spunk back, and he attributes it almost exclusively to adrenaline. The second skin is holding, for now. His thoughts are no longer buzzing with the foreign programming, though it’s still there, just muted, fractured. Welding and casting are possible again, as his conductivity is far less erratic following his turbulent nap, and a few practice runs. It’s only a matter of time until he can control the ship. Hopefully.

But first thing’s first; equip Peter properly. It’s mission number one. Full scale upgrade.

The remains of Peter’s phone lie scattered on his desk as he turns in his chair and presents what he’s rendered from them.

“Here, let this spider crawl into your ear.”

Peter eyeballs the tiny silver sphere pinched between Tony’s thumb and forefinger with hesitance.

“Umm, no? Is ‘no’ an option?”

Tony just shrugs, throws him an expression clearly relaying ‘not my problem’. “I mean, it’ll be like the tower of babel out there for you, but sure, I guess you could refuse some very, very cool technology. Oh well.”

It takes a few seconds for Peter to understand the subtext, Tony guesses, but once he does, his entire face lights up and he points at it. “Wait, is that a translator?”

“Oh, what, now you want it?” Tony asks with a smirk.

Peter scrunches his face at him. “Do you have one?”

“I have Extremis, Pete,” Tony explains, “I spent an hour downloading all known languages in the universe, courtesy of Rocket, just a few days ago. Luckily for me, and you, it remained unscathed by the virus.”

“You’re telling me every language in the universe exists in that little ball?” Peter wonders, pointing at it.

Tony squints and nods his head to the side. “I mean, not *every single one.* I’m positive there’s some backwoods dialect of something that isn’t in here, but yes, most languages.”
“Whoa,” Peter says, accepting the thing, which crawls onto his finger and sits patiently just as it should, waiting for an ear to attach to. He holds it close to his face, observing it. “Will it translate what I’m saying?”

“No, you speak normally. The cool thing about the universe is that nearly everyone out here has something similar to this. They will speak using whatever guttural series of snarfs and grunts they can muster, and your earpiece will translate it for you. You speak and their neck implant will do the same.”

“Neck implant?” Peter asks with a cringe and wide eyes.

“That’s what I said.” Tony smirks cheekily at him. “I elected to go with something a little less invasive, so maybe you shouldn’t appear actively repulsed by it, when the alternative isn’t nearly as pleasant. Now, let that technological wonder of a spider crawl into your ear. It’s not going to hurt, Peter, geez, didn’t you get shot recently?”

“Alright, alright, shit,” Peter says, tossing him a dirty look, and Tony grins at him. “How do I do this?”

“Just put your finger near your favorite listening hole and it’ll do the rest,” Tony says, and watches, amused as Peter flinches through the process. The little bug walks delicately into his ear, disappearing completely, and a range of emotions flashes across Peter’s face. Revulsion, fear, then he chuckles when it tickles him, and finally, some slight anxiety which tapers slowly into cautious optimism.

“I can’t even feel it!” He says jubilantly, and Tony can’t stop laughing.

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Almost twenty-four hours after launch, Tony is still unable to reach the Guardians, hindered by remnants of the virus. But it’s alright, because nothing stops Rocket Raccoon.

“Stark!” he shouts from the static-ridden hologram as soon as Tony answers following a bout of relieved, cheering laughter, and a fist bump with Peter. “What the shit is this?” He’s gesturing at them with open hands, but Tony knows he’s referring to the abnormal readings appearing on his screen. “Apparently you left ninety-three Earth days ago, and you’ve only traveled less than a meter—“

“I’ve got a few bugs,” Tony says, grinning foolishly. He didn’t expect this at all. On Earth, these animals dig through trash, and are routinely exterminated as pests. This one solved an issue even Tony couldn’t.

“I’ll say. And one extra one, it looks like.” He squints at Peter. “What did you do, kid, stowaway?”

“No!” Peter says, defensively.

“Actually, he probably saved this entire mission,” Tony admits, shooting Peter a grateful smile. “Unfortunately, I’m currently an outlaw and I’ve been poisoned with something nasty, some kind of virus, think you could take look at my specs, help me figure out how to completely purge it?”

“I don’t know, is it contagious?” Rocket sneers, and Peter snorts his laughter, covering his mouth
and looking around innocently when Tony turns to raise an eyebrow at him. "Kidding, send them over. Can’t have you showing up spreading communicable diseases to the rest of my clean tech."

"I am Groot," a voice rumbles from somewhere, and Rocket rolls his eyes, throws up his hands.

"I am being nice! What do you want me to do, purr for him? Yeesh."

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Peter stares at the ceiling of his quarters, exhausted, yet unable to sleep. And it has nothing to do with the bullet wound anymore, as that is completely healed. He’s worried about Tony.

Constant nightmares, visible stress, a manic demand to push himself past his extremely noticeable limits; something beyond the virus is affecting him greatly. Perhaps exacerbated by it, even. Tony’s anxiety disorder has ticked up into dangerous levels. Peter can feel it every time they’re in the same room together. His sixth sense is continuously overloaded.

And Peter knows exactly why, had seen it with his own two eyes the other day when Tony hijacked the screen Peter was watching Men in Black on in his sleep. Tony has stored… well, just about every movie Peter’s been able to think of in the ships massive database, along with untold amounts of music and video games. But it’s difficult to enjoy a movie, or anything else, really, when Tony’s busy using the screen to broadcast his worst nightmares. And apparently, one of those includes Peter dying horribly in space.

It hasn’t happened since, and Tony has had some pretty loud, fitful events in the past four days, so that must have been the most troubling to him if he became stressed enough to lose control like that. Peter is to blame for this. Or, more accurately, his presence is. That conversation with Aunt May rattled him, and he knows Tony feels completely responsible for this whole mess, no matter how miniscule his involvement in causing it was. At this point, Peter almost feels obligated to rouse Tony from his tumultuous naps.

And of course, the virus is stressing the man out in its own way, a terrible illness he’s unable to shake, doesn’t have the cure for. Hopefully Rocket can sort it out. Beyond his electricity, and the under armor in short doses, Extremis seems to be almost completely crippled, uncooperative, and unpredictable. Clearly, they really didn’t want Tony to have access to his armor, because many attempts and miserable bloody noses later, he’s still unable to use a single one of them. They sit in their comedic positions perpetually, a trio of lifeless statues depicting an ancient proverb.

Peter groans, rolls onto his side and settles beneath the blanket, forcing his eyes closed from where they want to stare into the dark nothing, forever thinking and seeing. He’s got to try and get some sleep. They’re making planetfall a tad earlier than Tony originally expected, and once they hit, there’s no telling what could happen. The planet they’re attempting to reach is in the riotous process of dying, its resources mostly depleted, and the local population has devolved and split into deadly, feudal tribes.

Great, now his heart’s racing again. He turns onto his stomach and growls into his pillow.

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They’re going to have a crash landing if Tony doesn’t get his shit together. And he hasn’t even finished upgrading Peter’s suit yet. It’s currently useless.

“Peter, strap in,” he warns loudly from the pilot’s chair, eyes blue, sweating with the effort of attempting to decrease their velocity. Mere minutes earlier he managed to finally connect to the ship, and began working through some of the more damning problems- immediately before dropping unexpectedly out of warp, right in front of Xiaxu, the dying planet the Guardians have been stranded on for nearly seven months. It’s massive, the size of two Earths, with giant, swirling, yellow pits splitting its mostly dark landmasses into sections, consuming them incredibly slowly. The civilization here mined the precious metals from the core of the planet until an accident caused a penny-sized black hole to form. The people inhabiting such an inhospitable environment are the ancestors of those who refused the call to evacuate centuries ago. They are essentially feral, barbaric animals with advanced technology, according to Gamora. A snarling product of their dying world.

A world Tony and Peter are currently hurtling towards at an extraordinary speed. The jets measuring instruments were astoundingly incorrect, had them arriving a full twenty-eight hours later than this, and even that was slightly early, or so Tony thought. He has some significant questions about exactly how long they’ve been in warp.

“Holy shit,” he hears Peter breathe behind him as he buckles himself into a seat, and Tony wishes he could enjoy the view as well, he truly does. But everything he has is being poured into figuring out what the hell is wrong with his descent program. He might have to land them manually. Or at least try to.

Alarms blare, warning signals begin flashing red and white through the cabin.

“Tony…?” Peter says fearfully. “Are we crashing right now?”

“Hang tight, Pete,” Tony grinds out. The front-facing thrusters aren’t even bothering, fuck, if he could just debug this one line… but Tony’s a mess of bugs himself, isn’t he?

They hit the atmosphere with a shuddering thud and a rush of fire engulfs them. Gravity is attracting them like a magnet. The sky is a deep purple, bathing everything on the surface in a violet hue. Five moons orbit the planet, and two are currently visible, accompanying a months-long night.

Tony’s nose is starting to drip red, but no, he can’t overheat, not now, he’s got to stay alert… there! A flash of blue across his vision, and the front thrusters engage, but they’re as weak as Tony’s technopathy currently is, operating at about forty-six percent.

‘Planetfall aim point, unknown.’ The feminine voice that isn’t Friday drones, and damn, does he miss Friday. He hasn’t had the time, nor the mental stability to mourn her loss. It’s hitting him now. ‘Planetfall aim point, unknown.’

“Tony?!” Peter’s voice is urgent. Tony understands the kid’s scared. shit, Tony himself is positively shaking with terror, but he does not have the spare attention to entertain it right now. A readout is telling him how fast they’re going, and it’s making him nauseous. This was supposed to be a joyous occasion, showing up like the hero he pretends to be, and saving his new friends from their horrifying predicament. He never imagined it could go so wrong.

‘Warning: catastrophic impact detected in thirty seconds.’

Not helping.
The terrain is barren, cracked, and a mountain comprised of material he doesn’t recognize, covered in long, thin, jagged spikes looms before them, a giant, metallic cactus. If Tony’s quick deductions are correct, they will impact the ground while going about 5,231mph and slowly lose momentum, just barely skidding into the mountain. The impact dampener won’t compensate completely for the lack of adequate landing gear, though. Shit. There’s little more he can do that his subroutines can’t.

He looks back at Peter, whose eyes are wide, shining with something Tony’s seen many times before; fear of imminent death. This impact will be insane. Those black clothes Peter’s wearing won’t do squat to protect him. But Tony’s head is killing him, his nose is streaming, dripping from his chin and onto the scales covering his chest. Maybe if he frees up Extremis…

He withdraws the under armor and focuses on something far more important.

‘Warning: catastrophic impact detected in ten seconds’

The jet is rattling viciously now, the external environment failing almost completely. Damage mitigation is the only thing that matters. Tony struggles greatly, but he’s almost got it. If he just concentrates on one part… doesn’t necessarily need the whole thing…

Peter’s yelling now. Screaming.

‘Impact in five seconds.’

The jet pulls up, anticipating landing gear that won’t deploy. Tony’s stomach is in his throat, his heart is pounding out a rapid drumbeat. Everything slows down, and he screams, horrified, desperate. Then, a miracle. His eyes flash blue and he gasps with the agony of it. Fucking finally, what a glorious, unprecedented burst of luck. The chest plate of armor three is flying towards them.

‘Prepare for impact.’

The armor envelopes Peter’s torso, avoiding the chair’s restraints, just as they crash with an ear-splitting shriek, throwing up a massive wave of dirt over the windshield, and the impact dampener fails, completely exhausted after cushioning them from over five thousand miles-per-hour worth of velocity. They slide for what seems like hours, the ground compromising the integrity of the hull, the immense friction wearing it away. It’s a wonder the damn tin can doesn’t rattle right apart.

Tony grits his teeth and clenches his eyes shut, tenses everything against his approaching death. He’s done all he can.

They smash into the mountain, and the entire universe seems to shake with it. Then, it’s just over. The chaos is over. A stunning silence, broken only by the sound of running water and sparking, broken electronics.

Tony chances opening one eye. Then two. A tentative breath. Is he alive? He gasps at what’s in front of him, coughs when thick smoke invades his throat and lungs. A spike impaled the ship right through the seat between Tony’s legs, sitting with menacing intent, just inches from his face. “Jesus,” he gasps, holding a hand over his heart and panting with relief. He’s okay, he’s alive, he’s-

From behind him, Peter emits a shrill cry.

No…

Whipping around, Tony takes one glance at the kid, curses colorfully, and scrambles to release himself from his restraints with shaking hands. Peter’s hurt, badly.
“Tony, help-,” he gasps, begins to hyperventilate, and Tony’s swallowing vomit as he propels himself over chunks of debris to get to him. Peter’s been impaled through his right thigh. He’s stuck there with about a foot of some unidentified mineral jutting from him, tinged red with his blood. No, no, no, no!

“Hey, don’t look at that, look at me,” Tony says, feeling breathless himself, grabbing the kid’s shoulders, and Peter looks up at him with these huge, tear-filled eyes. He finds himself stuttering for a second. “Th-this-this isn’t so bad, alright? You’re going to be fine.”

“It hurts,” Peter cries, gripping his leg near his hip.

_Fuck, this is so bad._

“I know, bud, just-just, uh, _god,_” Tony doesn’t know what to say, is panicking, and Peter’s watching him expectantly, assumes he has an answer. “Hey, I’ll be right, back okay? I have to get something-“

“No!” Peter shouts, grabbing Tony’s wrist, his arm, with both hands, “please, don’t leave me, please, please, I’m so s-scared, Tony, please-“

“Peter, I _have_ to,” Tony insists, and it pains him, but he’s got a plan. Peter will live if he has something to say about it. There will be no more dead children to haunt his restless nights. “Just don’t move, okay? I’ll be right back. Let go of me, Pete, please, come on, I want to help you.”

Peter appears reluctant, sniffling, gripping Tony’s arm painfully tight, complexion growing paler with each wasted second. Brown eyes dart back and forth between Tony’s, searching for deceit. “Don’t leave me here,” he croaks, and Tony’s heart breaks all over again.

“I would _never_ leave you, Peter.”

Peter nods at him, gasps out a sob and finally releases Tony’s arm.

“Fantastic job, _Spider-Man,_” Tony says with a proud, determined smile that takes a gargantuan effort to produce, ruffling Peter’s hair, before standing and navigating through the mess. There’s shit strewn everywhere. The jet skidded to a tilted halt with its belly resting up against the base of the mountain and Tony has to basically climb up into the restroom using mountain spikes as footholds. He lifts himself through the doorframe with a grunt. Water is streaming from the busted sink, creating a small river that’s rushing out through a gaping emergency exit, onto orange, alien soil. Below him, Peter is taking huge, shuddering breaths. “Almost got it Peter, hang in there! We’re _both_ getting through this, remember?” His voice is quaking with stress.

Peter doesn’t answer. The poor kid’s probably going into shock. _Fuck, get it together, Stark, stop failing him, constantly!_ Tony’s hands tremble as he shuffles through heaps of tossed up supplies within the closet. Ah, there’s one. He groans with relief, as he extracts a small, silver square, cursing his lack of foresight in not keeping a few on him in the first place. That will change immediately.

Peter’s in a lot of pain, coated in sweat and biting his fist. “That’s it, fight it,” Tony tells him on his way back. Summoning a gauntlet from armor three is remarkably easy, boosted by his unshakable resolve, his need to make sure Peter lives through this. “I’m going to try to break it off, first, alright?” Peter nods, moans with miserable acknowledgment.

Even with the gauntlet, the mineral is impossible to break, cut, saw, chip at. What the hell is it? How did it slice through his spacecraft like a toothpick into cheese? Analysis later. The gauntlet falls off him just as the chest-plate around Peter disengages into pieces. Well, that was short-lived.
“Fuck,” Tony spits, realizing what he’s going to have to do. This is everything he wanted to avoid. Displayed before him in graphic, red-tinted high definition, is the literal manifestation of his current worst fear. Peter looks up at him, and Tony sighs, rips through Peter’s restraints, digs an arm behind his back, and one beneath his knees, “He-hey, Pete, let me tell you a, uh, a story, alright? You know how I was hit with shrapnel in Afghanistan?”

“No, no, no, wait-,” Peter’s saying, eyes wide with terrified realization, then he’s screaming raggedly as Tony yanks him up off the spike. There’s no other choice, no time to wait around for one-two-threes. This mineral could be highly toxic or radioactive for all he knows.

“Just listen to me, Peter. Concentrate on my voice. It was an explosion so intense, shards of metal sliced right through a chest plate of my own invention, because it was my bomb that did it. As you know, I’m very skilled at making things explode.” A rare sting settles in his throat, behind his eyes as he recalls that pain, knows Peter’s is distressingly similar. Swallowing has no effect, and as Peter sobs and bleeds in his arms, Tony allows silent tears to escape their typically rigid confines as well. He slides from spike to spike as fast as he can, holding Peter close to his chest.

“I passed out. The first time I woke up, they had me in front of a camera, proof of life, and all that. I was terrified and in pain, and realizing what was happening, I mean, they kidnapped me, that was a hard pill to swallow.” Peter cries out in agony and Tony bites his lip. God, this is awful. This is the worst thing that’s ever happened. He ducks out of the emergency exit and steps onto a dark, foreign world.

The silver square he retrieved earlier is meant specifically for Tony, designed to essentially ‘fill in’ missing anatomy and adapt accordingly as Extremis slowly repairs him. He has a hunch it will work in a similar fashion on Peter.

“Hang in there, Pete, come on, stay with me, okay?” he says, placing him gently on the ground. Blood pours from his wound, a severed femoral artery, no doubt. Anyone else would have bled out by now. Peter is watching Tony’s face, lips pale and quivering, listening to his story intently, so Tony continues as he scrambles for the little square in his shorts pockets. “The- the second time I woke up, I was, uh- tied down and undergoing crack open heart surgery. I remember sharp agony, rapid Arabic, blood, a bone saw. Number one most painful thing on my list. Number two is Extremis.”

He’s lying. This, what’s happening now, Peter bleeding out in his arms, is the most painful thing he’s ever been through.

“They knocked me out with freaking chloroform, like some-some Liam Neeson nightmare, after a little while, but I remember feeling like I was being… carved into for hours.”

When he places the square over Peter’s seeping wound, he’s relieved to see it expand and wrap completely around his thigh to form a dense metal cuff, knows then that it will work as intended. Also understands the agony involved. Peter’s looking at it fearfully. “You’re doing great, Pete. Don’t watch that, look at me. So, the next time I woke up, I had the pleasure of discovering that not all of the shrapnel could be removed, and an electromagnet embedded in my chest, powered by an old, dusty fucking car battery, would immobilize it and prevent it from shredding my heart. Crazy, huh?”

“Ah, fuck, stop, stop!” Peter shouts, then yelps, screams, arching his back as the cuff does its job and begins to fill in missing tissue with temporary, artificial biology. Tony allows him to grip his arm, summons the second skin to resist it, throws everything to the wind and holds the kid while he suffers, because he would do the same for Tony.

“You’re going to be fine, I promise.” He murmurs. “If I could save myself from that, I can certainly
save you.”

Then, multiple, soft, mechanical whines from behind him, and every single one of Tony’s hairs stand on end. Peter’s sobs die down into gulping sniffles, and eventually total, stunned silence.

“Up, up, stand!” a deep, gruff voice demands, and Tony sets Peter down, slowly getting to his feet—“Hands! HANDS!” His hands shoot into the air. This is hauntingly familiar to him. Peter’s looking around him at whatever is holding them up, probably experiencing some terrible Deja-vu as well, and Tony is mentally deriding himself for letting his guard down.

“How many?” he asks through Peter’s earpiece. After the initial shock of it, and a wary glance up at Tony, Peter mouths ‘five’.

Oh, that’s not so bad.

‘Trust me,’ Tony instructs. In a blink, he scoops Peter up, and back into the cursed jet they go. As Tony jumps from spike to spike, Peter’s coating the exit with webbing, creating a thick seal, and Tony admires his ability to think quickly, even while in so much pain.

“Dammit, you’re a badass, Peter,” he tells him as he pushes him up into the restroom, careful to avoid getting water on him. “You got visual on that exit?”

“Yeah,” he gasps, rolling onto his belly and peering down through the doorframe.

“Great,” Tony says, because they’re already slicing up his temporary barrier, shouting in furious tongues. What a mess this is. A quick glance through the surveillance system shows five blue-tinted, humanoid individuals wearing what looks like goddamn animal skins, while at the same time, wielding advanced energy weapons. Like that makes sense. Hopefully, they have no resistances. “As soon as they come through, immobilize them.”

“Okay,” Peter adjusts his web shooter, adds a different cartridge and fires a tiny disk at the wall next to the exit with impressive accuracy, where it sticks with a soft beep.

Tony begins ripping the leaking hose right out of the wall above him, bending it to stop the flow, adjusting pressure dials and hopping back down through the bathroom door. Releasing it quickly creates a very wet problem for their uninvited guests. He saturates the lower level, and just barely dodges a shot from one of their weapons, the barrel of it, poking through a gap in Peter’s webbing. It’s glowing red hot, and slices a hole clean through the back of one of his passenger seats, dissipating against the wall of the jet. “Fuck!”

“Tony?” Peter calls.

“I’m fine,” he says, panting with nerves, eyes wide as he takes cover as far from Peter as the hose will allow, dropping it there with him to create a little river, a conduit. “Ready?”

“For what?”

Tony allows himself to crack a tiny smile. “You’ll see.”

Seconds later, the webbing is sliced completely away. Peter deploys his web bomb just as all five screeching aliens step into a sopping mess of water and supplies, trapping every one of them within thick webbing.

With an enormous shout and a flash of blue light, Tony sends the highest wattage electrical current he can muster into the little river he’s created. It travels the road, an amplified missile, reaching its
intended destination in an instant, and electrocutes the absolute shit out of the invaders, deafens Tony with a loud cracking sound, before ending the function of five separate hearts. They all collapse into a smoking heap. Tony looks on in terror, trembling all over.

“Peter, you alright?” he asks shakily, wiping blood from his face with the hem of his shirt.

“Yeah, dude,” is his breathy reply. A small pause, “that was the coolest thing ever.”

“Yeah, hope you got a good look,” Tony says, getting to his feet and starting the journey back over to Peter. “Not sure I’ll be able to do that again any time soon.”

“Well you better figure out something fast. There’s more.” It’s a cryptic warning. Peter deploys another web bomb, just as a pair of explosions from somewhere outside rock the entire jet.

Tony stops, looks up at Peter, looks down at the exit in his once glorious jet, crippled early and destroyed on its maiden voyage, impaled on the side of Mt. Porcupine. When he looks back at Peter, he finds a potent mixture of anger and fear.

“Hide.”

Peter shakes his head. “I’m not doing that,” he says, and Tony growls.

“Hide, now,” he demands.

“You said you wouldn’t leave me!”

“PETER-,”

“That’s my name,” says a cheery, familiar voice, and Tony whips around just in time to watch Peter Quill step inside his embarrassment of a spacecraft, grinning at them both, “Hey, losers. Wait, this means there’s two of us now. Two Peters. Peter squared! Man, this is gonna get weird.”

Chapter End Notes

Woo!!!!
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

At the absolutely delightful sight of Quill, Tony goes from full throttle three-hundred ‘I’m going to fucking kill for this kid’, to about twenty in less than a few seconds, relief deflating him like a punctured balloon.

“He- he needs… medical attention,” he stammers, gesturing wildly up at Peter, who’s looking down on them with large eyes, “r-right thigh, artery lacer-laceration, lost blood volume… needs fluids… son of a bitch-,” The second skin puts itself away this time. He’s so tired and riding out such an intense, twining fear hangover, that his knees are quivering. The strain of landing the ship without splattering against the planet, coupled with the stress of stemming Peter’s bleeding… god, and then barbarians show up, and within ten minutes of planetfall, he’s forced to take the lives of five people. And all while suffering through the effects of biological malware.

What the hell? Forget his faltering psychology, this has just become physically too much to handle right now.

“Whoa, steady,” Quill is saying from somewhere far off within a pulsing miasma. Tony’s dizzy. His nose has been bleeding continuously for quite a while, and he groans, stumbles down the few spikes to the lake of a floor. Quill is there in an instant, throwing one of Tony’s arms over his shoulders without question or hesitation. Tony pants, eyes him sideways with only slight distrust, finds an open, grinning face and relaxes, puffing out a sharp exhale. “Hey! Nice to meet you by the way. Thanks for coming to save our asses.”

It’s nice to be held up by someone and not have to feel guilt over it.

“Likewise,” Tony croaks, allowing himself to lean heavily on this friend he knows pretty well and has never met, trying very hard not to get disgusting nose blood all over him, “on both points.”

“Man, you guys look like shit. The ole’ universe has got you on the spin cycle, huh?” Tony chuckles ruefully, nods. Quill looks up, squinting through the semi-darkness. “Hey, Spider-Dude, you alright up there?”

“I’m fine,” Peter calls stiffly. He’s lying about it. Tony notes the strain in his voice. That injury is no joke at all, perforated a main artery, and Tony knows just a few more minutes of that horrific red geyser, and Peter, spider powers or not, would have been a goner. Unacceptable. Tony has got to do better.

“Just stay right there, alright? I’m going to have Drax come get you,” Quill shouts.

“What am I getting?” Drax steps through then, deep gray skin, intricate red tattooing, and he’s larger than Tony anticipated, makes Tony’s own, brand new muscles look like he’s smuggling jelly beans in comparison. It doesn’t help that the guy never wears a shirt, either. “Ah! I am elated to discover you both survived such an embarrassing debacle.”

“Dude, Drax, save the assholery,” Quill demands with an eye roll, “they just got here, give them a grace period.”

“What a glorious pile of deceased Xiaxians! Well done!” He cheers, stepping over the dead with a nod of approval. “And, is that the Spider-Man?” Drax is pointing up at Peter, who’s scowling over
the edge of the bathroom wall he’s lying on. Because things got that crazy.

“That’s him-“ Quill starts, but Drax is already practically braying with gut-clenching laughter.

“This is another ‘joke’, right? That is not a spider, nor a man!” Drax announces, wiping tears away, and Tony cracks a small, tired smile. Drax is one of his favorite people ever. Bone-dry humor, cut throat, and so full of laughter, Drax is unlike anyone he’s ever met. They all are in their own, individual ways.

“Hey!” Peter yelps indignantly.

“Don’t take offense, kid,” Rocket Racoon stumbles in next, nearly tripping over a loose wire, “-freaking wire, dammit-“ he curses, shaking the thing off his foot and holstering an enormous energy weapon across his back, “anyway, his primary functions are insults and running into situations unprepared. I wouldn’t take what he says to heart, he’s a big idiot.”

Drax scoffs, and Tony watches warily as he scales the spikes with zero effort. “How am I the idiot? Iron Man isn’t made of iron, Spider-Man isn’t a spider. Star-Lord is lord of, arguably, five people-”

“The only things you destroy are toilets, Drax,” Quill says with a hidden groan in his voice. “If you’re going to get all hung up on monikers, let’s be real, here.”

Drax laughs heartily. “I do produce legendary waste.”

Tony’s a little nervous about Drax handling Peter, but is pleasantly surprised when he sees him stop, ask Peter if he’s okay, find out where the injury is, and diligently ensure he doesn’t jostle it around too much as he picks him up. “Like lifting a feather.”

“Argh, dammit, screw you, man,” Peter replies in a weak, breathy voice.

“Eww, what a mess,” Rocket is saying from near his feet, and Tony thinks he’s referring to the distressing state of his jet, until he looks down and finds him tapping away at a translucent screen. “You’re worse, it’s a full-on infestation in there. I’m gonna have to boot the Milano in safe and hook you up to it directly to fix you, you know that?”

“Just go ahead and take a look, Rocket,” Tony says with half-hearted exasperation, wincing as he finally notices the intrusion humming painfully in the back of his mind, “don’t bother asking or anything. And ‘eww’ is so appropriate, gosh.”

“Hey, you should be thanking me for exposing yet another chink in your firewalls,” Rocket says, inputting symbols Tony’s never seen before, making him wholly uncomfortable. “It’s not like I’m feeling you up or something.”

“Hey, you should be thanking me for exposing yet another chink in your firewalls,” Rocket says, inputting symbols Tony’s never seen before, making him wholly uncomfortable. “It’s not like I’m feeling you up or something.”

“Eh, um, well, it’s similar, to be honest,” Tony says with a series of grimaces, and Rocket gazes up at him, an adorable creature with a penchant for devastating weapons and brilliant tech. Tony sighs. “Look, I was just attacked by malicious programming less than a week ago, the wound’s still kind of fresh, so, could you maybe show a little regard? Please?” Not to even mention his past experience with enhanced mind invaders. He pointedly doesn’t mention that.

“Rocket, are you hacking our salvation right now, really?” Quill asks irately. “I swear to god, I’m babysitting a bunch of inconsiderate children.”

Rocket Racoon is difficult to read at times, lacking a ‘normal’ humanoid countenance. Fur conceals the wrinkles usually produced by concern or despair. There’s no visible sweat or twitching eyelids to convey deceit. Deep, black eyes shield him from inner scrutiny, and Tony must admit, it unnerved
him to speak to Rocket at first, because Tony relies on those cues to protect himself. This time, though, lacking a screen to filter him, Tony can sense guilt and, curiously, intimate understanding.

“My bad, Stark,” he says softly, after a moment of searching Tony’s face, and pushes a button on the side of the tablet. The screen, which appears to be made of some kind of liquid crystal, retracts itself into a white cylinder encircled with black rings. Rocket sheathes it alongside his weapon with a sniff.

Rocket doesn’t apologize for anything, and his little ‘my bad’ is the sincerest apology he will ever offer. It means a lot. “It’s fine, just warn a guy first, I mean, there’s memories in there and stuff,” Tony says, before he’s distracted by a familiar moan. Drax has descended the angled space craft and landed heavily beside them with an agonized, startlingly bloody, Peter in his arms.

“I am sorry, friend,” Drax says, worry on his face, and Tony suddenly finds it in himself to stand on his own and push away from Quill.

“Hey, Pete, you-you, goddammit, you did great, kid, you know that?” Tony’s saying as Drax hands him over. “You alright?”

Peter appears on the verge of passing out. Pale, eyelids drooping, slow, depressed breathing, it’s his injury for sure. When he’s seriously hurt, he literally sleeps it off, and Tony’s positive this is the most egregious wound Peter Parker has ever sustained in his life. The guilt is incredible, erosive. Fucking bullets and mountains resembling inside out iron maidens, dammit, this is why Tony wanted him to stay home. The kid will have armor by the time they leave this planet.

“So tired…” he murmurs, closing his eyes and resting his head against Tony’s chest. “…you?”

“No, no, no, don’t you worry about me. That’s- that’s a rule,” Tony says, smiling when Peter cracks an eye open to offer him a weak glower. He can’t even speak straight in the face of this injured kid, good lord-

“Hey, sorry guys, but we have to go,” Quill says, then addresses thin air: “Gamora, Groot, you guys done out there?”

Tony doesn’t know what’s said back in the comms, is completely cut out of Extremis at the moment. But it must have been satisfactory, because Quill is motioning for them to exit the downed ship.

“We’re four miles out, you got him from here?” Quill asks, and Tony nods. Then, it strikes him.

“Shit, hold on,” he says, the cold realization freezing him in place and they all regard him expectantly. “The Milano’s core.” If this purple-tinted mineral can slice through his jet, it could certainly destroy the core. It’s the only part of the ship that isn’t self-mending. As soon as the obstacles are removed, the ship will repair itself using the exact same technology he stuck into the infinity cans at home, the same breakthrough that allows the second skin to exist within his bones. Once the hull senses a force too extreme to defend against, the area hyper-condenses, makes room for it instead, traps the object to create a seal. But the two cores-

“Where’s it at?” Rocket asks. Tony nods to the front of the ship where the vault is.

“Beneath a tile, up there.”

“On it.” Rocket is scurrying on all fours, looking more animal than ever, leaping with agile grace around debris and shifting a loose passenger seat aside with a grunt.

“There, right there, that’s it.” Thank god Rocket is doing this, because the next time Tony transfers
Peter, it will be to a damn bed for rest.

A few seconds later, Rocket has the tile up, and doesn’t need to ask for Tony’s pin to enter the vault. “Oh man, this, this is…” he hears Rocket sigh despondently, but before the anxiety attack can start, and Tony feels it, the pain of it, stabbing at him, pushing through his veins- Rocket extracts the fully intact core with a fanged smile, “such a beautiful shiny object.”


“Tricky little creature,” Drax grumbles, ducking out of the ship.

“Oh, and a book, with pages, how primitive,” he laughs.

“Bring that, too,” Tony calls, knowing they can’t bring every sensitive item on the ship, but that book is one of the more important ones. He would just die if something happened to it.

“Here, for your purse,” Rocket says, sniggering, handing Quill the core and the book, which he puts away with mocking sneer.

“Here, for your purse. Ugh, you see what I have to deal with?” Quill shakes his head and follows them outside. ‘By the way, there’s two Peters now, so you guys are gonna have to start calling me Star-Lord. You hear me? Hey! Don’t ignore me, this is important leader stuff, listen up.”

Tony can only stand there and breathe heavily for a moment. The possibility of the Guardians’ core being damaged beyond repair, or stolen, or lost, has been the subject of many nightmares, and the mere thought of it actually happening damn near gave him a panic attack.

“Tony?” The kid’s tiny voice snaps him out of it. Tony looks down to find Peter’s hand resting against his chest, right over his heart where it’s thundering away painfully, a violent storm, and there’s blue light rippling there as well, visible just beneath the collar of his shirt. Peter’s eyes are half-shuttered with exhaustion, though deep concern still shimmers brilliantly in them. “You okay?”

Of course, Peter can sense his heart rate, which is sky high at the moment, and even if he couldn’t, Tony’s body is a snitch now, displays his pain beyond his consent.

“Always,” he says, smirking at him.

“Liar,” Peter murmurs, giving an upward tick of his lips, and closes his eyes with a deep sigh.

Their second adventure outside the jet isn’t nearly as terrifying or hasty as the first. Quill hands him one of Rocket’s jet packs, an ‘Aero-Rig’, and Tony marvels at how much tech is packed into one tiny disk. It envelopes his entire chest, produces two powerful jets on his back. “Not bad,” he says, as Peter smiles and touches the breastplate.

“Space is so cool,” he murmurs. Gravely injured and still having a blast, Mr. Peter Parker, ladies and gentlemen.

When they crashed, they left an enormous skid mark in the dirt, a traitorous miles-long trail of breadcrumbs leading to a trove of dangerous loot. Tony’s cloaking technology would have been for naught- had Groot not expanded himself into a massive rake-like tool to clear the area of evidence, with Gamora providing instructions, zipping around Groot’s gargantuan form using the same flight rig Tony was just given.

“No, there, THERE, Groot! Not there- you just made it worse- oh, dammit!” Gamora growls with frustration as Groot creates new marks where the surface had already been smoothed out. “Rocket
“Come get a handle on your tree, I am finished with this nonsense.”

“I am Groot,” he rumbles from wherever he’s chosen to put his face.

“My instructions were absolutely clear, you fibbing flora!” she shouts back.

“They can understand him?” Peter wants to know, had only met Groot once on a screen, and is particularly fascinated by him, “I’m not even getting a proper translation.”

Tony opens his mouth to reply, but before he can explain that it’s something that literally just clicks, and hasn’t for him yet, either, they’re bathed suddenly in a red tinted light. He whips around, stuck in a moment of gasping fear, and is rendered speechless when they discover that Mt. Porcupine has shifted in color from a shimmering purple to a deep, swirling red.

“Whoa,” Peter exclaims, while Tony just looks on in awe. What in the-

“There’s a lot of those here,” Quill says, walking over to stand next to them while Drax and Rocket double and triple check Groot’s work. “They change colors randomly. No damn clue what it is, we haven’t been able to retrieve a sample, nothing can cut through it. Listen, dude, I’ve been hanging out in space for a while, and I had never seen anything like this until we got here. None of us had.”

Tony furrows his brow in thought.

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Their trip to the Milano is blessedly uneventful, the Aero-Rigs providing a safe route above a thrashing body of green water, over some skeleton trees, and around a few more jutting, spiked mountains consisting of unknown, color-changing, indestructible material. This planet is struggling to become a wasteland. Tony looks over it all, speechless, humbled. Peter sleeps in his arms, and he holds the kid close, terrified of dropping him. After ten minutes, they reach their destination and, like a swarm of overgrown fireflies, they descend slowly from the dark sky into a clearing surrounded by dense forest. One of the only ones left on the planet, Quill had informed him.

“This kid has a hole in his leg that needs to be cleaned out,” Tony remarks about the snoozing Peter he’s cradling against his chest like a breakable antique as soon as he touches down next to the Milano, which he couldn’t even see until he was standing within just a few feet of it. The concealment field around it tickles Extremis as he passes through, a tiny crackle of electricity in his mind, and a beautiful blue and orange spacecraft materializes right in front of him. “Wow! God, this is some incredible tech, guys.”

“We’ll take care of Spider-Man,” Quill says, disengaging his Aero Rig, and a wonder of a face mask Tony means to get the schematics for later. “Don’t mean to be bossy, but you need to start your upgrade. That crash probably attracted some undesirables, and it’s only a matter of time before they start swarming. The sooner we get out of here, the better. Rocket, how long did you say?”

“About six standard hours, give or take one,” Rocket informs them with a tired note, tapping away on his tablet with tiny, furry fingers, “like I said before, you’re going to have to be hooked up directly, I can’t transfer such a large packet of information wirelessly, and with that virus you’ve managed to contract, I can only do it in safe mode, which means no scanners, no cloaking, etcetera. We’ll be sitting ducks for at least five hours.”
“Drax, Groot,” Quill says, nodding to them both, “perimeter watch.”

“I hate perimeter watch,” Drax grumbles.

“I am Groot.” Groot offers helpfully, and they both depart, with Drax climbing on top of Groot, and Groot growing as tall as the trees surrounding them, a thick array of branches sprouting to provide his teammate with concealment.

Impressive. This is a team Tony can comfortably be a part of. They work together and trust each other, a pair of foreign concepts a few individuals on Earth could use a lesson in.

“Hey, Peter,” Tony’s saying, squeezing him just a bit as he follows his new team up a ramp, and Peter wakes up with a gasp which transforms into a low groan of agony. “Sorry. I’ve got something to take care of, so, Gamora and Quill are going to help you out, alright?”

“Where are we, a Hard Rock café?” he whispers, cracking one eye open to look around, and Tony sniggers. They’re inside now, passing through a rather messy communal area and down a short hallway. “Ow, my leg.”

“We’re with the Guardians, in their ship,” Tony informs him. Deep in the very back are the living quarters, a small room with five padded, clam-shell type sleeping pods. A massive tape deck, of all things, is situated above the first one to the left, and that’s where Quill motions for Tony to place Peter.

“You left the jet?” Peter protests weakly, moaning as Tony lays him down.

“No, of course not, it’s hidden and locked,” Tony says, “once Rocket fixes Extremis, I’m going back for it, obviously.”

“Which needs to start now,” Rocket insists, gesturing for Tony to follow him back out into the communal area, “you’ve delivered your precious cargo safe and sound, now let’s go, we don’t got all the time in the galaxy.”

“You got a dumpster party to go to, or what? A little land fill family reunion?” Tony says irately, scowls at him, then turns back to address Peter, who’s shivering with nerves or cold, Tony can’t tell. “Relax, okay? Gamora and Star-Lord are going to take care of you, I wouldn’t leave you with anyone I didn’t trust with my own life. I’ll be right outside this room.” He takes Peter’s hand, gives him a quick smirk. “You got this, Spider-Man. Easy peezy.”

Peter nods at him, breathless with pain and fear, and it takes everything Tony has to squeeze one last time and let him go.

“Yes! He called me Star-Lord!” Quill whispers excitedly to Gamora from inside what looks like a washroom, where they’re digging out advanced medical supplies, and Gamora rolls her eyes at him.

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Oldies are playing in the background. Fleetwood Mac, if Peter recalls correctly.

He bites his lip against many moans and groans wishing to sneak out, because he barely knows these people. This gorgeous green-skinned woman kneeling next to him, the sight of her making him blush
at times, alongside Star-Lord, the Earthling-turned galactic hero. They’re caring for him like one of their own, and he’s not sure how to feel about it.

“So, uh, what do you think of space, so far?” Quill is asking, as he carefully searches the metal band around Peter’s thigh for a release button.

“I think it’s painful,” Peter grits out, blinks watery eyes and wipes it away. Quill chuckles. “No, literally, I’ve been injured for a majority of it, so I don’t know yet. Get back to me later.”

Quill nods in agreement with a small, knowing smirk and a puff of air out his nose. “You know, the really cool thing about pain? It’s almost always temporary. Learning curves suck, dude, trust me, I know, but you guys are with us now, so don’t worry, you’ll get there. Imagine being eight years old and caught out here in all this craziness. That’s how old I was when- well, you know. Here it is, I think.” He’s found a small indent in the metal. The silly part of Peter hoped secretly that he would never find the release, knows he’s in for a world of pain once this starts.

“Relax, Peter,” Gamora is shushing him, brushing his hair back, and Peter realizes he’s gasping out his fear, as she gently encourages his leg up so she can wrap something around his thigh, above the cuff, near his groin, “you’re going to be fine.”

“That’s right, the hands you’re in are green and excellent,” Quill grins, and Gamora smirks at him.

“This is a tourniquet,” she explains, lightly touching the thin strip of plastic-like material, “when I activate it, it’s going to inflate until it senses that is has cut off the blood supply to your leg. It will keep you from bleeding out while we clean your wound.”

“Ahh, dammit,” Peter says ruefully, voice cracking, and he looks away from them, at the giant cassette player currently blasting a song he doesn’t recognize, something about bringing love home, or whatever. It’s not the first thing on his mind. He doesn’t want to do this. This will hurt on an extraordinary level.

Is this what it means to be a hero? It’s not as great as he thought it would be.

“Here, pal,” Quill takes his hand, smiles warmly, “ready?”

The touch is nice, a small distraction from the terror, reminding him that there’s something after this that isn’t pain-filled.

“Yeah.” Peter nods, squeezes Quill’s hand, but once the cuff begins to inflate, and the tears and begging starts, he finds himself wanting Tony to be there instead.
exempts logic completely. It makes him shiver with tension, want to rip out the wires in his neck manually and carry Peter away from the source of his pain.

“Calm down, they’re not actively killing him,” Rocket says with a groan, and Tony’s just about done with his shit.

“You ever cared about anyone, Rocket?” he asks viciously, perturbed by Peter’s suffering and upset he can’t be there for him, “I mean, really cared about someone so much you would give your life for them?”

“Yes, what the hell kind of dumb question is that?” Rocket demands haughtily, and just as Tony shoots a nasty glare, he sees Rocket sigh, his tiny arms drooping to his sides. “Look, I’m being an asshole because… well, I’m jealous.”

“Jealous,” Tony repeats, perplexed by it, “jealous of what?”

“Of you and that kid!” Rocket shouts, and his voice cracks mysteriously, then he looks away, continues his work. “Fuck, why am I even saying this? I’m jealous because… well, I, I just…”

Tony waits, watches with intense curiosity.

“You know…” he finally says softly after a moment, black eyes meeting Tony’s, and he notices them shimmering with something unsaid, “that Groot you met? That’s not the original Groot. That guy died protecting me and all the other idiots I room with. I love this Groot almost exactly the same but… it’s fucked up, he doesn’t have any of his memories, you know? He’s a completely different dude. And I loved the old Groot, like… I don’t know. But you do, don’t you? You love that stupid kid just like I loved Groot One, like, like a parent. And he’s gone forever. And I’m fucking jealous.”

Silence isn’t something Tony is usually shocked into, but it takes him a second to recalibrate his tongue after being confronted with such miserable information. “I had no idea. I’m sorry,” he says softly.

“Me too,” Rocket says, not looking at him, “for being a douche bag, I mean. I’m not the most emotionally stable guy.”

They both flinch as Peter screams again, the shrill sound dying into loud, pitiful sobbing.

“Fuck,” Tony curses under his breath, hides his face in a shaking hand, sighs heavily. “What do you expect me to do, huh?”

“Love that kid and protect him with everything you have,” Rocket says, pointing towards the door with bared fangs, “because you never know when you’re gonna lose him.”

And Tony’s gone ahead and checked that box already.

“Not a problem,” he says smiling.

“Great,” Rocket exclaims, turning back to his tablet, sliding something across the screen with focused determination. “So, I hacked you earlier, that was stupid of me. Can I start this thing?”

“What will it do to me?” Tony asks, watching the door.

“Nothing too extravagant,” Rocket elaborates, “put you to sleep for a few hours, cure that virus for sure, oh and I stuck a surprise in it for you, too, some information regarding energy weaponry, advanced spacecraft, alien hardware and programming. You’re getting a new operating system, a
better one of my own design, you know, no big deal. You should probably lie down.”

“Wow,” Tony says, sighs, smiles thankfully, “I- this is great, thanks, Rocket.”

“Look, I’m not a complete asshole,” Rocket says, shrugging, “now lie down.”

As he does, awkwardly on his side to avoid the wires, Tony notices a sudden lack of Peter’s audible misery. The poor kid’s gone and passed out, a bittersweet relief.

“Ready?” Rocket asks.

“Yeah,” Tony says despondently, just before the blackness takes him and he knows nothing more.

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It’s his sixth sense, a nearly painful freezing sensation, that startles Peter into waking, and an explosion that has him leaping out of Star-Lord’s sleeping pod. Immediately, his leg gives out, and he gasps, has to catch himself against the wall. “Shit,” he hisses, clutching it. It’s not fully healed. A pair of patches more suited to his biology than Tony’s Extremis-based technology cover both entry and exit wounds, and it still kills to put any weight on it whatsoever. “What the he- whoa!”

Another explosion rocks the entire ship, nearly throws Peter to the floor. Some massive battle is happening outside, and fuck, where’s Tony? What’s going on? Using the hallway walls as support, Peter exits the sleeping quarters to find Tony out in the common area, lying on his side, asleep with wires sprouting out the back of him like he’s some humanoid plant. Which is no longer such a far-fetched concept.

“Tony,” he gasps, limping over to him, and that’s when he notices the timer on the touch screen, the numbers still counting down. Thirty-three minutes remain until Tony’s upgrade is complete. But the battle outside isn’t going to wait that long, and Peter can sense many hostiles. He squeezes Tony’s limp hand before forgetting his own pain completely and snapping into action. Their new friends need help.

A moment is spared figuring out how to open the ship, because apparently, they were locked in tight. Outside, it’s loud, explosive, terrifying. “You can do this, Peter,” he whispers to himself as he exits the ship, begins the climb to the top of a massive wooden wall with tiny leaves growing out of it, which he doesn’t remember being here before. It’s encircling the Milano completely, protecting it. The Guardians are all standing on top at even intervals, firing huge energy weapons into what sounds like a horde of locals below.

“I am Groot-“ a face appears beside him, materializes within the wall, and he shouts, almost punches it out of pure fear.

“Oh, hey Groot,” he breathes, clutching his heart. “Didn’t realize this was you, sorry.”

Groot smiles serenely at him, “I am Groot.”

“Get back in the ship, humie,” Rocket is yelling at him from the very top of the Groot wall, energy weapon out and firing at something on the other side, something that screams very loudly. Next to him, a blue-tinted man manages to get to the top, and almost punts Rocket, before being snatched up by a huge vine and thrown to oblivion, shrieking bloody murder. Rocket laughs hysterically. “Oh,
“Wow, he thought he had it, didn’t he? Nice one, Groot, he’ll feel that in the morning.”

“What’s going on?” Peter shouts, and Rocket’s laughter dies away. He snarls a nasty curse.

“Nothing you need to be a part of, you tiny liability,” he barks back, tossing out a series of silver balls the size of marbles, pressing a button on his wrist band, and smirking at the litany of screams the follow. “Get back in the ship!”

“No, I want to help!” he insists, flinches as Groot grows a shield impressively quickly to defend Rocket from an incoming blast.

“Quill, come get this kid!” Rocket shouts, and Peter hears jets engage, looks over to find Quill shooting towards him, a pair of glowing red eyes in the darkness, flashing weapons producing a strobe effect all around him, and he suddenly feels like he’s in a horror movie.

“Hey, kid, you want to help?” Quill asks, disengaging his mask, and floating next to Peter, a hand on his shoulder.

He nods quickly. “Ye-yeah, dude, I do.”

“Great, go hang out on top of the Milano,” he says, pointing to his ship, “they’ve been lobbing grenades in here, I need to catch them and throw them back, you got it?”

Peter’s so excited he gets to be useful, his pain all but vanishes. “Yeah, sure, on it.”

“And don’t touch them with your hands!” Quill calls, as Peter leaps from his perch seventy feet onto the roof of the Milano, landing gracefully, even on one leg. “Get them with your web and sling ‘em out of here!”

It’s not a useless task, Peter soon finds, and perhaps Quill has faith in him, because the others stop leaping desperately at the grenades. Peter is thrilled to be of use. They keep this up for quite a while—at least five minutes, which feels like eternity. If a round object enters his area, he’s webbing it, and slinging it out with incredible force.

“Nice job, kid!” Quill calls, and he smiles.

A few more minutes later, the assault seems to be winding down—just as Rocket shouts in pain.

“Rocket!” Gamora cries, must have witnessed what happened, and she’s screaming a war cry, kicking an alien to dislodge one of her knives from its belly.

Peter whips around, sees Rocket stumble, begin to fall, smoke billowing from an injury in his back, and he doesn’t think twice, starts stringing a hammock together to catch him, has no idea what type of force that little body can withstand. Rocket lands in it, motionless, his weapon hitting the ground below.

“I… AM… GROOOOOOT!” Groot positively thunders his rage, roars like a beast, and Peter isn’t sure what happens, can’t see outside the thick wood, only feels the ground beneath him tremble as hard the wall does. There’s a loud rumble, a series of pained shouts, and then intense silence.

Peter can’t even move, just stands there atop the Milano and pants, watches the proceedings with mounting terror. Quill is there immediately, jet pack flaring and hissing, scooping Rocket up just as Groot condenses himself down to humanoid form.

Peter gasps at the carnage. Hundreds of people lie dead, or dying all around them. Purple blood
soaks the dusty soil. Many have enormous holes through their chests, and Peter realizes with close familiarity what Groot must have done in his rage and horror.

Drax and Gamora join them, a pair of shocked faces, speechless, and they encircle Rocket. Peter lowers himself to the ground with a web, but keeps his distance. This isn’t his place.

“He’s got a heart-beat,” Quill says, taking a reading with his face mask, before uncoupling it and placing Rocket in Groot’s arms, which have joined together to form a thick, wooden cradle.

“I am Groot,” he says softly, and Peter didn’t know trees could cry, feels helpless tears prick his own eyes at the sight.

“He’s gonna be fine, Groot,” Quill is saying, but it’s a breathless statement, lacks conviction. He rolls Rocket onto his side, and hisses at the mess in his back. Peter’s shocked to see a complex array of cybernetic attachments back there, and the immense damage they sustained. “Geez, Rocket.”

There’s no time to do anything about it because just then, a roar of engines has them all looking to the sky. A half-dozen black and gray space pods are descending on them, massive weapons deployed and aimed at them, and Peter looks to the Guardians, for assurance, but discovers they’re just as shocked as he is about this new development.

“On behalf of the Kree empire, and treaties associated, you are all hereby detained,” a deep, filtered voice shouts at them. Yellow beams of shimmering light shoot towards them all, and Peter finds himself floating with the rest of them, totally paralyzed. “Cooperate or face death.”

“Guys?” he shouts, to no answer.

Terror envelopes him. He can barely breathe. The tractor beams are pulling them all in, but a struggle only induces pain on a spectacular level, bone-deep agony that sends stars shooting across his vision. He’s a goner, they all are. How long did he last in space? Six days, or so. He truly wasn’t ready for this. Space is kind of a nightmare.

But, one of the pods is acting funky. He notices it out of the corner of his eye. The one on the very end to his right is turning towards its buddies, and Peter hears the whine of an enormous weapon charging up before it sends a beam of energy slicing straight through the other five.

The tractor beams disappear. Peter and the Guardians go crashing to the ground as five space pods explode into bits a mile above them. The sixth one goes hurtling into a mountain nearby, impaling itself on it and catching fire.

Panting, heart racing, Peter looks up, pushing his elbows beneath him with a groan. Leaning against the Milano with blood pouring grotesquely from his nose, eyes fading from an intense blue back to soft brown, Tony is smirking at them all.

“What did I miss?” he asks.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so clearly this isn't Guardians 2 compliant, as I had this outlined before that came out. Sorry in advance for lack of Manits :(

Love you all dearly, please tell me what you think!
Hello! I'm back from the grave, yet again, to grace all you patient people with another episode.

Hope everyone enjoys this chapter. I may not be able to update every single week like I used to, but I promise a new chapter every two weeks at the very least, so always check on Sundays. My daughter just started Kindergarten and they give these poor kids homework now, and I have priorities :D

If you commented on the last chapter and had a question for me, or simply wanted a reply, please, go ahead and re-post it on this one. Love you all!

Que dumb personal stuff below:

My absence was necessary, guys. I had to get sober. And now, I have been for almost a month! It was one of the most difficult things I've ever done. If anyone reading this is struggling with addiction, and you don't think you can do it, or you're scared of the withdrawal, like I was for so long, don't worry, alright? Take your time. But please know that IT IS WORTH IT. It's painful, and horrible, and frustrating as hell, but the misery is temporary. And when you're done, you get to take your life back. The feeling is like... like getting out of jail. I'm free from it now. I can EAT. I can SLEEP. I no longer wake up sick as fuck. I don't have to plan around it any more. I'm free. There's tears in my eyes right now, it feels that good.

Thank you all for your kind, supportive comments, and please excuse my lack of replies. Just know that this fic and all your support helped me do this.

Tony blinks awake inside the Milano and immediately notices the changes. His under armor holds incredibly steady. His electricity is a sheathed weapon, a firearm on safety with his thumb hovering over the selector switch, completely within his control. Bereft of the nasty, painfully humming malware, his thoughts are clear and concise. Everything he worked so diligently to achieve before the virus is back and better than ever- along with the addition of several thousand petabytes of information regarding numerous alien races and planets and their associated technological ability.

The flash of it through his brain knocks him back onto his ass for a moment, leaves him gasping at the sheer massive size of the file he’s got to unzip. No time though; he can sense something happening outside. Foreign signals he can’t identify assault him, becoming a pounding migraine behind his right eye. They’re being attacked. Dammit. His fault. He blinks it away with a grunt, rips the wires out of his port, and throws himself through the exit hatch.

There’s bodies everywhere. Tony blinks, gulps down a bout of nausea.

Rocket’s operating system is far superior to the one Tony concocted, but that doesn’t mean the new code is any easier to get a grip on. And those alien craft, shit, what complex tech. Though the sight
of all the Guardians, and even worse, Peter, being sucked into a series of hostile prisoner vessels, encourages him to begin the unzipping process, to locate these particular brand of craft within the dense file, because there’s no time to wait for his armor to arrive. And it’s torture, wading through so much unfamiliar data. Within seconds, though, he’s comprehending alien schematics he’s never seen before, the inner workings of the pods becoming exposed to him like an x-ray. Their fuel sources are laughingly combustible, their pilots, non-existent, mere drones, and with the pods lined up as they are, Tony uses the robotic positioning to his advantage.

It’s the first time he gets to use this part of Extremis as a weapon. His eyes flash blue and he smirks with the power.

All it will take is one shot. He possesses the last craft as a vengeful techno-poltergeist, and ignores the agony of it, the familiar coppery taste in the back of his throat. As exhilarating as it is, it’s like running a marathon with zero preparatory training; fucking taxing. But he does it anyway, the safety of his friends trumping his discomfort. It very nearly knocks him out.

A particle beam with enough measurable emittance to vaporize steel shoots straight through five armored space drones. They explode one by one, a colorful array of celebratory fireworks, dropping their prisoners instantly, producing a symphony of grunts and groans. He sends the last one careening away, and smirks with satisfaction as it’s impaled as viciously as his own ship was. Lacking Tony’s patented adaptive technology, it catches fire almost immediately, hopefully attracting the locals to it and away from Tony and the others. It will soon share the same unfortunate fate of its brethren.

His little, “what did I miss?” is meant to conceal how absolutely exhausting that was to pull off. The concern at the sight of Rocket’s unmoving form, while everyone else scrambles to their feet, is more difficult to hide and even his constant Peter-related worrying is overshadowed. He can clearly see the kid is fine, bum leg, sure, but totally alert. Rocket though, the little spit-fire of a being, is deathly still.

“Shit, what the hell happened?” Tony asks as he rushes over, hopping aboard his own chugging guilt train, because this is a direct result of his damned illness and Rocket’s efforts to cure it. Tony can’t ever get a break.

“Tagged by a Xiaxian,” Quill explains from within his mask, looking over Rocket, who’s being cradled by Groot. The rest of them look on, helpless and appearing grief-stricken, their sorrow palpable. “They hit him right in the back, dammit, his neuro connections are fried,” Quill growls the curse, retracts his mask and bares his teeth, “we don’t have the supplies, I can’t do anything without-”

“Can I take a look?” Tony asks Quill, glancing up at Groot as well to acknowledge his part in this, and is distressed to find tears on his wooden countenance.

“Yeah, please,” Quill insists hastily as he moves aside to stand next to Drax and Gamora. In his peripheral, Tony sees Drax place a hand on Quill’s shoulder as Peter limps up next to them and finds a seat on the ground, a silent, stunned observer.

“I am Groot,” rumbles from Groot, voice cracking as he holds out his most treasured friend, and Tony swears he hears the ghost of the word “trust” somewhere in there, though he can’t be certain. He meets Groot’s soft gaze, momentarily shocked, and returns the broken smile he’s given. No time to consider it. “Thanks, buddy.” Trust is nice.

Even in the darkness, Tony can plainly see that Rocket’s back is a mess. Eyes flash blue as he communicates remotely, begins a search. Hopefully… ah, yes, wow, there it is. Shockingly, there’s
an entire schematic related to Rocket stored within Tony’s new system. He immediately comprehends every fractured biological micro-hydraulic and their functions, all the neuro-mechanical pathways currently leaking a yellow fluid, mixed with red blood all over Groot’s flattened arms. A detailed, exploded view of Rocket informs him of every disconnect inflicted. The trust that must have taken to plant that schematic in his new system is staggering, and Tony is frankly honored. Something to address later. The Three Musketeers are inbound, with supplies.

Alvin, Simon and Theodore are shooting in behind him, invisible sources of rushing winds. “No worries, it’s just me,” he assures the Guardians, and a wobbly Peter, who have taken up defensive positions. Stealth mode melts away revealing three wonderfully functional sets of armor which touch down with impeccable grace. Tony allows Theodore to encase him, his movements never hindered. Doing so is as natural as moving a finger, because they basically are him. He masks his sigh of relief. Finally, he doesn’t feel so exposed. And now he has a flashlight, one that pops up from his shoulder.

He sends Simon to patrol the perimeter and Alvin walks up beside him and offers its hand. He hears Peter gasp as he snaps a finger off of it, retracting his right gauntlet so he can use Extremis to melt it down into a malleable, molten goo, a process so hot it creates a bright flash in his palm, like a tiny sun. If not for the vibranium scales covering his body, it would have melted his skin clean off. A shame he never had enough of the material, nor the time to synthesize a sufficient amount, to fabricate suits out of it.

A tiny silver syringe in his left gauntlet is actually a precision tool, meant to withstand intense heat, and it pokes from the gauntlet’s index finger. He places the tool in the center of the goo in his palm, and draws back the syringe plunger, sucking it up, before getting to work on Rocket. Only a marginal awareness exists, of the others crowding around and watching curiously, as most of his concentration is being funneled into the delicate process of repairing Rocket’s neuro-mechanical pathways. The syringe deposits molten goop along the damaged mechanics and his middle finger follows behind with a coolant, instantly hardening it into a tough metal, a series of needed patches. His helmet offers a magnified view from many angles.

The guy really is a feat of incredible engineering, despite the torture he must have endured to become what he is. It’s sad and terrifying, and Tony experiences an intimate understanding as he recreates tubes and intricate machinery, because Tony himself has been torn apart and remade without his consent, once upon a time in a dusty cave. Strapped down to a goddamn table, screaming and writhing for an escape he’ll never manage. He can’t even imagine what a creature with no ability to understand what was happening to it would think as it was being contorted into this. A complete and total mental grasp of his situation didn’t help lesson Tony’s terror in the slightest.

It takes him all of five minutes, and six of Alvin’s fingers, to complete. When he’s finished, he presses a foam bandage gently to Rocket’s back, releasing a long exhale of relief when he notices his vitals returning slowly to normal. Within the hour, Rocket should be on his feet again, not totally healed, but his neuropathways are reconnected and the micro-hydraulics that have twisted him into an upright position are fully functional again. The real flesh and fur surrounding them will take a week, or even longer, to heal in totality, unfortunately. Rocket’s enhanced, but not like Tony or Peter. Nothing more Tony can do about it.

“He should be up, all piss and vinegar, in a matter of hours,” Tony informs them as he scans Rocket once more, ensuring his accuracy with the make-shift repairs, and suddenly wonders with great mirth how amused Rocket will be to discover Tony’s ‘scrap metal’ now exists inside him. “The wound itself should heal normally, but it would behoove us to check on it periodically. I’ve brought enough bandages like this one to supply a small army, I could- uh… you guys alright?” Tony, curious about the silence from the others, has glanced up to find the rest of them watching him while sporting various expressions of shock- with the exception of Peter, who is smiling widely, almost proudly.
“What?” he asks, perplexed by their stares, “Oh, sorry.” He disengages his helmet, grimaces a small, awkward smile. Maybe it’s Iron Man’s cold countenance making everyone uneasy?

“Dude, Tony,” Quill starts, eyes large and very green, and Tony watches with apprehension. Did he do something wrong? But there’s no anger, only a huge grin that slowly engulfs his whole face. “You are awesome, man! You’re like David Hasselhoff, Chuck Norris and the guy who created the Nintendo had a three-way baby, and that baby came out and immediately kicked all their asses, like, wow. Am I right guys?” He regards the rest of them with a grin and a pair of wide hands.

“Um,” Tony says, unsure how to deal with praise from anyone other than little Peter Parker, who’s practically star-struck by him. “I mean, those are actual legends, gods among men, so…”

“I do not know who any of those people are,” Drax grumbles, pulling Peter to his feet, and allowing him to lean against him for support.

Gamora is retrieving a discarded sword from the ground, begins wiping blue blood off of it with graceful, practiced swipes against a panel on her leg, which absorbs it instantly. “We’ll take your word for it,” she says, sheathing her weapon, then smiles kindly at Tony. “Thank you, Tony, you probably saved Rocket’s life, as well as all of ours.”

What does he even say to that? Tony tries desperately to conceal his smile and act annoyed, hiding it behind his hand while he wipes crimson from his face with a sniff. A vine from Groot whips out and he grunts with surprise as it pulls him close to the sentient tree, armor and all, embraces him in one of the strangest hugs he’s ever received. “I am Groot,” he says, smiles, and Tony hears it then, unmistakable. Hidden within Groot’s statement is the opaque whisper of one word; “family”.

This is… this is family?

And then his anxiety kicks in.

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There’s a million and one things Tony needs to get done before they can leave the planet, and relaxation is a distant fantasy. For Peter and Rocket, though, it’s a pressing necessity.

“Oh c’mon, man, I want to help, don’t ground me, this isn’t cool,” Peter complains, wincing as he lies down on one of the Milano’s sleeping pods. Mere feet away, an ingrained Groot is falling asleep against the wall, and still cradling Rocket protectively. “Hey, you’re welcome, by the way. What is this, four times I’ve helped saved your life now? Five? I don’t know, I’m losing count.”

Tony glares at him disapprovingly with a set of blue eyes and crossed arms. Currently in the process of pulling his ship off Mount Porcupine using two of his suits, he’s in no mood for an argumentative teenager. “You have a hole in your leg I could toss a golf ball through, you’re sitting this one out.”

“It’s really not that bad,” Peter insists, but the sweat breaking out all over him says otherwise.

“Alright then, Rambo, I’ll just give it a little flick-“ Tony says, moving his armored fingers into an ‘O.K.’ symbol, and smirking when Peter grabs his leg and rejects the action with panic in his eyes.

“No, no, don’t!” he spouts frantically.
“Hmm, thought so.” Tony’s smile is tight. It brings him absolutely no enjoyment, being so right all the time.

“It’s just a little sore, is all,” Peter mumbles dejectedly, then sighs, and drapes an arm over his eyes, which Tony notes, are ringed with dense shadow. “I’m lying, it really hurts.”

“I know. I’m not the only one who’s terrible at lying,” Tony says, eyes flicking microscopically to the… well, ‘screens’ he’s keeping up in his vision, displaying the perspectives of Alvin and Simon. They’ve got the jet right-side-up and are lowering it slowly, an immense task that takes concentration to maintain until it’s safely positioned on the ground. Bringing up a third screen, he slices it into four subsections so he can watch the ships surroundings through surveillance cameras, and engages deadly defense protocols as well. The bugs in the coding are now child’s play, so he sets up a simple subroutine to purge them. This new operating system is making everything cake. He and Rocket owe each other a mound of thanks.

“You look like you could be Rocket’s brother, my man,” Quill says, addressing Peter with a chin tilt, as he walks up to them, wiping machine grease from his hands. “Give sleep a chance. You did good, but we got this from here. Professionals, remember?”

“Professionally unfortunate,” Peter murmurs. Breathing slowing, body relaxing out of a constant pain-induced tension; he’s already falling asleep. Within seconds, he’s out, snoring lightly, and Tony is deflating with relief. Peter will be safe here, these are good people, he’ll be fine, he will heal, he will-

“Warp core’s installed,” Quill says. Tony looks at him with a tilted eyebrow. “It’ll take a day or so for the ship to download the new program, and then I’ll need to run diag on it, and- what? What’s the eyebrow for?”

“You installed that?” Tony asks. Didn’t they just get inside like ten minutes ago? “Already? Just now?”

“Well, yeah, this is my ship. Right?” Quill says, furrowing his brow. “I couldn’t put it in earlier while we were in safe mode, would have been pointless, really, with the integration it needs to complete. But Rocket and I set up the socket for it months ago so we could just plug it in really quick, worked with you directly over vid-com to… no? You don’t remember?” A mix of worry and confusion crosses his face when Tony shakes his head.

“Honestly, I thought I was going to have to install it myself,” Tony admits, running a hand down his face, and wondering just how many memories his addled brain purged during that time. He looks away from Quill, motions for him to walk with him towards the front of the Milano, not wanting Peter to hear, no matter how asleep he seems. “I never told you, because I found out just days before Extremis started, but I, um… I had this mild seizure one night. Whole right side of my body just started doing its own thing. So, I had a scan done, and voila, memory mystery solved. Come to find out, I had brain cancer. Crazy, huh?”

“You- you had brain cancer?” Quill utters in low, awed tones, and when Tony stops near the bridge and looks at him, he discovers a curious mixture of reverence and deep, deep sadness he didn’t expect. “Holy shit, dude, what stage?”

“God, I don’t know,” Tony says with a sigh large enough to shift his armor around him, “but I know it was advanced enough to encourage me to get a damn move on with Extremis. And to ask for some help.” He sticks a thumb out and pokes it over his shoulder to indicate Peter. “That’s the main reason I got that poor kid involved, you know, I didn’t really have anyone I could trust, and my paranoia was absolutely out of control. Time was not on my side. And now I’m here, and my goddamn
terrible luck decided to infect him, too. And he has a hole in his leg. My fault.” An attempt to take the focus off himself doesn’t work, unfortunately.

“So, hold on, let me get this straight,” Quill begins, emitting an impressed, huffing chuckle, and gesturing for Tony to slow down with open palms, ‘you built two intergalactic warp drives, an interstellar jet, a bunch of armor, planned for extended space travel, created Extremis-‘

“Fixed Extremis,” Tony interjects, and Quill scoffs.

“Fixed, created, whatever, dude, something tells me the original didn’t include controlling technology with your freaking mind,” he says, and Tony can’t argue with that, just stares at Quill as he’s praised again and knowing nothing about how to react to it. “My point is… look I’ve- I’ve seen first-hand how miserable brain cancer is, man, my mom- my, my mom, um, battled it for months and months, and- and she still-“

Tony remains silent, shuts off Extremis, waits patiently with a giant boulder swinging from his heart, as Quill’s voice cracks, and he looks away, out the Milanos wind-shield to where Gamora and Drax are busy tossing Xianian bodies into a mass grave. Impossibly green eyes turn misty and dull for a moment. Tony notices his Adam’s apple working as he tries to gulp the emotion back down. The stories say Quill was abducted from hospital property all those years ago. There’s only one plausible explanation as to why he was there in the first place.

Quill saw his mother die of cancer, and was kidnapped mere minutes after. God…

“There’s a reason you haven’t been back to Earth, huh?” Tony asks quietly.

“Yeah.” Quill’s response is barely a whisper. He wipes his eyes, sniffs once, shoots a reluctant half-smile at Tony. “I just can’t believe you did all this while you were sick like that. There’s not enough ways to say ‘thanks’ for what you’ve done for us, Tony, I mean the heart disease was one thing, and I’m not downplaying that at all, but, shit man. My mom, she could barely move most days. And you- you cured it, didn’t you?”

“I did. I cured everything.” Tony meets his intense gaze with one a little softer, tries to transmit understanding through it and hoping he’s not failing miserably. “That must have been extremely difficult for you to watch happen.”

A familiar, frozen road. A single gunshot ringing through the otherwise silent night, followed by the screech of twisting metal. Flames. Smoke. Agonized moaning. Those intolerable, choking gasps he can hear so plainly-

“I was young. A seven-year-old whipper-snapper, when she was diagnosed,” Quill says, tossing Tony back out of the horrific memory, and ‘good’, he thinks. This isn’t the time for a damn flashback. Quill deserves his full attention if he’s going to be sharing such sensitive information, and actually views Tony as worthy of knowing it. “I don’t think I ever truly understood what was happening at the time. I knew she had a lump growing in her brain, and they called it cancer, other than that, though, I didn’t really get it. I was just worried about when the new Indiana Jones movie was coming out, I didn’t know what the hell cancer actually meant, I was just a kid, and no one wanted to explain it to me properly. My mom tried, though. She really tried.

“She, uh… she told me there was some medicine for it, but I didn’t understand why it made her sicker. Medicine is supposed to help. And I felt like it was, um… just hurting her more, you know? And she kept talking about my shit-bag, absent father like he was some literal god or something. She was stuck in this loop, it was- it was like being stabbed through the heart, every time I saw her, all her hair fell out and she got pale and skinny, more so every single day, she would forget things
sometimes, my name, her own name. It was disturbing, it, it, it, was—Tony, I missed her before she was even gone.” His sigh is broken, wet, but he still smiles at Tony, green orbs surrounded by a miserable, bloodshot red.

Fuck, how the hell should he react? Tony’s never been skilled at consolation, has always come off as a jackass, because that’s what happens when he’s uncomfortable, and human misery always rattles him something fierce. So, he settles with the forlorn, pitying expression he’s already wearing and a simple “I’m sorry, Peter.”

Now’s not the time, but… when should he tell Quill he knows exactly what it’s like to watch his mother die?

“It is what it is. Now I’m a space man. Oh well.” Quill places a hand against a passenger seat and leans, as though the words he’s just spoken exhausted him physically, “What’s Earth like, now?”

Tony thinks for a moment, shrugs one shoulder, and the armor moves fluidly with it. “You’ll probably find it laughingly primitive. Maybe even boring. Rocket will have an insult field day.”

“Honestly, I could probably use a little ‘boring’ in my life,” Quill says, raking fingers through his hair, placing one hand on his hip, and expelling air slowly between puffed out cheeks. “I need a vacation, dude. Space is exhausting.”

“Well, I know some spots,” Tony says, and smirks, “actually, I own some spots. After all this Thanos business is over, I can hook you all up with a good time, beachside, completely stress free.”

“Don’t have to twist my arm,” Quill says, grabbing his long, red coat and swinging it around his shoulders with a flourish, “let’s get a move on, that vacation isn’t going to have itself.”

“By the way, I, uh… I have Last Crusade saved on my jet,” Tony says. “Actually, I have all of them. Once I get it up and running, you can watch it, if you want. We’ll have a marathon. I don’t think the kid’s seen them, which is blasphemy.”

He’s delighted to watch Quill’s face light up with excitement. Maybe misery isn’t the only thing Tony Stark is capable of propagating.

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The night outside is thick, cool, and everlasting. Once the others have been alerted of Quill and Tony’s intentions, they depart together in stealth, aided by the darkness, a pair of curious blurs in the sky.

Rocket’s aero-rigs may contain the most condensed tech in the smallest deployment package Tony’s ever seen, but they absolutely do not match up to the speed and maneuverability his repulsors allow him. Proof is in the pudding when he touches down next to his injured jet a full two minutes before a whistling Quill, who expresses his admiration jubilantly once he arrives.

After checking on the jet, which is undergoing meticulous, blessedly uninterrupted reconstruction, and finding the progress satisfactory, Tony goes about answering his next most pressing question; what the hell is Mount Porcupine comprised of? Using the element analyzer Peter Parker designed while Tony himself was a useless mass of writhing misery during the Extremis fiasco, he takes readings of the material, which is now glowing a soft green. The data that pops up startles him.
“This can’t be right,” Tony comments, putting the armor through a soft reboot, unsure of its integrity, even still, because that virus was nasty and there’s got to be a glitch still. Right? “Ugh, hold on.”

“What’s up?” Quill inquires, glancing between Tony and the mysterious, color-changing substance with a pair of raised eyebrows.

“Nothing. Must’ve been a bug from before, in the- the, uh…” Tony trails off, because despite the reboot, his scanners are telling him the exact same thing as before. The device works; it’s been tested rigorously, perfected, and integrated right into his suit alongside his other scanners. It can’t be wrong. “Huh, well then. Weird.”

“Not a bug, eh?” Quill says with a smile.

“This- this is-” Tony reads the data being displayed on his HUD with squinted, suspicious eyes, “this is impossible. It’s saying this material is comprised of every known element simultaneously, and thousands more, unknown… wait-“ he’s seen this before, this particular chemical make-up, within a condensed, complex algorithm inscribed on a golden page. Never could he have envisioned himself actually locating some. Nothing ever pointed him toward considering that any of it still existed. “No way.”

The mountain changes color then, the sparkling green becoming a swirling ocean of blue.

“It’s something really cool, isn’t it?” Quill’s smiling with excitement at him, and Tony disengages his helmet with merely a signal from his brain. It’s as easy to command as the grin he currently bears, a genuine one. This could turn the tide of the entire fight, if his hunch is correct.

“You guys came here following an Infinity Stone, right?” he inquires, and Quill nods slowly. “Never found one, did you?”

“No, the signal scattered as we got closer, right before our fuel was sucked away, and a lot of our instruments went haywire-“ then he gasps and Tony laughs with a manic tone as Quill’s eyes grow enormous. “You don’t think-“

“That this is a compound found inside the Stones?” Tony claps his metal hands together in triumph, already processing mounds of calculations in his mind. “Actually, I do, and I have proof in that book I brought with me. I think I’ve figured out how and why our Xiaxian friends screwed up this planet so badly, as well. Holy shit, what a find. Let me see that book?”

“Yeah, sure,” Quill extracts the book from his satchel and hands it to Tony, who has memorized the entire thing, but after the virus, nothing is certain. And, sure enough, five pages in, the book is detailing one of the two elements needed to synthesize a goddamn Infinity Stone. The other apparently remains a mystery, even to the immortal beings who composed this invaluable manual.

Tony is in awe. “Well I’ll be damned. There it is. The Asgardians called it Eternium.”

“What do you think happened?” Quill inquires, gazing at the mountain with wide eyes.

“Well, if I had to chance a wild guess, I’d assume, due to its immense density, this substance can only be mined using portals,” Tony elaborates, as he flips through animated pages, “or, in the case of these local unfortunates, miniaturized black holes, since they wouldn’t yet have access to an infinity stone to study. I mean, I’m only speculating here, but in theory, they would fabricate a black hole within the substance itself to sort of slice it off, and maybe they were successful for a while, but I’m sure you understand how easy it is to lose control of something so powerful.”

Quill huffs his agreement. “So, the black hole at the center of this planet?”
“A mining operation gone terribly wrong,” Tony says, slamming the book shut with a loud *smack* and handing it back to Quill, who puts it away in his bag. “This stuff must have only existed in the core at some point, and is now actively displaced to the surface by the sheer force being exerted down there. It’s remarkable. I want some.”

“You want to try and create a synthetic Infinity Stone, don’t you?” Quill asks, his tone skeptical, familiar even, and Tony is reminded suddenly of the cynicism of his former team, feels a rush of freezing anxiety.

“I mean, fight fire with fire, right?” he says, shrugging, an attempt at causality that he hopes Quill purchases from him without a second thought over it.

“Trust me, dude,” Quill starts, looking at Tony sideways, “you don’t want to mess with these things, they’re too powerful, and… well… *unless*—” Tony can see him biting his lip, waits with bated anticipation. “God, I mean, it would give us all a huge advantage, having one, though, wouldn’t it? Shit, just imagine if we *all* had one.”

“Right?” Tony’s smile is creeping back onto his face, spurned by Quill’s curiosity, his budding willingness to maybe *try*. “On Earth, there was one in a cube, another socketed into a staff. I’ve got a ton of data on the one that actually creates portals. What if I could find a way to inhibit it?”

Quill regards him with half a smile and a raised eyebrow. “Is that even possible?”

Tony shrugs. “Anything’s possible through technology.”

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Seven hours later, Peter’s wound is nearly healed, leaving only scarring that will eventually disappear, and he’s up and walking normally. Rocket is still out, though, cradled within the protective vines of Groot, who is determined to stay with him. It’s regrettable, because Tony has drawn up schematics for a device meant to shave off samples of Eternium, and would appreciate Rocket’s input on how to fabricate it.

And at this rate, they’re both going to miss the party.

Years ago, Tony would have been delighted at the prospect of a party, loved to socialize, especially if it involved revels with the Avengers. Now, however, he has way too much to do to be distracted by such trivialities. And he feels terrible for it, because the Guardians thought up this little campfire-lit get together to celebrate his and Peter’s apparent “special brands of badass”, as Quill had so blatantly put it.

But Tony can’t stay here and enjoy it, must put the laughter and the friendly banter taking place between these otherworldly people, and the comparatively normal Peter Parker, on the furthest backburner. His mind is in his ship instead, manipulating the armors, repairing, building, crafting, and it feels like he’s cheating, perhaps even being rude. Something needs to be completed within the next hour, something incredibly important. It’s regrettable that Alvin has to be sacrificed to make it happen, but he only had four fingers left anyway. All Tony’s repair modules were left on Earth during their unplanned departure, and though he has no doubt about their ability to locate some kind of suitable replacement material, he’d rather use the damaged suit for this very important thing.

He works diligently as stories he already knows are told, and laughter rings all around him.
At one point, a bunch of rustling brush does snap him back for a moment. Drax vanishes into the forest for all of five tense minutes before reappearing with a creature the size of a deer across his back, blue blood dripping down his shoulders grotesquely. Its smooth skin is displaying a chromatic ballet of many vibrant colors, the result of dying nerves firing their last synapses. A dense pair of horns poke from its bulbous head.

“Oh, hell yeah, you guys are in for a treat,” Quill beams, helping Drax tie the animal’s front legs together, and they hang it from a tree a few meters away. “These things eat nothing but this rare fruit, right, and the meat is really sweet, like syrup. Doesn’t even need seasoning.”

“Come slice this animal’s organs out with me!” Drax declares, grinning maniacally and offering his knife to Peter. “The honor of the first cut is yours.”

Peter grimaces and Tony can see him fighting to transform it into an awkward, twitching smile. “No, I’m- I’m good, Drax, thanks,” he stutters, rigidly unnerved.

Drax laughs. “What? Are you frightened? There is no reason to be, the beast is dead, it can no longer gore you to death.”

“Leave him alone, you blundering primitive. Not everyone is a savage, like you,” Gamora hisses as she deposits more firewood next to their campsite. She smiles at Peter, ruffles his hair and leaves him blushing radiantly. “You’re like a breath of fresh air, honey, don’t listen to this moron.”

“Every man should know how to clean an animal for consumption,” Drax grumbles, slicing into the belly and pulling down in a smooth movement. Blood and entrails pour out, hitting the ground with a sickening, wet plop. Tony raises an eyebrow at it. Gore is something he’s used to, but this is colorful and alien.

No time to consider it. Back into the jet he goes. The project is almost done, and he needs to free up Simon and Theodore so they can continue putting his damn spacecraft back together-

“Your boy is absolutely adorable,” Gamora tells Tony quietly, smiling pleasantly as she sits next to him. There’s a drink in her hand. It smells delicious, strong, and Tony must resist the urge to partake. He never did tell them about his alcoholism, finding it too embarrassing to mention to these amazing people. And he always enjoyed hearing their stories more than he did telling his. “I’m going to steal him from you, if you’re not careful. You better watch your back.”

There’s a groan of disgust from Peter as Drax rips out an organ, shows it to him and explains that the beast has four hearts, and each one of them tastes different.

Tony huffs a small, voiceless chuckle. “You’ll have to put one of your knives in it to do that,” he assures her. No harm is meant by either party.

An attempt to avoid looking at her, to hide his shameful detachment, is met with a low hum.

“You’re busy, aren’t you?” she observes, shifting a bit to find his eyes, which are shining that cursed, revealing blue while he labors away miles from here. “Always working. It’s admirable.” Her smile displays friendly affection, respect, and empathy.

Tony sighs, nods to Peter, who’s somehow been conned into holding an enormous plate, and is begrudgingly accepting the raw steaks Quill and Drax are placing on it with a series of comical grimaces. “That kid over there saved my life more times than I’m comfortable with,” he informs her in hushed tones, “if I have to work for the rest of my life to keep him safe, I will. I’ll do whatever it takes.”
“Hey, it’s alright,” she insists, clearly detecting his unease, his ever-present anxiety disorder that hasn’t let up on him since discovering that Peter was along for his space romp. She takes his hand, squeezes, and the contact causes his scales to shift all over his body, nearly smacks him right out of Extremis due to shock. “You’re not the only one any more, Tony. All of us are looking out for him. For both of you.”

Well that’s a terrible idea. He stares into her depthless black eyes and engages in a desperate struggle to string together an appropriate response. Tony’s likely to get them mutilated or killed or separated, considering his track record with people who dare to give a flying fuck about him. Peter should be protected at all costs, but Tony, on the other hand… he’s not worthy of their affection. This is something he knows.

“Keep an eye on the kid,” he says, and extracts his hand from hers, doesn’t want to taint her perfection with his sullen wretchedness, “but please, don’t waste your time on me.”

Gamora sighs, gives him a small, sad smile. “As difficult as it might be for you to believe, you are not a waste of time.”

Damn, she can see right through him. He swallows, clears his throat. “It’s uh… it’s his birthday today. Well, on Earth. If we were still on Earth, it would be his birthday. He’s seventeen now.”

“Well, then, that is a welcome surprise,” she says, after a sip of her drink, and a grimace as it goes down. “Peter, our Peter, I mean, celebrates those. None of us ever considered the day we were born to be something worthy of celebration until we met him. He made up dates for all of us and marked them on a Terran calendar he keeps so he can plan a party for each one.”

“He’s a nice guy,” Tony remarks, watches the man in question explain to his Peter how to cook the steaks on a grate set up over their fire with genuine enthusiasm.

“Oh, we all hate it,” Gamora says, and Tony snickers, imagines Rocket in a party hat, sitting in front of a cake with a single candle, tiny arms crossed, and a face full of spite as a trio of tone-deaf people sing ‘Happy Birthday’ and Groot awkwardly repeats the three words he knows. “But… it is nice that someone cares about us enough to do that. So, we tolerate it. It makes him happy.”

This team is perfect, knitted together like a warm scarf, and they should stay as far away from Tony, and his brown thumb, as possible. Hopefully his influence is limited and doesn’t tarnish them too much. He can’t get attached again. He will only hurt them, and in retaliation, they will hurt him back.

Right?

With one last solder, Peter’s birthday gift is finally complete.

“You want to see happy?” he asks Gamora with a glimmer in his eye that has nothing to do with Extremis, “watch this. Hey, kid!” Tony smirks when Peter looks toward him, “how old are you, again?”

“Oh, c’mon, really?” Peter scoffs while he flips a steak. “You going senile, or something, old man? I’m sixtee-“

“Oh, ah, ah, nope,” Tony interrupts with a straightened index finger, standing and ensuring his smile reaches his eyes, “try that one again, there, Pythagoras. What day is it back on Earth?”

The gift is inbound, now, being escorted by Theodore.

“What are you- oh!” the realization on his face as the answer crosses his mind is humorous, eyes
growing large and mouth hanging slightly open. Apparently, amidst his glorious space adventure, he’d lost track of time completely. “It’s… it’s my birthday, isn’t it? I’m seventeen today. No shit.”

“God, you’re so bright, it’s blinding me,” Tony shakes his head at him as Quill beams with excitement.

“It’s your birthday?!” he exclaims, laughing heartily and pumping his fist, “god, yes! Oh, hell yes, finally, someone who appreciates it! Dammit, why didn’t anyone tell me? I don’t have a cake, or candles-“

“I am sorry, friend,” Drax says forlornly, approaches Peter and puts a hand on his shoulder as though the kid’s dog was just hit by a car, “Quill introduced us to these ‘birthdays’” he says, basically spitting the word. “They are… torture to partake in.”

“Shut up, Drax, stop ruining everything!” Quill says, his grin never faltering. “This is awesome. We gotta sing happy birthday-“

“Oh, and the singing!” Drax bemoans, grabbing Peter’s other shoulder, and bringing him closer. “Trust me, you will want your ears cut off instead.”

“Happy birthday, sweetie,” Gamora says, winking at him from behind her cup before taking a huge sip.

“Th-thanks,” Peter stutters, looks her way, but his expression is like a distress signal.

“I got you something,” Tony says, landing Theodore beside him, “made you something, actually.”

“You did?” Peter asks, and Drax lets him go, mumbling about the absurdness of gifts.

“Sure,” Tony assures him, “what kind of shitty person would I be if I didn’t?”

Peter waits for a second, staring at him, looks all around Tony and then the campsite, before his eyes land on Theodore. “Are- are you giving me one of your suits?” it’s said with humbled appreciation.

“No,” Tony says, then cocks his head, and looks to the sky with a slight wince, “well, not exactly ‘no’, and not wholly ‘yes’ either.”

“Well, where is it?”

Tony gestures to the empty air behind Peter. “Right there, of course.”

As Peter turns, his birthday present materializes out of stealth right beside him, eliciting a satisfying, terrified shout alongside a collective flinch out of everyone except Tony, and causing Peter to stumble back from it. “Oh, whoa, wow! Shit! What the-?”

It’s his new suit, standing there on its own. Forged from the old one, and the remnants of Alvin, Tony fused them together to create a versatile, flexible, protective, space-worthy, suit of armor for him, and he didn’t skimp on the Spider-Man scheme. Thin, not at all bulky like Tony’s own suits, blue and red, with a huge, black spider symbol and gold trim, webbing detailed throughout; it should make him happy. And keep him safe. It’s a passible birthday gift, he supposes.

“Wow…” Quill whispers.

“I’m having a drink,” Drax breathes and disappears into the Milano, catching his breath with a hand over his chest.
“Did, did, did-“ Peter’s clearly shocked, can’t barely summon words. It’s the only thanks Tony really needs from him. He points to the suit, looks at Tony with awe and disbelief. “Did, did you- oh my god, Tony, did you dismantle one of your suits to, to make this for me?”

“You going to take it for a spin, or continue to mercilessly slaughter the English language?” Tony tosses him a pair of wrist bands Theodor’s been holding, and Peter catches them without looking. “Put those on, give them both a tap, it’ll wrap around you like a nice little security blanket, pre-K.”

“Okay, um, well, this is happening first,” Peter says, and then closes the distance between them faster than Tony can blink, is ambushing him with a hug, *again*, and it would be completely dickish of Tony to do anything other than hug him back. It is Peter’s birthday, after all.

“Happy birthday, Peter,” Tony says, smiling, holding him tight and unwilling to admit that this is anything other than involuntary. Not ready to address the warmth growing like a tiny flame in his heart. He can’t pull away, because… well, Peter’s just too strong. That’s it.

Yeah, that’s it.
Hello all you wonderful people! Welcome to the halfway point. I just wanted to say that all of your encouragement and kudos for overcoming my little problem meant a ton to me. I’m overwhelmed by the kind words. I haven’t been able to tell many people in my life about it, and only my husband truly knows how bad it got, so there was a depressing point where I felt like I couldn’t even be proud. No one knew, you know? So, I cried reading all your replies.

You guys mean the world to me. Please, enjoy another chapter. I’ll have the next up in one to two weeks.

Immediately after receiving his gift, Peter, predictably enough, wants training. Hands-on training. And it’s remarkable, how swiftly Tony’s attitude can sour.

He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath, opening them in time to witness Peter make a tentative, gentle attempt at activating one of his condensed repulsors. “Try again, kid. Give it more ‘umph’, you’re not petting a kitten, you’re triggering flight, it takes some force.”

Alright, sorry, okay, here I go,” Peter shakes his hands out, dancing from foot to foot, a display of pent up, nervous energy. “Okay, Peter, you can fly, you’re Maverick. You. Are. Maverick.”

Tony plants the back of his gauntlet against his forehead and tries not to snap.

What the hell is wrong with him? Should he be doing something else? No, ensuring Peter understands how to operate his new suit is just as critical as anything else that needs to be done, and besides, usually Tony enjoys training with the kid. But as of ten minutes ago, a strange static he can’t identify began buzzing in the back of his mind, accompanied by a sensation of impending doom. Bizarre as that static is, the impending doom is familiar, so he attributes both feelings to his anxiety disorder acting up again. The sensation makes him mean and snappy like a grumpy cat, clawing at anyone who dares get close. Sarcasm and douche-baggery and general irritableness are his best defense against uncomfortable questions. It occurs as naturally and uncontrollably as any other instinct.

And perhaps the static is there as well due to Rocket’s influence on Extremis. That’s got to be it, right? His old friend, Generalized Anxiety Disorder, has shown up to the damn Halloween party that is his head, wearing a different costume this time, and accompanied by an annoying friend. The slight pangs he felt earlier around Quill were growing pains compared to this. Dear lord, there’s not even a decent explanation for it, it’s just there, twanging away, a merciless knife twisting in his chest. It feels like something horrible is about to happen.

Clenching his fists has no effect. His hands continue to shake and quiver within his gauntlets.

He really hopes the thoughts won’t start, the nasty, racing ones. The condemnatory, scolding, pitiless ones. And then the chest pain and heavy breathing, and the terrible sweating, and forgetting where
he is, and who he is, and the desperate need to run away and- fuck. Not in front of these very composed people, please. The Guardians have all been through hell, and just look at them, they’re fine. Glowing, smiling, tolerant beacons of rationality. They’re as stalwart as Captain America, as serenely contemplative as Black Widow, as proficient and observant as Hawkeye, as resilient and battle-hardened as Thor, and as awkwardly friendly as Bruce.

It’s only a matter of time before Tony drags the dark side out of all of them, as he had the aforementioned. Betrayal. Assault, both verbal and physical. Deceit. Disdain. Distrust. Tony has a knack for unlocking such physiognomies in otherwise generally respectable people. It’s what he does. He turns good things to shit.

Fretting like this… it isn’t what he needs to be doing.

Come to think of it, what was he doing?

Oh, right, the kid. Peter is important, preparing him is important. He must locate some patience for this.

“No, Peter, like this. Splay your fingers more and really shove your palm down,” he instructs, making a positively heroic effort to keep his voice neutral while he demonstrates the extremely specific movement.

Theodore’s right repulsor bursts to life with a flash and a whine, kicking up orange dirt beneath it. Of course, following the advent of Extremis, such an action is typically completed by synapses being relayed directly from Tony’s brain, but he puts that aside. Extremis is shut off for the night, a request, or more specifically, a command, made by Peter right after he got done assaulting Tony with that hug. Peter wants him to take a break from it, so Tony humored him, set up subroutines, calibrated his sensors to activate an alert if Kree vessels come within half a lightyear of their location and placed Simon on autonomous duty. It’s not ideal. He’d rather be directly connected, ensuring things are done properly. Not that they won’t be, it’s just…

Ugh. Whatever. Peter’s right, he can’t constantly be using it, he’ll end up frying himself at the rate he’s going, and the static he’s experiencing could even be related to overuse in some way. Plus, it’s the kid’s birthday. He’ll put his brown eyes on for it, if it makes him happy.

Might as well stick with the theme, you’re full of shit, anyway.

And there it is. Right on schedule. A table for him and his anxious self-loathing, by a window, please, thank you.

“Okay, so… like this? Whoosh!” Peter opens his hand, fails to splay his fingers enough, and Tony can practically see him pouting behind the severe, mouthless face of Spider-Man when nothing happens. “Oh, come on. Whoosh! Whooooosh! I think your birthday present’s defective.”

Tony scoffs, an unjustified bout of annoyance elevating his blood pressure.

“No, it’s not, it’s simply experiencing some heavy user-related errors. And please, spare us the ‘whoosh’, you’re not in a fucking comic book, Superman, we don’t need action words,” he grumbles, grabbing Peter’s hand and splaying his fingers for him. The poor kid’s shaking slightly, probably intimidated by the tech. “See? Like that. And for god’s sake, stop shaking so much, you’re like Marty McFly on amphetamines, you’re likely to kill us all, rookie.” When Spider-Man’s eyes widen, Tony rolls his own and sighs. “Shit, scratch that, that was mean, I didn’t mean to say that.”

God, what an insufferable jerk you are. It’s not the suit, clearly, you’re the one making him nervous,
“Yeah, that really wasn’t cool,” Peter says. The mask is thicker now, more of a helmet, really, and it no longer shifts around when Peter talks. It’s slightly unnerving.

“What’s wrong with McFly?” Quill wants to know from over where he’s put himself in charge of cooking. Tony and Peter are standing a relatively safe distance away from the others for his test flight. Just in case. “That was the guy in Back to the Future, right? Michael J. Fox played him?”

“Sure did,” Tony calls back, pinching the bridge of his nose, frustrated by all the distractions, including that fist tightening fretfully in his chest, indicating a dire need to prepare, prepare, prepare, because if he doesn’t there will certainly be blood. “The actor developed a neurological disorder that makes him shake involuntarily called Parkinson’s disease. That’s, uh, that’s what I was very insensitively referring to.” He’s sure there’s a rhythmic, blue light show currently sparkling right over his heart, which is thumping away as painfully as it used to when he was afflicted with illness. Luckily, the armor conceals it, this time.

“Oh, wow,” Quill says, wincing, “that really sucks, I like that guy. Good movie. ‘Hello? Anybody home? Think, McFly, think!’” he turns to Gamora with a grin, knocks her very lightly on the forehead, and she flicks an eyebrow up at him. “Hah, sorry. Famous quote from the movie, my whole school was saying it after it came out. Marty McFly was this High School kid who went back in time and found out his dad had this big, beefy, arrogant dude named ‘Biff’ always picking on him and cracking stupid jokes.”

“My goodness, what an excellent impression of him,” she drawls with a smirk.

“Parkinson’s disease, right. And, what’s the one called that involuntarily makes you act like an asshole?” Peter asks Tony, the suit’s eyelids narrowing, “Tony Stark disease?”

“Hah-urgh!” Drax, who is sitting next to fire, and getting quite toasted, laughs mid-drink only to end up choking and coughing loudly for a moment as Tony spears Peter with one of his dangerous looks. Vague memories exist of instructing Peter to tell him off when he gets shitty with him. And good. If Tony’s going to spare these people from his venomous influence, he’s got to put a cap on his mouth, and Peter’s always been an excellent moral barometer.

*That’s the truth though, you jackass, and you know it. You’re a disease, and you happen to be contagious.*

“No, no, I know that one, it’s actually called Drax disorder,” Quill says, grinning at Drax provokingly, “get it right.”

“Hey!” Drax exclaims, visibly perturbed as he wipes alcohol from beneath his nose. “I am not a disorder!”

Peter sighs, looking down at the dull, lifeless repulsors embedded in his gloves. “I’m sorry, Tony, it’s just, I’ve never flown before, alright? I’m a little nervous,” he admits quietly.

“No nonsense, you flew on a private jet with Happy, and you’re almost single-handedly responsible for shooting both of us into to outer goddamn space,” Tony says, and he’s allowing the frustration to practically flood his voice now, his tone growing heavy. “Oh, and what the hell do you call all that swinging around New York you do, huh?”

“Uh, webbing-aided propulsion?” Peter says bashfully. “That’s not really comparable to just shooting around like you do, though. It’s different.”
“No, it’s not. It’s flying with more mechanics,” Tony informs him. “Last I checked, there are no skyscrapers in space, silk-spinner, so get over it. C’mon, let’s go, I don’t have all damn year to wait for you to figure this out. This is Iron-Spider 101, this is amateur hour, and you’re bombing.”

“Oh, okay, damn, Tony,” Peter’s voice goes Paper thin on the final words, and he’s glancing back and forth from Tony to his hands, anxiously.

Tony wants to kick himself.

You blazing garbage fire, you’ve just got to ignite everyone else too, don’t you? Whole damn forest has to go up in smoke for you to be happy, you shit-Midas. It’s not the kid’s fault you’re missing your true home; the dumpster.

He gnaws his cheek ferociously until he tastes blood.

What the fuck are you doing, you waste of cells? You need to get off this planet, Peter needs to go home. There’s monsters here, and Thanos is out there, and the Kree-

A loud, internal snarl shakes his mind.

Shut up, Stark, just stop it! One damn thing at a time! Do you want the Guardians to know how fucked up you are?

He crosses his arms over his chest to hide the way his respiration has increased.

The kid takes a deep breath, lets it out with a whoosh, looks like he’s going to try again- “Wait, so, once I get it started, how do I stop it?”

“Like hitting five keys on a piano consecutively, starting with your pinkies,” Tony says, demonstrating the movement that is so fluid and practiced for him. He’s got to remember that Peter is brand new at this, shouldn’t give him too hard of a time, because Tony very lucidly recalls slamming painfully into a ceiling over a decade ago.

Find some pity in that black soul of yours, would ya? You should be proud, you corruption-laced piece of garbage. He’s trying so hard.

“There’s a lot of little movements involved, Tony,” Peter says, wringing his hands, “this is really difficult, maybe I-“

“Goddammit, you think it’s fucking easy, being me?!” Tony snaps, far too loudly, and everyone goes deathly silent.

Holy shit, what the hell was that?

A familiar, yet rare heat settles in his face, in the cartilage of his ears, at the base of his neck. They’re staring, he knows it, he can feel it piercing his back like bullets. He blinks, swallows, mouth moving silently as he searches for words that will fix this mess. “I mean, me, Iron Man, you know, with all the little things I have to be aware of and memorize, it’s, uh, it’s- it’s not easy, at first, alright? But, um, you’ll get it. I know you will.”

Colossal. Idiot. The last time you fumbled a save that spectacularly, Pepper fell three-hundred feet.

Yikes. It hasn’t been this bad in quite a while. He’s lost complete control of his own inner monologue, and now it’s seeping into his mouth and spilling out to burn everyone like a strong acid. Time to get a grip.
With a series of tiny clicks, the Iron-Spider helmet folds seamlessly into the collar of Peter’s suit to reveal a young, worried face, and a pair of profound, amber eyes that have witnessed way too much of Tony’s nonsense. “Tony, are you okay?” he asks in blessedly hushed tones.

“No. You’re not okay, you will never be okay. You’re a shit-fire and everyone else is innocent tinder. Just look at this kid’s haunted eyes! You did that to him. It’s your fault. Get everyone away from you.

“I’m fine,” Tony insists stiffly, shrugging, and resisting the unrelenting urge to put his helmet up and hide his reddened face.

“No, you’re not,” Peter presses, “you’re nervous. I can feel it. Shit, man, it’s making me nervous.”

Right. Of course, he can.

“Uh, hey guys, food’s ready,” Quill calls reluctantly before Tony can figure out what to say. With his back to the Guardians, they can’t see his chest heaving so dramatically that his breastplate is shifting with it. But Peter can. Tony bites his lip and looks away.

“Hey,” Peter whispers to him, “if you need to use Extremis, it’s fine, I won’t be-“

“No,” Tony interrupts, shaking his head, and Peter narrows his eyes at him with doubt shining in them, “seriously, it’s okay, you’re right, I need a break. Clearly.” He gives Peter half of a forced smile and motions flipantly toward his left temple. “I’ve just… I’ve got this weird headache, alright? I’m a little on edge. It’s not your fault.”

“A headache?” Peter says skeptically, brow dipping low.

Tony’s face is slowly twisting back into a glower. “Yeah. A bad one.”

“You have a headache?”

“Christ, are we in a cave, or something?” Tony snaps, and it’s so easy for that exasperated, sarcastic tone to slip back into his lowered voice. “Are you stuck on repeat? Is there a fucking button I need to press to make you stop or reset you, or-?”

“Sorry, I’m not buying it. Even at your most miserable, you’ve rarely snapped at me like this,” Peter says, glowering back. “You’re more anxious than I’ve ever seen you. Why?”

Tony scoffs, sneers spitefully. “Nosey little- does that really need explaining?” he hisses between clenched teeth. “Did you, or did you not almost get shanghaied away by a fleet of Kree prisoner scouting vessels a few hours ago? They could show up again, you know, with much bigger guns this time, super curious as to why their drones suddenly went belly-up like a bunch of neglected goldfish. I highly doubt it’s something that happens often. Those with a will to live don’t usually aggravate the Kree, from what I’ve been told, and honestly, they scare the living shit out of me. And I don’t know if you’ve forgotten, but Thanos, Infinity Stones, biblical fucking old-testament style god? Any of those terrifying things ringing a bell? We’re still working against the clock, here, I would like to leave this planet yesterday.”

“But, there’s nothing we can do about it now, right?” Peter says, worried eyes darting between Tony’s wide, fearful ones. “The jet is self-repairing, your other armor is on auto-pilot, the Milano’s almost ready, and I’ve got my upgraded suit. Everything that can be done is being done, and going pretty damn well, considering, so at this point, you’re- you’re just,” he stops, gaze darting around Tony’s feet as though he’s searching for the right words down there, “you’re just torturing yourself with it, Tony. You’ve got to give yourself a break-”
“Yeah? You think?” Tony growls. “Well, guess what, Energizer bunny? I don’t have any off buttons, either! I don’t have a magic fucking button that can just turn this off and make everything rainbows and sunshine up here in this damn three-ring circus I call a brain. Because if I did, I would have already pressed it. But no, I don’t get that luxury, it keeps going, and going, and going. You think I fancy the idea of having some kind of-of-of freak out, right now?”

“That’s it, right there,” Peter says, pointing at Tony, expression relaxing into something sympathetic and smug at the same time, and Tony’s stomach flips over, “you’re a nervous wreck and you’re terrified of letting it show in front of the Guardians, so you’re defaulting to asshole mode. And you’ve been beating the shit out of yourself over it, too.”

Lost for words, Tony stares as Peter smirks at him. This kid is incredibly empathetic and dangerously intelligent. He’s gotten too close, has figured out too much, how does he even know-

“Guys,” Quill is singing, dragging out the word with a tantalizing note, “juicy monster steaks. Yum yum.”

“Just a sec!” Peter calls, before addressing Tony again. “Look, I heard some of what you were saying to Gamora-”

Tony seizes on it, growling indignantly, allowing the rush of anger to fuel his words, “of course you were listening, you little eaves-dropping shit-”

“-no, you shut the fuck up and listen to me for a second,” Peter demands forcefully, and Tony is shocked into silence once more, “just turn off that goddamn façade and listen- because, you know what? She was right. You’re worth a lot more than you think you are. I may have saved your life a few times, but you saved mine twice before I even really met you.”

“Twice?” Tony asks, taken aback, anger replaced speedily by confusion. New York, nuclear missile, sure, whatever, but what was the other time?

“Yeah, twice. Not to even mention keeping me from bleeding out just a few hours ago-“

Tony rolls his eyes, “-that was my fault in the first place, that doesn’t count-“

“Dammit, no it wasn’t- it counts to me!” Peter growls with frustration, clenches his fists, and Tony realizes then, he’s never seen the kid get so exasperated before, prepares himself for an emotion-filled verbal torrent. “See? This is exactly my point! You give yourself zero credit! A worthless asshole doesn’t do stuff like that! So, this-this thing, where you think you owe me something for saving your life? You don’t, and I hope that makes things a little easier for you. If anything, I was paying you back because you deserve to have someone care about you. You’re so busy saving everyone else, it’s about time someone helped save you for once! And I’m-I’m glad it was me, alright? You’re not a waste of time. You are not what you keep telling yourself you are. And it’s the Avengers’ fault, all of it. All this bullshit where you compare yourself to garbage, and shit, and, and, and, how you blame yourself for every little bad thing that’s happened, while ignoring all the good you’ve done? They made you believe that! It’s their fucking fault for treating you like shit, and betraying you, and hurting you, and lying to you, while using your money and taking you for granted, and now you’re terrified of these people, and they’re nothing like them-”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, wait, back up-“ Tony demands, as a chill sweeps over his body that has nothing to do with the temperature outside, and Peter’s face goes from furious to ghostly white and petrified in less than a millisecond, “-what did you- how- how the hell do you-“ He can barely get words out. Save that time they didn’t bother to call after the Mandarin attack, Tony’s never told Peter anything negative about the Avengers. Ever. Peter shouldn’t know those things. Has he been in his
files? Maybe old surveillance system footage?

How fucking dare, he? The- the snooping little-

Tony could melt a glacier with his gaze. The gulp Peter forces down is comically perceptible. “I… I’m- I’m sorry, Tony. I should have told you-”

“Told me what?!” Tony hisses with rage on his breath.

“How fucking dare, he? The- the snooping little-

“Told me what?!” Tony hisses with rage on his breath.

“Everything okay, over there?” Gamora calls hesitantly.

“Peachy!” Tony shouts back tersely, never removing his death glare from Peter, who is shrinking down into a state of timidity. “We’ll be right back.” Without offering further notice, he grabs Peter’s wrist and drags him into the forest, where the trees provide some privacy, his boots leaving deep imprints behind. Peter doesn’t make a sound. “Spill, Parker,” he growls as soon as they’re a satisfying distance away from the others, letting go of his wrist and spinning to face him. Their only light shines from his armor, surrounds them with dancing shadows.

Peter swallows and looks down at Tony’s feet, wrings his hands, opens his mouth to say something, then closes it quickly. He’s shaking visibly, pale as the Earth’s moon. Tony waits with more patience than he ever thought he was capable of, until finally, Peter’s able to add sound to the words his mouth is silently forming; “Sometimes, when you, uh, when you have nightmares, really bad ones, you sort of… project them.”

Tony blinks at him for a moment. “What the hell do you mean, ‘project’ them?” he asks, very slowly enunciating each word, with furious eyes and a clenched jaw.

“I mean, you- you literally, project them,” Peter says, running a shaking hand through his hair, wincing when some gets caught on his glove, and looking everywhere but directly at Tony, “you hijack screens and you broadcast them. Like- like a movie.”

After the initial physical jolt of comprehension, horror induces an odd paralysis. A creeping chill overtakes the warmth his armor provides, just as a cold sweat breaks out all over him and nausea rears its ugly head. Everything spins around him, closes in. “What?” he whispers, and he’s being gripped by so many devastating realizations all at once, it’s bound to suffocate him. Peter’s been wading through the quagmire in his head, has been playing audience to his very nightmares as easily as one patrons a movie theater on discount night. It… it hurts. The fact that he didn’t bother to even notify Tony of it… it hurts more than it should, in a very familiar way. “Why didn’t you tell me?” His voice is soft, his expression, more forlorn than angry, now.

“Because- uh… dammit, I don’t know,” Peter says, hiding his eyes, and taking deep shuddering breaths. “I guess, I was scared of-of-of-, I didn’t want you to be embarrassed, or- or, feel like… fuck, I don’t know, Tony.” He’s hugging himself, and looking downright ashamed.

“Jesus Christ,” Tony breathes as he stares wide-eyed at this kid who probably knows more about him now than almost anyone. Replays of his most recent night terror episodes bombard him in startling detail, and he has to turn away and lean against a tree, panting through how ill he’s feeling. “Goddammit, Peter.”

Nobody should see that. All the violence and misery his life has become? No one should see it. No one should know how dark life can get. Especially not someone as young and impressionable as Peter.

“I’m so sorry,” Peter’s voice is cracking, and Tony picks up a tiny sniffle, even through the roar of
blood pounding in his ears, “I meant to tell you, I really did, I just… so much was going on, I didn’t
know when was best, and, god, I fucked up. I really fucked up. I should have told you, immediately,
after the first time-”

“Which was?” Tony croaks.

“After… after I gave you the last dose of Extremis,” Peter reveals, in a voice that’s barely audible, “a
few hours in. You took over Friday. The entire invisible room went black, except for one screen.
That’s how I knew you were a technopath. It… it really bothered me, Tony. It’s been eating at me
for a while, and I didn’t know how to tell you. You have every right to be angry, and I’m sorry. I’m
so sorry.”

Tony is stunned. Horrified, and… betrayed? No.

No, no, no.

This isn’t the same. It feels so disturbingly familiar, but Tony has to remember this isn’t even
remotely similar. This isn’t watching his parents’ murder. This isn’t betrayal, this isn’t his fully-
grown, adult team leader, who knew better, lying to him for years while shamelessly taking
advantage of his resources, all before beating the shit out of him and leaving him for dead. This is an
innocent, terrified kid who has been placed in ghastly circumstances, and when faced with something
as dark and disturbing as Tony’s PTSD, had no idea how to deal with it. Completely understandable.
Peter didn’t mean any harm. Tony’s positive Peter is actually incapable of intentionally harming
someone. It’s not his fault. If anything, it’s Tony’s fault. He should have known that could happen.

After a long moment, Tony takes a couple of deep, calming breaths and turns back to face Peter,
who’s sat on the ground and is cradling his head in his hands.

“And what all did you see?” he asks softly.

Peter’s head whips up, eyes wide and surprised. There’s tears on his cheeks, and the sight of them
sends a wave of guilt crashing straight through Tony as Peter works quickly to wipe them away,
clearly embarrassed.

“A lot,” he admits with a grimace, “I- I saw…” then, he pauses, and the shame on his face slowly
morphs into strict determination. His gaze finds Tony’s and locks it down. “I saw a man who tries his
best to do what’s right, and to help as many people as he can. Someone who has been beaten, and
lied to and betrayed, and- and tortured, and has still gotten back up to be this badass dude who
covers himself in armor so he can fly off and save the world. I saw someone who cares so much
about everyone else, that there’s little time left to care for himself. And despite all this, I also saw this
guy who loathes himself, who blames himself for everything that’s ever gone wrong, and tries his
best to take responsibility and make it all right. Overall? I saw inside the mind of a good person I can
proudly look up to. And… and you know what I didn’t see? This asshole persona you put on to hide
it all. I know you don’t want me to be like you, but Tony, god, if I had just half of your bravery and
strength and determination…” He trails off, chews his lip fiercely and looks away, face practically
glowing red.

It’s right then Tony realizes that the scornful thoughts which plagued him earlier have been
completely muted.

“That’s how you knew when to wake me up,” he observes, pitying this kid who has had to deal with
so much of his bullshit, it’s insane. It’s completely nuts.

Peter lets out a rueful huff through his nose. “You don’t always scream,” he says, miserably.
“And that one time; ‘We’re going to make it through this. Both of us?’” Tony inquires.

“Me, dying in space. Yeah. Saw the whole thing.” Peter admits, rubbing his armored bicep. “I’m sorr-“

“Get up,” Tony says, and offers his hand to Peter.

“Huh?” Peter’s positively baffled when he looks up at Tony, who gives him a smirk he hopes is reassuring. “You’re not mad?”

“Why would I be? It’s not your fault. Let’s go, get up, got shit to do.” Tony wags his fingers, and Peter reluctantly takes his hand, allows Tony to pull him to his feet. “You don’t have to fly tonight, but I at least want to see a repulsor blast. It’s the only way to make this up to me. C’mon, we’ll do it together.”

Peter sighs, slumping his shoulders and shaking his head. “I don’t know, man, I don’t think I’m ready-”

“Who are you trying to kid, here, kid?” Tony says, smiling with a bright, open face, inexplicably feeling better than he has all night, but that damn buzzing static is still there. “You are more ready right now than you will ever be. Do you not remember telling me to ‘shut the fuck up’ a few minutes ago? That takes guts. I can be mean as hell. Bravery, strength, determination? You already have all that, you’ve always had it. I had to learn it. Just like you have to learn how to use this armor. Now, helmet up, aim at that tree, alright?”

Peter looks from Tony, to the tree, to his glove and back at Tony with immense concern. “But… that tree didn’t do anything to me.”

Tony scoffs. “That’s crap, that tree shook you down, stole your lunch money, called you a pansy, and dumped your chocolate milk on your head.”

“How did I get chocolate milk if it already took my lunch money?” Peter asks insincerely, relaxing completely and smiling at Tony. It’s good to see.

“I don’t know, a quantum leap?” Iron Man’s helmet appears just in time to conceal Tony’s eye-roll. “You’re a little smart-ass, you know that?”

“Yes,” Peter says plainly, and puts his hand up as his own helmet clanks into place.

“Perfect,” Tony remarks, places his arm around Peter’s shoulders to steady him, and slouches a little so their hands are level. “Watch my hand and copy exactly what I do.”

“Okay,” Peter lets out a rush of breath, but Tony’s elated to sense that he’s so much more relaxed now.

“Count of three. Ready, Spider-Man?”

“Ready.”

“One,” Tony bends his fingers, and his repulsor whines to life- and his dark heart swells with pride when Peter’s does as well. Finally. “Two,” he splays his fingers, hears the charge of it mingle with another, “three!” he pushes his palm forward to release the energy. A bright beam flashes out of both his and Peter’s gauntlets, and positively decimates the tree they were aiming at. It explodes into splinters.
“Hah! Hahaha! Woo!” Peter laughs as Tony lets him go, cheers, jumps in the air before landing gracefully, and looking at his hand. “Wow! Oh my god, that was cool!” He breathes. “You have no idea how long I’ve wanted to do that.”

“Oh, I’d say for about thirty minutes, now,” Tony says, disengaging his helmet, and pretending to look at a watch.

“No, no, try years,” Peter says, and Tony cocks his head in question, “try like, almost a whole decade.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Tony wonders, genuinely confused.

“Oh, god, uh…” if Peter didn’t have his helmet up, Tony’s sure he would be directly privy to the reluctant expression the kid must be wearing, considering his voice inflections. “So, this is awkward. You probably don’t remember, it was a long time ago, but-but I never forgot it. It was so cool.”

“Well don’t keep me in suspense, here,” Tony insists.

“The first time you saved my life,” Peter says, tracing one of his repulsors with an extended index finger, “I was at Stark Expo, with my Uncle the day those, uh, what were they, drones? The day those Hammer robots, or whatever, went insane, I was there, and I remember wanting to help, so, I let go of Ben’s hand and he lost me in the crowd. I ran all the way to the presentation hall. One of them came out and targeted me, and I was just a stupid kid and I wanted to be like you, so I didn’t run. I put my hand up—“

Tony feels like he’s been punched in the gut. “You were wearing a toy helmet,” he whispers, the memory coming back clearer than he ever thought possible. There’s no way fate is that predictable. For not the first time that night, shock overcomes him as Spider-Man looks up at him and nods vigorously. “I signed your poster earlier that week. Right? That… that was you?”

“Yeah,” Peter says, and Tony blinks rapidly against the unexpected sting that’s settling behind his eyes, because suddenly, his life has had meaning, “you landed behind me and, and shot that thing dead, and I will never forget the way you said, ‘nice work, kid’, like I had done something to help you? You’re Iron Man, and I helped you! And you saved me that day, so thank you, Tony. I’m alive because of you.”

“Wow,” is all Tony can manage to murmur as, through a growing blur, he watches this thriving teenager laugh joyfully and try out more repulsor blasts at varying strengths. Just observes and appreciates this incredible, strong, smart, caring person who still has their life because of Tony. Who had a chance to grow up, because Tony made sure of it. The feeling is indescribable, ushers in something he has never felt before; a tiny, warm spark of love for himself.

There’s nothing he can do to give Charlie Spencer his life back, though he would trade his own life in a heartbeat if he could. That boy in Italy will forever remain a nameless ghost. But Peter Parker… and probably countless other innocents… Peter’s right. Tony’s been so consumed with guilt over the lives he’s taken, inadvertantly or not, that he completely discounted those he’s given a chance to.

Swallowing isn’t enough to fight back the raw emotion. A single blink, and tears fall freely, a product of overwhelming hope. He’s glad Peter is oblivious to it.

For years and years, he swore he would never forgive himself, felt that doing so would make him complacent again, and adamantly refused to see the damage it was doing to his psyche. Could only nod and smile at those whose words broke him down, because he always knew- no, felt- that they were right. The guilt motivated him, pressured him to constantly try to be better. And when it made
him miserable, he would tell himself how much he deserved it.

But now, he’s caught sight of another path. Not one overcast by crushing darkness, but one that is lit, and grows brighter with each step he takes. It’s a long path to walk, and there’s thorn-bushes along the way, but he’ll get to the end, he knows. This is the first time Tony’s ever considered beginning the process of forgiving himself. It clicks on as easily as a light switch, and he understands then how blind he’s been this whole time.

What a crazy night this is. Tony sniffs, wipes his eyes quickly.

“Hey, Pete—” he starts, wants to tell Peter how much he values him, that he’s thankful for the way Peter dealt with his nightmares, and that he’s going to figure out a way to put a tight lid on the projection issue. But before he can continue, he witnesses Peter trigger all his repulsors and lose control. The kid barrels toward a tree, shouting curses, and Tony is activating Extremis just in time to right the system and bring him to a halt before he ends up breaking his damn back-

-and then, a horror movie forces its way into his mind.

Tony gasps in terror. The static that’s been a nuisance all night configures itself into an image, a video he’s unable to end. Screams fill his ears, sobbing, desperate pleas, children wailing. The picture is incredibly jerky. He can see shoes, lots of blurry shoes kicking up dust, as though the camera man is too busy running from something to record much else. And it seems he’s not alone in his panic. He’s in an absolute stampede of bodies.

The screams grow louder. The camera pans back to reveal a sea of running people being turned instantly to ash as a massive, purple wave of light passes over them, originating from an enormous, shadowy, humanoid figure. The wave comes closer, emits a blinding flash, and the camera clatters loudly to the ground, lost forever in what appears to be a barren wasteland. The screams grow fainter. The chaos subsides. A haunting calmness persists, and a breeze picks up a cloud of white ash, carrying it off sullenly.

A headline written in alien gibberish pops up, and Tony can comprehend it now; ‘Emergency Broadcast in Effect’, it says. ‘Thanos ravages Xandar, steals Infinity Stone’

“Tony, Snap out of it! Shut it off!” Peter’s voice. That’s Peter. Someone smacks him across the face. Hard. And to prevent the defensive electric shock he knows will result from such an attack, he uses everything he has to subdue Extremis. It works.

He comes back to reality on all fours, heaving for breath, with Peter kneeling next to him and that horrible static buzzing away in his head. The panic wants to cripple him, but he can’t let it. Not yet.

“Dude, what the hell was that?” Peter asks in a high voice marked with fear.

“Camp-campsite. Now,” Tony gasps out, grabbing the hand Peter's holding out for him and standing on legs as wobbly as that footage was.

“But—”

“Now!” Tony roars, and moves swiftly.

They rush through the forest, sprinting, dodging trees and shadowy obstacles. When they reach the Guardians, Quill greets them with a huge grin from where he’s standing beneath a gloriously lit up Milano. Tony doesn’t have it in him to feel relieved by the sight.

“Music time! The Milano just booted up—“ Quill’s expression immediately dips into extreme worry at
the sight of them. “What’s wrong?”

Gamora says something as well, and he thinks maybe Drax stands up, but Tony has tunnel vision.

He swallows, finds himself incapable of constructing words, just nods his head toward the Milano as he walks inside and hopes he’s being followed. The large, translucent screen which acts as their television is already on, broadcasting the same devastating headline, and Tony assumes galactic emergency broadcasts happen to be invasive. He’ll have to activate Extremis and figure out a workaround later.

“No! Oh, shit!” Quill exclaims, burying his hands in his hair. Drones are providing an aerial view of the decimated planet’s surface, sweeping around the gigantic, crumbling ruins of what must have formerly been a glorious city. “Ohhh, shit!” And Thanos is there, the commander of a massive, shrieking Chitauri army.

“-a new development in the destruction of the Nova Capital-“ a ridiculously calm female voice is saying, and Tony can feel a full-fledged anxiety attack coming on when a wormhole appears in front of Thanos, and fucking Loki steps gracefully out of it, donning a smirk and his customary reindeer outfit. A glowing object is offered, the Tesseract, and Thanos takes it, crushes the cube to reveal the Space Stone before plugging it effortlessly into a golden gauntlet, alongside its purple sibling.

Asgard. He’s going for Asgard. Thor.

Fuck, fuck, fuck!

Thanos has two Infinity Stones, and he’s going straight for Thor. And there’s nothing they can do.

Breathing is becoming the most difficult thing Tony’s ever needed to do. If anyone else besides Star-Lord is witnessing this with him, he’s completely unaware of them. If gasps, or cries of anguish are being uttered, he can't hear them. His world is slipping away, along with his thoughts, his feelings, all replaced by pure, unbridled, uncaring fear, and a desperate, feral need to escape. To fucking run as far as he can.

It’s too much. It’s simply too much to handle. This has been a long time coming. So much for keeping his cool in front of the Guardians, because as aliens begin to pour through the portal, with a beefed-up Thanos, and a sniveling Loki leading the charge, Tony completely loses himself within his panic.
Hello! Many apologies for the delay, life is getting hectic. Job hunting is eating up most of my time, but I'm invested in this, so never fear. I hope everyone's October is treating them well. It's my favorite month. No one should have a bad October, ever.

Love you guys. Thanks for sticking with me!

Peter looks on, mouth hanging open, heart pounding away, cold and pale as a corpse, and feeling as empty as one. On the screen before him, an interplanetary news outlet is displaying footage of a beautiful, white city bustling with life, and in a startling juxtaposition alongside it, its empty, skeletal remains. Barely visible through the swirling dust are massive piles of rubble jutting from a dead, gray wasteland.

Loud footsteps on the ramp, and he hears Gamora gasp loudly. Peter looks, finds that she’s covering her mouth with a shaking hand while Drax stands behind her, his eyes wide and fearful.

A familiar roar from the screen draws his attention back to it.

Amongst the ruins, scurries monsters Peter recognizes instantly as Chituari. Gargantuan space dragons undulate through thin air. And at their head, a large humanoid flanked by a team of five generals, stares expectantly into nothing, just before a sucking portal opens-

“Whoa!” Peter shouts, and his heart stops for a moment, everything stops for a moment, because it’s not the first time he’s seen something like that. Within a blink, he’s a tiny child again, staring out his bedroom window while a giant, roaring space monster, swims above his apartment building, just before being rushed hurriedly into the basement by his Uncle Ben. May was working at the time. They had no contact with her until hours later.

-a new development in the destruction of the Nova capital-

At the sound of the calm voice from the screen, and Star-Lord’s horrified exclamations, Peter comes back to reality, covered in goosebumps, jittery with past fear experienced anew. Loki’s sudden appearance pushes him into physically staggering back a few steps in shock.

-minutes after Thanos issued his demands, it seems one individual has complied- the voice states, as Loki hands over what can only be the Space Stone. So, this is Thanos.

“What the- I thought he was dead!” Peter says, looking over to Tony for reassurance.

But Tony is a visible mess. “Thor,” he whispers, and Peter can see him perspiring dramatically, his quickened breaths hitching, as though he can’t quite expand his lungs fully. That startling dullness is clouding his eyes, casting a shadow of terror over their light, snuffing it completely. The armor spits him out, and he stumble back on what appears to be weak knees while the second skin disappears, uncovering plain, black clothes and tan skin. “What are we gonna- I- I can’t… oh god…”

“Tony-,” Peter starts, but he’s not put together enough for this right now, either.
“Tony, hey-“ Gamora is saying, but following a frightened glance at her, Tony is tearing past them all, uttering apologies, gasping for breath, and heading unsteadily down the ramp into the persistent night outside.

Iron Man remains, standing there rigidly, split open and exposed like some strange molt. A discarded shell.

“Geez, alright,” Quill starts, releasing a rush of air from between puffed-out cheeks, and running his hand down his face, “Gamora, Drax, go wake sleeping beauty up. His nap is over.” Gamora nods at him, before grabbing a stunned Drax by the arm and pulling him into the back. Quill then turns to Peter, smiles kindly at him. “You good, Spider-Dude?”

“Y-yeah, I’m good,” Peter stammers, and it’s basically a lie, he’s still quivering with dread and worry.

“Great,” Quill motions toward the ramp, “let’s go help Tony out, alright?”

“Sure, of course,” Peter says, relief flooding him as they move, easing his nerves, because he’s just realized that he’s not alone with Tony’s problems any more. Not that he resents helping Tony, or isn’t willing to, it’s just nice to have an added opinion. Getting consolation from a teenaged nobody may not be as impressive as receiving it from a well-respected starship captain. He just hopes Quill’s delivery is impactful, without being patronizing or callous.

Out in the purple-tinged darkness, it smells of impending rain. Tony is nowhere to be seen.

“Tony?” Quill calls, searching around the feet of the ship, off into the edges of the forest, behind trees, heading towards the clearing where Peter and Tony had been training just minutes before. Where Peter knows he’d finally begun to chip away at Tony’s ironclad self-loathing. Of course, he glimpsed the tears, he would’ve had to be a blind kid to miss them. And it’s about time it happened outside the prison-like confines of Tony’s nightmares, and in response to something other than terror or pain.

They’ll never find him like this, calling his name and simply looking. So, he waits, listens, registers distractions and actively blocks them out in favor of a single, familiar sound; Tony’s heartbeat. Within seconds, he can hear it thumping away between the middle and top flaps of the Milanos right wing. “Tony, I’m coming up there,” he calls, intent on not startling the guy further, and jumps up, landing on the wing with feline grace.

Within the small space, he finds Tony sitting there with a knee pulled up, still covered in sweat, hugging his chest, and breathing rather heavily, but he’s calmed himself quite a bit, it seems. The gaze he fixes Peter with is full of shame.

“Hey,” Peter says softly, bending over to get a little closer, his movements slow, deliberate, and obvious.

“Hey,” Tony says back with a voice as thin as air.

Peter sits cross-legged in front of him. “You alright?”

The chuckle Tony releases is breathless, rueful. “Better than Thor, right now, I’m sure,” he says darkly. Peter watches him glance at his shaking hand, sneer at it, and clench it into a tight fist with a sigh. “I thought I had a handle on this. Guess not.” A strong shiver wracks him, and he hugs his knee close.

“Your anxiety?” Peter asks.
Tony cocks his head with a wince, indicating that Peter’s at least half correct. “That and, the uh... the P.T.S.D.” Peter watches him intently, heartened by the admission and that Tony feels like talking about it. With a scornful smirk and a quick sideways glance at Peter, Tony continues. “They go hand-in-hand, you know, a goddamn package deal, buy one get one free. Or, that’s what they told me, at least. Contrary to widespread belief, I did seek treatment for it. Received a proper diagnosis, went through the counseling, took the damn pills, memorized the coping techniques.” Covering his face, he groans loudly into his hands. “This space thing is bringing it all back.”

The rain has started. Peter can hear it pinging off the Milano, little musical notes without structure.

There’s shuffling movement beneath them. “Hey, where’s my invite to the panic party?” Quill jokes as he lifts himself onto the flap with a grunt.

Tony sniffs at the sight of him, and Peter notices the change in his expression immediately. Soft vulnerability disappears in favor of hardened, practiced neutrality. “Ah, it’s an open house,” he says, shrugging and averting his gaze, “open bar, too, help yourself.”

“For real, I wouldn’t mind a drink, that was some scary stuff.” Quill admits, and chuckles briefly, glances around the small space. “This ain’t a bad place to sit, huh?” Peter can see Tony watching closely as Quill sits next to him with a sigh. “I used to hide out in here a lot when we were parked for supplies, to get away from the other Ravagers while Yondu was out. They were always threatening to eat me or turn me inside out and hang me up like curtains. You know, normal stuff.” He shrugs, smiles.

“Not normal,” Peter says with a raised eyebrow, horrified, “not normal at all.”

Tony just stares, expression unreadable.

“Well, for me it was.” Quill rests back casually on his hands with a deep sigh and watches the rain. Peter scooches over so he’s sitting next to Tony instead of across from him expectantly, doesn’t want him to feel pressure that will make him clam up. “Is there any way to warn your friend?”

“No,” Tony answers gravely. “The only way I had to contact him, I used for something else. I hope it wasn’t a waste of time.”

“I’m sorry,” Quill says softly, and receives powerful silence.

Thunder grumbles far off in the distance.

“That guy we saw giving the Space Stone to Thanos? His name is Loki. He’s Thor’s estranged brother,” Tony reveals after a while, and Quill looks over at him with piqued interest and arched eyebrows. “Eight years ago, Loki tried to take over Earth, unleashed a bunch of aliens on New York through a portal using that same Infinity Stone. But of course, you knew that already, through Gamora.”

“Right,” Quill says, “that was him, huh? Back from the dead. Zombie god.”

“I guess so.” Tony then turns to Peter, smiles apologetically. “Hey, Pete, I never told you, but, Thanos concocted that whole thing.”

Peter’s jaw nearly hits the starship they’re sitting on. “No way!” he says, and scoffs in pure, shocked disbelief, when Quill nods his confirmation. “Wow. Small universe.”

“So, Quill, full disclosure, that... event was kind of a turning point for me,” Tony continues, fingers ghosting over his left temple with nervous agitation, “We- the Avengers- we worked our asses off to
contain it. Some powerful people became impatient and resorted to nuking the problem away, almost wasted the whole city for nothing. I grabbed the missile, took it through the portal, got an up-close and personal view of their, uh, *mothership*, I guess, as it exploded from the nuclear impact. I almost died. Freaked me out. Messed with my head. Flashbacks, nightmares, anxiety attacks; the works.”

“Understandable,” Quill says, and Peter notices him watching Tony closely, looking him over, acknowledging every twitch, paying respect to his quivering hands and the foot he won’t stop moving in harmony with his outrageous heartrate. The lack of judgement in Quill’s observations leaves Peter feeling warm and comforted.

“You know,” Tony says with a dark, contrite tinge to his voice, “after that little wake up call, I spent years trying to warn them. To warn my team. Because I could feel it coming. Something bigger than what happened in New York was coming, so I was always presenting all these contingencies, just for them to shoot them down, and maybe I was too aggressive about it, or annoying or… I don’t know. But eventually, instead of calm reassurances and empty promises, there were scoffs, jeers, eye rolls. Arguments, long, heated ones. I felt like I was going insane.”

Quill shifts a little to get more comfortable. “Well, clearly, you weren’t.”

“Didn’t stop everything from falling apart.” Tony bites his lip, huffs with frustration. “Look, my point is, Extremis didn’t cure everything,” he admits, avoiding looking at either of them, seemingly preferring to watch the rain. “The stuff you can see, sure, all the physical maladies. Heart disease, cancer, organ failure, arthritis, all of that can be quantified with medical imaging and various diagnostic tests. Disease of the *mind*, though…” His chuckle is voiceless, and he shakes his head at, what Peter assumes, is the injustice of it all. “The nightmares, the guilt, the anxiety and helplessness and distrust, and, and *fear*, I… I don’t know how I ever allowed myself to hope it would all just go away.”

“Shit, man,” Quill remarks sadly.

“Yeah, I’m a handful,” Tony says with casual dullness, “people tend to drop me, like a mattress, or a bulky dresser. It’s fine. It’s not anyone’s job to carry me.” He lifts one shoulder, the typical dismissal.

“Any of those idiots ever thought about using two hands?” Quill ponders. Tony regards him with reluctance, and Peter can’t contain his smile. “Here, on the Guardians, when one of us falls, we pick them up. It’s like a rule. If it takes both hands, then so be it. And, hey, so, after we shove this purple space turd back up whatever butthole he slipped out of, you have a permanent spot on the team, should you choose to accept it.”

Tony’s eyes grow big, lips parting in disbelief. Meanwhile, Peter feels like he’s been punched in the gut, experiences two very conflicting emotions at the same time. On one hand, he’s thrilled for Tony, knows without a doubt that the Guardians are a perfect fit for him. But on the other, that means Tony will be gone. And that’s just… Peter feels lonely just thinking about it.

“Yeah, that’s right, we want you on the team, problems and all,” Quill says in response to Tony’s speechless reaction and shocked face. “That’s kind of what the whole party thing was about. I was going to present it to you in a somewhat formal way, but things got a little crazy. And you too, Spider-Man,” he points at Peter, who’s then forced to process another confusing set of emotions, “as soon as you bring in a permission slip, you have a spot too.”

Well that’ll never happen. Peter will be lucky if May doesn’t lock his ass down until he turns eighteen, and that’s fine, waiting a bit. He owes it to May, and himself, to wait until he’s at least
considered an adult before making such a life-altering decision.

A peep at Tony reveals that a small, surprised smile has wrinkled his face. His gaze shifts to Peter, and they share of moment of silent, mutual comprehension.

“We’re going to have to think about it,” Tony answers correctly for both of them.

“And that’s fine!” Quill grins. “And even if you don’t want to, that’s fine as well. I can handle rejection, trust me.”

“Well, it’s an honor to be considered,” Tony says.

Quill nods. “So, whenever you’re ready, come down stairs, alright? We need to start figuring out what the hell we’re going to do.”

“Right,” Tony nods his agreement as Quill gets to his feet, “just give me a second.”

“Sure, no prob.” Quill turns to leave, but stops and readdresses Tony over his shoulder, “oh, and for the record, you have a lot more in common with my crew of space orphans, than you may think.”

Peter smirks. As soon as he senses Star-Lord is inside the Milano, safely out of earshot, he grins at Tony. “Told you.”

“Told me what?” Tony asks, acting oblivious with a dubious hand wave and a false frown.

“That the Guardians aren’t like them.”

“Are you flaunting that at me right now?” His expression is mockingly incredulous.

“Yes,” Peter says simply, then starts to rise. “I love proving you wrong, it’s my third or fourth favorite hobby. I’ll see you down there-”

“Wait.” Tony catches his arm, and Peter’s surprised by the desperate grip. There’s hesitancy on Tony’s face, as though he’s battling internally with what exactly he wants Peter to wait for. A bob of his Adam’s apple exposes a nervous swallow. “Maybe, stay a moment? I’ve, um, I’ve got an algorithm I need to upload to Extremis, you know, to block the news broadcast, otherwise, it’ll just bombard me. I’ll have to turn it on to do it, and you’ve got that glorious backhand of awakening, so-“

“Oh, right,” Peter says, wincing at the memory of smacking Tony as hard as he did, “sorry about that, by the way.”

“No, you did great, and I probably deserved it,” Tony says dejectedly, and releases his arm, “I’m sorry, too, kid. I’m an asshole.”

Peter shrugs. “Yeah.”

“Wow.” Tony eyes him. “You’re not supposed to agree to that.”

“Oh, sorry, I guess I’m supposed to lie,” Peter says, then takes on a higher, derisive tone, and waves his hands, “oh don’t say that, Tony, you’re not an asshole at all, not one bit, in fact, I think you deserve the Nicest Person in the Universe Award. I’ll call the agency right now to nominate you-“

“Alright, you little prick,” Tony snaps, with a curled upper lip, but his attempts to seem angry are transparently artificial, and Peter just smiles at him. Mouth twitching, he eventually snickers, the humor wrinkling his eyes. “Nicest Person in the Universe Award…”
“Come on, do the thing,” Peter insists with a gentle note. “Stop stalling, I know that’s what you’re doing. Get it over with.”

Tony scoffs. “What do you know, Spider-shit? You clairvoyant now, too?”

“Tony…”

“Alright, alright.” He sighs, takes a deep breath. Brown eyes close and reappear as blue. A sharp inhale shudders through him, and Peter is there in an instant, taking his hand.

“Stay here.” Peter squeezes his hand, smiles when Tony squeezes back, “you’re here, you’re not there. You’re safe. Stay here with me.”

Tony nods, his exhale, jagged as gravel. “I- I guess Thanos wasn’t satisfied with Loki’s terms,” he gasps out, “because the guy’s currently choking on them. What goes around…”

“Alright, let’s kick this off,” Quill begins. They’re sat back around the fire once more, the storm having passed over and retreated toward the west. Peter watches with intense interest as Quill brings up a detailed projection of the Infinity Stones from a round device he places on the ground in front of him. “There’s six of these things, Thanos has two,” he slashes a finger over Space and Power, leaves two red Xs over them, “and your pal Vision has one,” he labels Mind with something Peter can’t read, but he assumes it means ‘Earth’. “What do we know about the locations of the remaining three?”

“There’s another on Earth,” Tony chimes in immediately, “though it remains M.I.A., concentrated quantum field fluctuations in Hong Kong a few years back suggest a Time Stone-related incident.”

“Two on a single planet, how foolish,” Drax sighs as he sharpens a knife against a flat stone which glows brightly with each strike. Peter notes the drastic change in mood. The party’s over. This is battle planning, war preparation. It settles as a restless tension just beneath his diaphragm, like an intense caffeine rush.

“Right, any clue as to who has it?” Quill asks, after shooting Drax an ugly look. He labels Time with symbols matching the ones beneath Mind.

“Well,” Tony says, grimacing and kneading his forehead with the heel of his hand, “normally, I would dismiss silly things such as legends, but after having met a few living ones over the years… gosh, I can’t believe I’m saying this; a group of powerful, magic-wielding sorcerers?”

Rocket snorts, and looks around with raised paws at all the angry glares he receives. Peter knows he’s been drinking, mainly to dull the pain of his injury. He can’t even walk, relying on Groot to carry him around like a fuzzy, griping infant. “What? Oh, I’m sorry, are we taking this seriously?”

“Yes, you drunken ball of fur,” Gamora snaps harshly, ignores Rocket’s groan and following eye-roll, then turns to Tony. She’s also applying maintenance to a weapon, has the insides of an energy blaster laid out before her, and is wiping down each one with diligence. “What are their intentions? Their allegiances?”

“I’m not sure,” Tony says, shaking his head, “they exist in impressive secrecy. But it’s safe to
assume they’re at least neutral, if not benign, considering time keeps ticking away and Hong Kong remains unaltered.”

“I appreciate this name, ‘Hong Kong’,” Drax muses, inspecting his blade in the light of the fire, “the rhyme is pleasant.”

“What about the others?” Quill carries on, “Thanos has Power and Space. Mind and Time are on Earth. Where are the last two?”

There’s a lot of silence. Then, something occurs to Peter. “London,” he pipes up, looking to Tony for validation. “The Space stone has been in Asgard for years, right? Well, what happened in London? What caused that?”

Tony chews his lip thoughtfully, squints as he remembers. “Thor said it was caused by something called The Aether. It was this fluid, red substance that possessed his girlfriend—” then he snaps his fingers, giving Peter a tight-lipped smile and pointing at him. “Reality. That’s it. Damn thing goes all tape worm when away from its buddies, according to Thor’s book. Good job, kid.”

Peter smiles, happy to be of help.

“Where did it end up?” Quill asks with fearful reluctance.

“You know what? I’m not entirely sure,” Tony admits to a few disappointed ‘tsks’ and sighs, “Thor had his people take care of it, promised us it was in good hands. What was is he said…? Sorry, it’s been years. Something about, a, uh, a renowned hobbyist, or some kind of cosmic collector—”

“Tivan,” four out of five of the Guardians say in unison before trading a series of frustrated looks.

“I’m guessing said hands aren’t actually good?” Tony asks with an exhausted sigh.

Quill winces in Gamora’s direction. “They’re certainly questionable.”

“We almost sold the Power Stone to him,” Gamora informs them, “before we knew what it was, of course. His… assistant went for it. It destroyed her along with Tivan’s entire studio.”

“And hopefully his sense of superiority,” Rocket grumbles into his drink. “Guy’s a jerk.”

“Well, we’ve got to stop and get supplies, might as well pay him a visit,” Quill says, “problem is, we’ve all gained quite the undesirable reputation ‘round those parts.”

“I am Groot?” Groot rumbles his question.

Rocket sighs. “Even you, big guy,” he says sadly, patting Groot on the arm and taking a long swig.

“I’ll go,” Tony offers without a second of hesitation. “Send a supply list to Extremis. I’ll get what we need, and snatch up the stone.”

“You won’t be able to just snatch it. You’re going to have to distract Tivan.” Quill continues, nodding at Tony. “And since we have nothing of equal or greater value to an Infinity Stone, someone else is going to have to sneak in and steal it.”

They all look at Rocket, who scoffs indignantly. “Wow, it’s like I’m not over here getting wasted to dull the pain of my horrendously crippling injury. And, quite frankly, that’s offensive. I got beef with that. Sitting there, looking at me like I’m the best at stealing shit, what the hell kind of prejudiced—”

“Then I’ll do it,” Peter says, and immediately regards Tony defiantly, because he knows the look is
coming, the disapproving look. And there it is, as expected. With his brow dipped low and just a hint of fear in his eyes, Tony shakes his head.

“No,” he says.

Peter groans. “Oh, come on, you can’t shelve me forever, you just built me a new suit that can turn me completely invisible, and you won’t even let me—”

“Actually,” Quill says, smiling apologetically at the warning glare Tony shoots him, “he’s right. That suit has some of the best stealth tech I’ve seen. He might be able to pull it off.”

“Thank you!” Peter exclaims, gesturing to Quill.


“Yes!” Peter pumps his fist. Finally, a real mission, with real danger and real stakes, one that isn’t abrupt and ridden with issues. Something to test his skills and, even better, the new suit he’s been gifted. He’s never been so excited.

“But you’ll be in stealth,” Tony says, gaze narrow.

Peter nods, grinning. “Yeah, yeah, of course.”

“The entire time,” Tony demands strictly.

“O-okay.”

“And if anything happens, if anything at all starts popping off, you’ll go straight back to the jet,” Tony says.

And just leave Tony behind? Peter grimaces, “well, I-I don’t know about-”

“Alright, everybody look at me, I have good news!” Rocket slurs with a toothy smile, and then a pained wince as he reaches for the cylindric item containing his tablet. “Last time we were at Tivan’s, I stole something important.”

Quill scoffs and shakes his head. “Unreal. And you wonder why you get looks.”

“You should be thanking me,” Rocket says, tapping away at the screen. He finds what he wants and expands his fingers, producing a translucent hologram of the inside of some large, domed building. “I’m the only one who ever thinks ahead. Behold, blueprints to Tivan’s place. You’re welcome.”

Drax laughs heartily. “Excellent!”

“Okay, that’s much better than I expected,” Quill admits. “Any idea where he would keep the stones?”

“What do I look like, some dumb animal?” Rocket asks rhetorically, spinning the projection. He stops it and grabs the only room that has no detail within, expanding it and discarding the others. “This is the most reinforced room in the whole tacky place. The only one my scanner couldn’t penetrate. My only conclusion is that its meant to hold Infinity Stones. I’ll transmit an infiltration plan to you guys. Can I go back to sleep now?”

“No,” Quill says.

“What do I need to know about this guy?” Tony asks.
Rocket snorts as he draws up a route through the building on his tablet. “His nickname is Whitey, and he will talk you to death.”

“He’s one of the oldest beings in the universe,” Gamora supplies. “His immortality is based upon his will to live. Thus, he collects. It gives him purpose, keeps him young.”

“He’s eccentric, flamboyant, intelligent, and very rich,” Quill adds, “he can see right through the thickest layer of bullshit, and has no time for it.”

“Sounds like we’ll get along just fine,” Tony says. “So, I’ll just pop in real quick, offer him something tantalizing, initiate a lengthy negotiation, and once Peter has the stone, leave with a rather heated ‘good day, sir’?”

“More or less,” Quill says. “Only one question remains; what to offer him.”

“Give me a beast steak and eight hours, I’ll have something to offer him,” Rocket says with a snicker and a wink toward Drax.

Drax chuckles, nods approvingly as he begins work on his second knife. “Nice, nice.”

“What about your book?” Gamora inquires of Tony, who hisses in a breath through clenched teeth.

“Uh-uh, nope, off-limits,” he says a little irritably, and Peter wonders if he’s thinking about Thor. About the fate of Asgard. Apparently, it’s bad enough that even Loki had qualms with it, because according to Tony, Thanos unleashed some harsh discipline on him. The cameras recording the incident were swiftly destroyed, leaving Loki’s fate up to imagination.

“Show him Eternium,” Peter recommends, wanting to move the conversation along before Tony starts agonizing over it all again. “he’s probably never seen it before, right? Might take some time to appraise it, or whatever, stall him.”

Tony considers it with a contemplative frown. “That’s… actually not a bad idea.”

“What the hell is ‘Eternium’?” Rocket asks.

“It’s what the spikey mountains are made of,” Quill says. “It’s one of the raw elements found inside the Infinity Stones, and Tony wants to harvest some so we can attempt a synthesis.”

“You want to create Infinity Stones?” Rocket pauses a moment, before tilting his head from side to side with consideration. “Well, you did manage to piece me back together, so… I approve of this plan. I want in.”

Peter doesn’t miss the tiny smile that Tony almost loses control over.

“So what about this last one?” Quill circles the orange Stone. Soul. “Any idea of its location?”

No one has an answer for him.

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While Peter is out sifting through the intricacies of his new suit, Tony is inside the Milano, grunting his way through the questionable directives being provided to him by Rocket.
“Okay, now whack that thingy with a wrench until it sparks and breaks even with the panel, there,” Rocket instructs from where he’s still being cradled by Groot, who has taken to the roll of living wheelchair rather gracefully.

“You’re kidding me.” Tony looks up from the rectangular-shaped black hole device he’s piecing together, and acknowledges Rocket with incredulity. “Just smack it around? This thing is supposed to create black holes, you just want me to whack it like it’s a misbehaving vintage television?”

“I’m not sure what that means, but yes,” Rocket says. “I’d do it myself, but there’s a giant hole where my back used to be. What, you don’t beat your equipment into existence?”

“Not usually, no. Especially not equipment designed to produce miniaturized suns, and then immediately collapse those suns into very dangerous black holes.”

Rocket appears genuinely confused. “Where’s the fun in that?”

“We got an estimated departure time, yet?” Quill wants to know from the front of the ship, where he’s attempting communication with some old allies of his. None of them would venture into Kree territory to aid the Guardians while they were stranded, and Tony doubts they’d be willing to help with Thanos, of all things. But he supposes it’s worth a shot.

Tony glances at the readings Extremis is providing in his peripheral vision, at the status of the jet, and its repairs. “No more than four hours.”

“We’ll have some of that juicy Eternium in two,” Rocket says, rubbing his paws together, eyes gleaming at the device Tony is now hammering into.

“Great,” Quill says, nodding with approval. “You get those credits transferred to the ghost account?”

“Yes, Star-Nag. What are you, my mother?” Rocket objects.

“You know what? Sometimes I feel like I am,” Quill grumbles.

One hour and fifty-five minutes later, Tony, Rocket and Groot are posted up behind the relative safety of one of Rocket’s forcefields. Three-hundred yards away, the hollow, rectangular object they haphazardly scrapped together covers one spike like a foot-long metal sock. If it works, it will produce ten miniaturized black holes, severing off ten samples of Eternium. Tony’s never been so unsure about one of his creations in quite some time.

“I am Groot?”

“Yeah, why are we so far away, Rocket?” Tony echoes.

“Well, two things could happen,” Rocket explains, pulling up a projection displaying a closer view of the device. “Either A., it gives us ten lovely pieces of Eternium to play with, or B., the atoms fail to remain miniaturized during fusion, and we end up being consumed by ten giant magnetic suns.”

“Huh,” Tony grunts, shrugs, “my relationship with absolutes is similar to yours, apparently.” He gestures toward the device. “Proceed.”

“That’s the spirit,” Rocket exclaims, his smile flashing savage teeth, and they all flinch mightily as he engages the machine with three taps at the hologram. But for all their fear, it simply shudders once and settles anti-climactically into the dirt, leaving behind an amputee spike.

“Whew,” Tony lets out a long breath he didn’t realize he’d been holding, “fortunately for us, it went
“Now, all we have to do is wait for Spider-Nub to figure out how to be useful, and we can get the hell out of here,” Rocket says, taking readings of the severed Eternium as Groot carries him over to collect it.

“I am Groot.” Groot insists Rocket not be a dick.

‘Hey kid, Rocket’s out here doubting you,’ Tony relays to Peter, who has been performing excellently with his new suit as he flies solo above the forest. A glance through the Iron Spider’s monitoring system displays desirable readings for Tony to peruse. It seems flight has become as natural to the kid as breathing. Excellent.

‘God, I can’t wait to see his face when he gets to Earth and meets an actual raccoon,’ Peter responds, prompting a laugh from Tony.

“What?” Rocket inquires. “What’s so funny?”

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The jet is complete, the Eternium is being processed, and the sky and stars beyond are looking more welcoming than ever before. Tony is thrilled, because now, things are going correctly. No more virus, no buggy ship, he’s down quite a few Iron Man suits, but that’s alright, it’s nothing he can’t work with. Peter is alive. The Guardians are with him. Everything is going to be okay, now. All he has to do is remind himself of these facts every hour or so, and he’s right as rain.

Thor has been on his mind. Not knowing his fate is squeezing Tony dry.

“Oh, this is so much better than last time,” Peter remarks from his seat behind Tony as they ascend rapidly into the calm stillness beyond Xiaxu’s atmosphere.

“Agreed,” Tony responds. “Milano, do you copy?”

“Copy, loud and clear,” Quill’s voice booms over the intercom. Tony winces, and turns the volume down.

“Great. Enter this sequence,” he instructs them, using Extremis to broadcast a line of code, “it’ll link up the warp cores so we remain on the same trajectory. Everything your ship does, mine will replicate with stunning accuracy. Don’t bother being shy.”

“Got it,” Quill says through the intercom. Tony watches the input happen, smirking with satisfaction when Quill enters it flawlessly and their starships line up, one after the other, with the Milano leading. “According to our readouts, we should arrive at Knowhere in twenty-two hours. Prepare for warp.”

“Man, finally,” Rocket groans over the countdown. “This experience with you people has been absolutely hellish, offense intended.”

“Well, everyone needs to thank Tony,” Gamora says, “without his daring rescue, there’s no doubt, I would have ended up murdering all of you without a moment’s hesitation.”
“I have no doubts about that, either,” Rocket says. “Thanks, Stark. For this, and, you know, the spontaneous back surgery.”

Tony smiles and adds two more events to his ‘forgive himself’ list.

“That lady was into you,” Peter comments, as they fly through the actual severed head that is Knowhere toward Tivan’s place. Tony’s properly encased within Theodore’s protective confines, and Peter has reluctantly, though impressively, managed to avoid detection throughout the first part of the mission. Which included purchasing supplies from a blobby mess of a female alien, and sending said supplies back to the orbiting Milano via an autonomous transport vehicle provided by the Guardians. “Well hello there, handsome,” he mocks with a deep, gruff voice, “maybe we can negotiate a discount, hmm?”

“You have anything useful to add?” Tony inquires haughtily.

“Sure. It smells here. Like, really bad.”

“It’s the rotting severed head of a giant, celestial being,” Tony says, double checking his map provided by Rocket. They’re close. “What did you expect, Patchouli? Perhaps a nice floral blend? We’re in a head, not a Bath and Body Works. They’re actively harvesting brain matter right over there.”

“You guys are closing in,” Quill says, and Tony experiences a pang of nerves as the huge, domed building approaches fast, “time to get in the mood.”

“Hear that, Peter?” Tony asks, “stop freaking out, mood time.”

“Stop projecting,” Peter fires back, “I happen to be completely composed.”

“Everything’s going to be fine,” Quill assures them. “Land, now.”

They touch down in the middle of a bustling market, and Tony, once again, relishes the fact that not a single person rushes forward to demand an autograph. No one wants a selfie with him. No one even knows who the hell he is, nor do they care, simply sparing him a glance, before moving on, because they’ve seen everything before. He’s nothing special out here. It’s liberating.

“Alright. Stick with the plan,” Tony reminds Peter as they move, approaching the dome, the entrance to which is guarded by a pair of beefy aliens, “I distract, you extract. It’s that simple.”

“No problem.” Peter stays close, expertly avoiding contact with everyone.

“Evening,” Tony retracts his helmet, smirks and greets the guards, who shift and snort, regarding him with distrust, “I’m here to speak with Taneleer Tivan. I have something he may find interesting.”

“Present the item,” the one on the left demands, and Tony extracts the Eternium for appraisal. The guard observes it intensely, and his expression twitches when the element shifts from blue to green in Tony’s armored palm. “Hmm. Certainly, it’s worth a look. Wait here.”

He disappears into the long, brightly lit tunnel, and seconds later, returns with a pink woman, whose
hair is in pigtails, her smile, false. She immediately unnerves Tony, but he returns her fake smile all the same.

“Good evening,” she says, bowing to Tony with her fists pressed together. “My master awaits with enthusiasm.”

“I’m sure he does,” Tony responds, and follows her into the building while Peter scales the wall, and attaches himself to the ceiling above him.

“Where does this dude get all these pink ladies?” Rocket asks, just before the infiltration plan Peter is intended to follow pops up in Tony’s vision. “Follow this path, kid. It should lead you directly to the stone.”

“Got it,” Peter says.

“Great, I’ll get to work on the security system. Stark, I need to infiltrate through Extremis, cool?” ‘Thanks for the warning this time.’ Tony notices the slight crackle of Rocket’s influence isn’t quite as invasive as it once was.

Once inside, Tony is perplexed by what he finds. ‘This collection looks extremely intact,’ he tells the Guardians, observant eyes darting over enormous glass cases containing exotic creatures and items. It feels wrong in here. Something is off. He begins collecting readings and sends everything he’s seeing to the Milano in real time.

“He must have replaced most of it already,” Quill says. “Tivan is well-connected.”

‘Right, but…’ Tony has no time to consider it, though.

A man with stunningly white hair, wearing luxurious furs and a calculating expression, approaches him from the back of the studio. “Welcome, metal man,” he says with a glance up and down Tony’s body, “to my collection. What can I do for you?”

The pink assistant goes to stand behind him. They share identical smirks. It’s astoundingly creepy.

‘Hurry, up, Peter.’

“Okay, okay,” Peter says, and Tony is keeping track of his progress, knows he’s no more than forty seconds from the intended destination. The place is enormous, labyrinthine.

“Thanks for seeing me on such immediate notice. I have this,” Tony says, revealing the sliver of Eternium. “It’s an extremely rare mineral. I was wondering what price it would fetch me.”

“Interesting,” Tivan remarks, accepting it from Tony. He smiles when it changes from green to red in his hand. “Where did you get this?”

“I won it in a bet on Sakaar,” he lies, using the line given to him by the Guardians, “the original owner assured me it would interest you.”

“And who was this ‘original owner’?” Tivan asks, pulling out a small item that produces a bright light, which he shines onto the mineral.

“I can’t remember, I was drunk,” Tony says. “You know how it is. Knock back a few hard ones before the fight, end up accepting things that aren’t credits. I can barely recall which fight I bet on.”

“I’m at the room,” Peter says.
“Hmm, what an interesting specimen,” the Collector says as the Eternium shifts to purple, his assistant standing behind him, still smirking, and her eyes are red. Tony’s just realized that her eyes are bright red.

And just a second too late, his warning systems begin to shriek at him.

The whole universe pulses. The studio crumbles to rubble, destroyed and destitute, resembling the mess the Guardians described it being when they left. Totally abandoned, save for the pink girl. Tony blinks, and when he opens his eyes, Steve is there. A gasp wrenches itself out of him. They’re all at the compound, on the day he visited with Ross to present the accords. Steve, Rhodey, Vision, Sam, Natasha, Wanda, all of them are there in front of him. They’re having the follow up argument. But something is different.

The image of Charlie Spencer being projected by his phone haunts him like a ghost.

“You know, I’m willing to give it a try,” Steve says, looking up at Tony from the massive document he’s holding, and smiling with confidence, “this is no big deal. We’re the Avengers, we stick together. And I know you wouldn’t lead us down the wrong path, Tony. I trust your judgment, we all do.”

“Sure,” Tony hears himself say, so pleased that Steve is open to the idea and approaching the issue with rationality, that he ignores the instincts currently screaming at him to snap the hell out of it, “and if we sign this, it gives us credibility, and the public some peace of mind. And we can always contest anything we find to be unreasonable. I have a stellar team of lawyers and absolutely zero issues putting them to work. In a way, signing this and showing the world that we support their wishes, makes us more powerful. The citizens of one hundred and seventeen countries will have our backs. I think it’s worth a shot.”

“Whatever it takes to earn the public’s trust back,” Steve says with a sigh, and a glance around at everyone. “We’re here to serve them, to protect them. If this is what they want, then we should comply. And if things get out of hand, if we’re being used for anything other than good, we’ll have their support in changing it.”

“Exactly,” Tony says, sharing a smile with Steve. “If there’s abuse, we will know, and we’ll go to legal war. And we’ll win.”

This isn’t real, it can’t be, he knows it. Getting a chance to see how cooperating with each other would have played out, though… it’s interesting. Emotionally appealing to his fractured soul. But why is everything blurring, glitching like an old video game? What is going on?

“We’re stronger together,” Steve says, face warping, voice distorting. “I may not fully trust these people, but I do trust our judgement. I have faith in our team, so, let’s give it a try. It’s that or become criminals and I’m willing to at least see what this is about before resorting to that. I want to do what’s right.”

“Can’t save the world with bounties on our heads,” Tony says, and everyone agrees. There’s no bickering whatsoever. It’s too perfect.

This is wonderful. This is everything Tony ever wanted. But he can’t stay here. It’s not real. He knows because he can feel the struggle Reality is undergoing to keep him contained. Which is strange. It shouldn’t be a struggle, he should be completely immersed in the forced reality, and yet, he inexplicably remains aware of its false nature. It’s… it’s not real, just like Tivan’s revitalized studio wasn’t real, nor was Tivan himself, the man probably long gone on a new journey to replenish his collection. It was all a mirage, a game being played by a nearly sentient Infinity Stone. Now,
having found a worthier host in Tony, it’s attempting integration.

Steve’s eyes are so blue, soft, and accepting, shining with trust. And totally fabricated. Dammit.

The comprehension of all this terrifies him. The warmth of the altered memory threatens to consume him. And Tony has no idea how to fight it.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Warning: this chapter contains graphic violence.

I just got a chance to see all your comments, guys, I'm sorry. I'm uploading this from McDonald's right now. My home internet has been down since freaking Tuesday, and the cable people are being asshats. Thank you so much for all your continued support, please, please don't be shy, let me know what you think. Your comments are the fuel I need to keep this going.

My daughter almost picked Iron Man for her Halloween costume this year, and I had a mini-meltdown in the store... until she saw the Harley Quinn on the aisle over. She was Batman last year -_- 

“Whoa!”

Peter stops in front of the door to the assumed Infinity Stone room, heart pounding in his chest. The luxurious deeper innards of the studio have just decayed instantly into decimated ruins right before his eyes. With freezing fear rushing through him, he jumps to the ceiling of the hallway, sticking there and panting.

“Guys, something happened,” he says to anyone who will listen, but no one answers. A display tells him he’s in a dead zone. Maybe it distorts reality around him, as well, some kind of strange security protocol. “Whew, alrighty, on with it, then.” Crawling toward the door, he lets go of the ceiling, standing there in front of it upside down. Entering the symbols Rocket sent him into the small crystal screen set into the wall provides him access without issue. The door beeps happily and dematerializes, fizzles out with a flash of green light instead of sliding away or simply opening. He ventures in, undetectable.

There’s nothing in there. “Shit.” He whispers to himself. There are six pedestals comprised of some unknown black material and pressed into each one is an empty slot. It’s not difficult to guess what they’re intended for.

It hits him like a sledge hammer to the chest. This is real, the ruination and decay are what’s real. Tivan’s studio was never repaired. What they walked into was a complex projection being displayed by a powerful cosmic item older than time itself. They’re in very grave danger.

Tony.

Steeling himself, shutting out his pulsing terror for the time being, Peter exits the room at a sprint.

“Parker,” Rocket is barking at him as soon as he regains connectivity, “what the hell is going on? We’ve lost Stark’s visuals.”

“The Reality Stone is loose,” Peter says, voice wavering when he realizes what losing contact with Tony probably means. He skids around a corner, almost drops his balance, arms pinwheeling, but catches himself and continues running, not nearly confident enough with his suit to attempt flying
through such narrow passageways. “The room’s empty, and this place was never repaired. It was a
goddamn illusion.”

“Ah, shit,” Star-Lord voices everything Peter is currently feeling. “Alright, get out of there. Now.”

“Yeah right, I’m not leaving,” Peter insists. He’s just feet away from the main hall. Inside, red light is
flashing. “Not without Tony.”

“I know,” Quill says, “I’m just covering my ass. If he asks, you were a belligerent little shit.”

Peter smiles, and hopes desperately that nothing awful has happened to his mentor. “Oh, he’ll believe
that, for sure.”

Seconds later, his humor disappears. He enters the room to discover Tony, still in his armor, floating
six feet in the air within an angry, writhing mass of red liquid. The expression on his face reminds
Peter of when Vision cleared his mind during the Extremis procedure; totally content, devoid of all
the telling wrinkles of emotion. Opposite him, behind the crooked remnants of the desk, the pink
lady is in a similar position. Crimson shoots between them furiously. Reality seems to be having a
great deal of trouble binding to its new host. Peter swallows, panting, his terrified eyes darting
between Tony and the pink lady. God, what does he do?

“You guys seeing this?” he murmurs to the Guardians.

“We sure are,” Star-Lord replies. “Hang tight, Drax, Gamora and I are on our way.”

There’s no time to wait. No telling what the hell is happening to Tony.

He doesn’t dare call Tony’s name, aloud or even to Extremis. From a compartment at his hip, he
takes the orb the Guardians provided him, one of about twenty more they’re keeping back on the
ship, specifically used to collect Infinity Stones. Looking down at it, it’s just floating in midair while
he’s in stealth. Weird.

“I’m gonna try something,” he says.

“Is it a stupid ‘something’?” Rocket replies.

“I don’t know yet.”

He’s seconds away from opening the orb and tossing it at Reality like some kind of silver Poké Ball,
when he hesitates. All the hairs on his body stand on end, and a twang in his vision freezes him in
place. Someone else has just entered the studio, he can hear their light footsteps outside the door.
Hastily, he puts the orb away, not wanting to reveal his position before he even knows who it is.

“You guys here already?” he whispers, though there’s no need, his helmet mutes his words to the
world outside.

“Not yet,” Quill responds. “Fifteen minutes.”

That’s a lot of time.

Soon enough, the answer is unneeded, anyway. A woman steps through the door to the grand hall.
She’s bald, with blue skin and dark eyes that dart intensely over the situation before her, then
throughout the rest of the rubble. Peter stays stock still, doesn’t know what to expect, watches her
movements with wide eyes. She isn’t normal. There’s something about her that unsettles him. A scan
reveals that most of her is no longer organic, which explains the silver detailing in her face, and the
completely mechanical left hand, amongst other things.

“Oh good,” Rocket sighs, “guys, Baldy’s just shown up.”

Quill scoffs. “Well this is perfect.”

“Nebula,” Gamora’s frantic voice in his helmet reveals her familiarity with the woman, “Peter, stay away from her!”

This person called ‘Nebula’ is moving forward, producing a round item similar to the one Peter was about to use to contain the Infinity Stone, but it’s much smaller, golf-ball sized. She also extracts a jagged knife. “She’s going for the stone,” Peter says, climbing the wall behind him soundlessly, and even that slight movement shifts her unwanted attention in his direction. She’s clearly very attentive, and relatively intelligent, because she spears the location he once occupied with terrifying inquisitiveness.

“Peter, do not engage!” Quill shouts.

“Why would I ask her to marry me?” he jokes to a frustrated growl from Quill, reaching the ceiling as Nebula shrugs off the distraction and turns, preferring the pink girl. She slides a black disk beneath the sparking fluid connecting the girl to Tony, which spins and produces a blinding field of light. Whatever it is, it severs the link, and encases Tony and Reality together in a translucent, glowing sphere. Reality reacts with rage, lashing out pointed, shadowy tendrils, but is unable to penetrate the field surrounding it. The pink girl collapses to the ground, and Nebula’s expression remains totally stoic as she kneels beside her and stabs her in her chest.

“Whoa, shit,” Peter gasps, looking away, feeling ill as his blood runs cold as ice.

“Exhibit A of why you’re being yelled at right now,” Rocket says.

“No hard feelings,” he hears Nebula say, and then a disturbing, wet ‘shink’ as she removes the knife. “I cannot risk it binding to you again.”

Swallowing vomit, Peter tries a glance. Now, she’s moving toward Tony. “Deploy Crickets, three,” he instructs his suit, which releases three small, invisible drones from within his left knee. With a savage animal gnawing on his insides, he situates them strategically throughout the room. “Two Flies.” A pair of micro-cameras buzz off to stick high up on the walls, providing him with two more points of view. The displays appear in his HUD, a pair of boxes on the left side.

He will never stop thanking Tony for building him this suit.

“Hmm,” Nebula has been given pause by Tony’s situation, is observing him from the other side of the light with interest. Peter is moving again, silently taking up a position on the ceiling behind her. “Why does it brawl with you, human?” she whispers, cocking her head to the side, gaze narrowing. Tony remains oblivious to everything.

Peter waits with bated breath, watches while Nebula places the round device she’s holding on the ground as close to the sphere containing Tony as possible, where it opens and emits a swirling cone of light. A tap at a band on her wrist disengages the device emitting the sphere, and Reality shrieks, immediately seeking out the cone and being sucked right in, disappearing completely. The trap closes into a ball, and Tony falls to the ground with a metallic thump, motionless.

“That was easy,” Nebula comments. There’s no pleasure on her face. She seems perpetually angry.

“Activate Cricket one,” Peter says, taking aim with both a repulsor and a web shooter. He must get
A powerful explosion goes off way in the back of the studio, masking the whine of Peter’s repulsor, which he fires at nearly the same time. Nebula cries out as she’s struck in the back with incredible force and is thrown long enough that Peter has the chance to web the sphere containing Reality to himself, stuffing it into a compartment on his belt. Conducting a flip in mid-air, Nebula skids expertly to a halt nearly thirty feet away with impressive grace. Furious, she bares her teeth, eyes darting wildly from Tony’s still form, to the location of the explosion, then over to where last she knew the orb to be. Grasping that Reality is gone, she snarls viciously.

“Show yourself!”

“Uh, no. Why do bad guys always think I’m gonna just do what they say?” Peter moves to a different location. “Activate Cricket two,” he says, but Nebula turns just in time to see him fire his repulsor, and completely ignores the explosion. Instead, she dodges the beam, grabs a large chunk of debris and hurls it directly at Peter.

“Dammit!” Peter exclaims, jumping from the ceiling where the debris shatters on impact, and he makes a mistake by attempting to swing away via webbing, because she notices it, firing an energy weapon at it and severing it. As he falls, he snatches the weapon with a web and pulls it out of her hand. She growls as he tosses it away.

Unfortunately, he lands in some dust mere feet from his attacker. Sharp, black eyes notice the disturbance immediately, homing in on him like a humanoid targeting system. The incoming fist is swift enough that Peter barely avoids it, jumping around behind her and delivering a pair of quick jabs to where her left kidney should be. It doesn’t produce the usual effect, however, merely staggering her, and she turns with a kick, landing it against his ribs before he can move. It knocks the wind from him and his system warns of slight structural damage. He follows with an uppercut to her jaw, which she handles with impressive sturdiness, withdrawing a pair of batons crackling with strange purple energy. One is used to block his second incoming punch. The other strikes at the area she kicked earlier, sending daggers through his ribs and further diminishing the integrity of his armor.

Okay, ouch. He launches himself toward the back of the room, applying thick webbing to Nebula’s feet, trapping them there. And he knows it won’t hold her long. She’s already combined her energized batons into a bladed lance, which she expands even further with a flick of her wrist, but he’s terrified and out of breath and needs to collect himself. This person clearly possesses years of combat experience over him. Peter posts up behind a pillar and gasps in terror, watches the screens, shaking his head, because Nebula has already sliced through the webbing. And now, she’s throwing a canister. It hisses and spins, producing thick smoke.

Fuck, what does he do? He can’t fire rockets at her, terrified he’ll hit Tony, or drop debris on him. The building isn’t very stable, and the force of his Crickets have already weakened it further. But before he can plan anything at all, his HUD displays a shrill warning. The room is filling with an unidentified misty substance, a result of the canister. It’s clouding around him, and he looks down at his hands to find that his actions are causing it to swirl noticeably. Movement in his screens, and Peter’s heart sinks when she squats next to Tony and pulls him up by his chin, placing her lance over his throat.

Shit.

“Reveal yourself and deliver my stone, or I will slit this man’s thro-“ her demands are cut off by a sharp cry, because in a burst of blue light, Tony’s gone and shocked the hell out of her. Peter peeks around the pillar just in time to watch a fully armored Iron Man propel himself beneath Nebula’s legs, knocking her forward. Airborne, he fires a repulsor at her back, thwarting her effort to stand,
then pins her to the ground with a knee on her spine, and a hand against the back of her neck. Snatching her weapon from her, he tosses it at a wall, which it pierces, sticking there and vibrating with the force.

Peter breathes a sigh of relief.

“Who the hell are you?” Tony demands, the hand that isn’t occupied firing up another blast, preparing to disable should the need arise.

Instead of replying, Nebula growls furiously. An attempt to rise and buck Tony off gets her nowhere, and she just ends up shuffling around in the dust pitifully.

“Wrong answer,” Tony warns her, “you get one more try before you go night-night.”

‘Peter, bring me the stone.’

The sound of Tony’s voice in his helmet startles Peter greatly, as he’s been so stunned by how quickly Tony disabled this terrifying threat, that he hasn’t bothered to come out of hiding. “O-okay,” he stutters, extracting the stone and bringing it over. Tony takes it and puts it away in a compartment near his thigh.

‘Good work.’

“Ah, welcome back, Stark.” Rocket sounds genuinely thankful.

“Go ahead, kill me,” Nebula gasps, still pinned beneath Iron Man’s unrelenting weight, “death would be a reprieve.”

“Hmm,” Tony hums thoughtfully. “My dear, whatever gripes you have with life, I’m not here to liberate you from it. It’s not my style.”

“Then let me go,” she snarls, her desperate breath kicking up dirt.

Rocket snorts. “Yeah right. Truss her up and bring her back with you, she’s kind of a wanted terrorist.”

“I’m afraid I can’t fulfill that request, either,” Tony informs her with mock remorse, “I can, however, with a tiny shock to your hypothalamus, grant you the best sleep you’ve ever gotten in your apparently miserable life.”

“And then, what will you do with me?”

No time for an answer. The world is suddenly thrumming with warning. “Tony!” Peter shouts, because a portal has appeared, spitting a long, pointed object at them so fast that it’s a blur. Tony turns, notices the object, but not quickly enough, attempts a repulsor, which simply dissipates against it in a startling flash of light. An attempt to move is matched by the item, which changes its direction to follow him. It strikes him in the right shoulder near his collar bone, effortlessly slicing through thick armor and vibranium alloy, appearing out the other side at a downward angle and pinning him to the ground. The pained grunt Tony emits echoes in Peter’s helmet.

“No!” Before Peter can react, his systems lock up, and he’s being moved against his will, propelled into the air toward the back of the studio, away from the action, where the mist isn’t reaching. “Tony, dammit, stop!”

All he can do is complain and watch helplessly.
Whatever hits him causes a spectacular, star-bursting amount of suffering. Merely a grunt escapes before he manages to mute his microphone, and his cries after that are known only to him. He grips the thing as it shifts from bright red to a desolate black, and finds it impossible to move. Extremis works at it, attempts to burn it away, to no avail, it’s simply too dense. A quick scan reveals that it now weighs as much as a small sun. He’s pinned there like a damn insect and every tiny shift he attempts sends crippling pain through his entire torso.

Fucking… this is not supposed to happen. His under armor is comprised of a vibranium alloy, is virtually impenetrable- or, it was, up until right now. Goddamn space weapons. Run diagnostics.

“Guys…” Rocket says, voice low, scared, “It’s the Black Order.”

“Whoa!” Quill in his ear, sounding frantic. “Tony, get out of there, you gotta go, right now!”

“C-Can’t move,” he gasps. There’s no way he’s going anywhere. “Would if I could.”

“Fuck!” Quill spits. “Hang in there, we’re coming.”

Peter is shouting and cursing at him. Tony mutes it. There’s too much mist swirling around the entrance, attempting to remove Peter from the studio would reveal his location. The Guardians will get him out. Should the unthinkable happen, and Tony is killed, the Guardians will get him, keep him safe. Hopefully not send him into any more death traps.

Sorry, kid.

Nebula scrambles to her feet with a cryptic “fool, you’ve doomed us all!” Her hiss is shaky, fearful.

It all happens at once.

Within seconds of being hit, the wormhole is stirring. Tony watches and pants with fear, agony spider-webbing from the hole in his shoulder with each breath. “You almost missed, Midnight,” a gruff, male voice comments as two individuals step from within it, the pulsing miasma gasping in their wake. One is a tall, slender blue female, and the other, a rather decrepit looking goblin type being wielding a large, bladed weapon. They both sport thick armor. “I believed that impossible.”

“It is impossible, Corvus,” the woman rebuts, motioning toward Tony, “as you can clearly see, I still hit him.” The movement must have been a command, because the spear dislodges itself from Tony’s shoulder with a spray of crimson and flies back to hover vertically behind her. It rends a jagged scream from him. Extremis warns him of extensive damage to the area, a parade of gory specifics assaulting him. “If you would like to avoid another impalement, tin-man, I suggest you hand over the artifact you are carrying.”

“Ah! What have we here?” the male individual spots Nebula, who’s retrieved her weapon from the wall, and is watching them warily. “Hello, little sister.”

“I am not your sister,” Nebula sneers.

“Why, Nebula,” the woman called ‘Midnight’ smirks in her direction, “you’re lacking a limb. Still losing fights, I see?”
Tony lies very still and watches the exchange before him. What the hell?

“Just wait until the day you fail,” Nebula growls, inching slowly toward the door, “on that day, do you honestly think Thanos will have mercy on you? That he won’t subject you to the same torment he unleashed on me?”

“Oh, sweet sister,” Midnight coos, smiling as she nears Tony, scanning him with unsettling yellow eyes, “I never fail.”

God, please let this work. His shoulder feels like it’s been set on fire and covered in a nice salt bandage.

As she squats next to him and opens her mouth to say something, Tony unleashes a devastating shock wave, firing up his repulsors, and rocketing away- but he moans with disappointment when it barely elicits a blink from her or her companion. It’s strong enough to unsettle the foundation of the building even further, to shake the entire thing, and Nebula is thrown against a wall, but these two new beings…

Midnight only laughs at him. The realization hits him then, with subzero, swelling fear, just how woefully unprepared he is for this. Tony fires a pair of repulsor blasts at her, and she summons her spear, spinning it in front of her, absorbing his blasts away with ludicrous ease. Expanding her hands splits it into six red-hot, pointed sections, which fly towards him at incredible speeds when she executes a movement akin to pushing someone.

Dammit. This will suck immensely. At least Peter is safely hidden away, protected, invisible, muted and furious.

“Stark!” Rocket shouts.

They slice through his armor and second skin like he’s nothing more than a stick of butter. A pathetic fucking stick of butter. In six places he’s pierced; two of them shoot through his hands, destroying his repulsors. Another enters near his right hip, and a fourth, further up his left side, just beneath his ribs, while two shred his right calf muscle. They pin him to the wall three feet off the ground, a gruesome, bleeding party game.

Painkillers are administered by his armor, but they have such a small effect, he might as well have done nothing at all. The discomfort is so immense, it knocks him out of Extremis, severing his connection with the Guardians, and he barely has a moment to auto-lock Peter’s suit before he’s tossed out of that, too. Breaths come in quick, beleaguered gasps, vocal and sharp. A small amount of thrust from his boots takes some weight off the points of contact, but it’s still all white-hot agony, a stunning amount of it.

“Stop playing with your food, Midnight,” he hears Corvus demand through the haze of pain, watches his blurry figure gesture at the portal, “Lord Thanos will not wait forever.”

Midnight scoffs and shakes her head at Tony with half a smile, as though to say, ‘can you believe this guy?’ Like she’s sharing a joke with the man she’s actively tormenting. It’s infuriating, how casual this is to her, while Tony is in some of the worst pain he’s ever felt. Fucking sadists, he’s sick of them all. As she approaches, he fires up his unibeam, his last-ditch effort. A quick, simple jab to his chest repulsor damages it beyond use. She tilts her head at him. “Where is the stone, my hapless friend?”

“It’s not here,” Tony grits out. Speaking is hellish. He knows it’s futile, lying like this, but he’s not just going to give it to her. “The- the collector took it with him.”
“Nonsense,” she says, touching his faceplate with long, slender blue fingers, “I have a very reliable Asgardian source who assured me that visiting this location would prove fruitful.”

No. Tony hopes this source happens to be skilled at lies and deceit.

To his left, Nebula groans, stirs. “If you decline to mention my name to Thanos, I will show you where the stone is.” She says, shifting rubble aside to stand and glower at them.

Bitch!

Corvus and Midnight exchange glances. Tony simply hangs from the wall like a Halloween decoration, swallows sour bile, and tries so hard to breathe.

“Fair,” Midnight says, shrugging one shoulder. “Though Thanos would love to punish your treachery, you are not a threat. You’re too weak to ever be one.”

The label given seems to bother Nebula, her expression tightening even further. “He has it,” she claims, pointing at Tony, “in a compartment on his left thigh.”

Tony growls. “F-Fuck you.” All this suffering for nothing.

How typical. Midnight smirks at him, snatches the armor plating off his leg. It pushes a pained shout from him when the nervous system contact with the plug at his hip is forcibly severed, sending fire straight into his brain. The muted solitude of his helmet is a godsend. “Very good,” she sighs happily, tearing into his armor like a damn birthday present and holding up the orb the stone is contained in. “See, dear sister? I never fai- hey!”

Tony has been watching Nebula with concentrated hatred, but his expression switched to one of shock when he sees her press a button on her wristband, and the orb shoots right out of Midnight’s hand. Nebula catches it, darting from the room faster than Tony can blink. Well, damn.

“Guys, Nebula’s making a run for it,” Rocket says.

“Roger,” Quill replies.

“No! Get her!” Midnight roars, and Corvus lunges after their traitorous former colleague. Midnight stands back, waves her hand, and the pieces of her spear rip themselves out of Tony’s body, scattering blood from the two-inch diameter holes they leave in their stead. His scream is hoarse and cut short. The damage appears as numbers in his mind. Fuck, Extremis has its work cut out for it. He slides to the floor, gasping and painting a thick red streak down the wall behind him.

Before Midnight even has a second to recalibrate her spear, Corvus comes running back into the room. “She’s escaped in a pod.” He says. The fear in his voice is tangible. “We must return to Thanos, perhaps he can track it if we hurry.”

Midnight hesitates as her spear comes together. Tony smirks at the terrified expression on her face, because he’s sharing her dread with her, and it’s just darkly hilarious to him. If this incredibly powerful being, capable of picking Iron Man apart like a party sampler, is frightened of Thanos… The Guardians, The Avengers, they won’t stand a chance.

She holds her hand up in protest. “But-“

“The sooner we inform him, the better,” Corvus insists, and disappears into the portal.

Midnight stalls only a few seconds before following, her torturous little spear floating beside her. The
wormhole closes with an intense suction effect.

“Son of a bitch,” Tony grumbles, settling into his suffering while his HUD hitches and beeps at him. He’s never felt so outclassed, so chastened.

Newly freed from Extremis’ grip, Peter descends on him, landing heavily and withdrawing his helmet. His words are as pointed and defamatory as Midnight’s spear. He’s been crying.

“You fucking asshole!” he screams, furious, red-faced, “you- I could have helped you! I- oh god.” Tony retracts his own helmet and smiles up at him in what he hopes is a reassuring way, because Peter has just noticed the blood on the wall, on the floor, all over. The kid looks away, runs his hands through his hair, gives a loud sob. “Holy shit, Tony.”

“They- they would have killed you,” Tony says breathlessly. He’s so tired. Extremis is lulling him to sleep so it can reroute the energy he’s wasting on wakefulness, and second skin deployment, into healing his wounds. “Not like I did it for kicks. And let’s- let’s talk about how you were supposed to boot scoot as soon as trouble started.”

“Just shut up,” Peter chokes out, kneeling next to him and pushing on the side of Tony’s right rerebrace where a small flap hisses open. There’s twenty little silver squares in there, stacked neatly. Sniffling, Peter takes seven out. “I can’t believe you did that to me.”

“You mean save your life?” Tony scoffs. “Gosh, what a monster I am.”

“Just shut up,” Peter choking out, kneeling next to him and pushing on the side of Tony’s right rerebrace where a small flap hisses open. There’s twenty little silver squares in there, stacked neatly. Sniffling, Peter takes seven out. “I can’t believe you did that to me.”

“You mean save your life?” Tony scoffs. “Gosh, what a monster I am.”

Peter lances him with a dirty look. “What was that?” he asks. “That weapon?”

“I’m not sure,” Tony admits, running through the data he managed to collect on it while the damn thing was sitting inside him. “It’s powered by a mixture of mechanical and magical energy, which, incidentally is how it sliced through my under-armor like it was cheesecake. I never even considered that a possibility.” He grits his teeth and groans as he disengages his chest-plate with a hiss, and a plume of smoke billows when Peter pulls it off him. There’s pieces of it stuck in his wounds, each of which, the second skin is pulled back from. “Perhaps I should have.”

Thudding bootsteps to his left, and Tony experiences a hot wave of guilt and humiliation at the sight of Quill rushing toward him. “Shit- oh, god, are you okay?” he asks, pressing the bead behind his ear to withdraw his mask. His face is wrinkled with worry and rage.

“I will be,” Tony says, guarded eyes following Quill as he kneels next to him. “I’m sorry. I suppose I just put a blemish on my Guardians resume, huh?”

“The hell are you apologizing for?” Quill demands, taking one of Tony’s hands still encased in a shattered gauntlet, and gently turning it over to view the damage, which is extensive. Tony can’t move his fingers at all. There’s amplifying quartz glass embedded in his palm from the destroyed repulsor. What a mess. “Those two belong to Thanos’ Black Order, his most elite death squad. Just one of them would have done the same to any of us, maybe all of us. You did fine. Here, give me one of those.” He wags fingers at Peter, who hands him a square.

“I let the stone go—” Tony begins, but he’s cut off by his own involuntary growl that thrusts itself through gritted teeth. Peter has started patching him, choosing the wound by his hip to tend to first, the one bleeding the most. Nanobots travel into him, connecting severed tissue, artificially reversing organ damage and internal bleeding until Extremis is allowed a chance to replace his human biology. It kills, leaves a terrible, throbbing ache when it’s finished.

“Six to go,” Peter says. Bitterness rides his tone. He’s still pissed off, and that’s fine, he’s alive
enough to feel things like anger. One day he’ll understand. Tony doesn’t regret it.

“Actually, I’ve got good news for you,” Quill informs him, taking an energy-based cutting tool to Tony’s gauntlet, slicing into it and removing it in seconds. The square goes to work. All Tony can do is try to keep the volume of his agony at the lowest possible notch. “We snagged Nebula up outside. Her and the stone.”

“What?” Tony huffs a laugh, and immediately regrets it. He’s rendered silent then, biting his lip through the patching of his shoulder, and then the hole beneath his ribs. A whine sneaks past the ironclad doors of his pride, anyway.

“Damn straight,” Quill grins at him. “Gamora and Drax are escorting her to the Milano at this very moment.”

“They thought she took off in a spacecraft,” Peter says, voicing Tony’s thoughts. “How in the hell did you pull that off?”

Quill chuckles, shuffles around to aid Tony’s other hand, “with a very convincing hologram and Nebula’s own ship. You think we were sitting out there twiddling our thumbs while this happened to you?”

“Tricky bastard,” Tony says, grinning, closing his eyes and laying his sweaty head back against the wall. Movement is returning to his left hand, assisted by the artificial bone structure, so he concentrates on it. Shuddering, twitching movement, but movement all the same. He’s wanted nothing more than to squeeze the shit out of something during this process, but he now lacks crucial tendons and nerves in his palms. “What the hell was that weapon she had?”

“A spear forged by Thanos himself,” Quill says with a dark tone. “Proxima Midnight can control its density. It will pierce anything, and it never misses its intended target.”

“Wow,” Tony remarks, “so we’re dealing with a neigh-invulnerable space giant, who happens to also be skilled in galactic weapon craft.” He hisses through the final two patches, the ones for his leg.

“Oh, and he’s also a super genius.” Quill stands and throws a small box on the floor, which expands itself out into a bigger box. “And he can manipulate energy through self-made cybernetics… and he’s the strongest, fastest, toughest dude in the universe. No biggie.”

For not the first time in his life, Tony feels helpless, pathetic and completely out of his league. It drops into his stomach like a boulder. “Phenomenal.”

Peter sighs. “Remind me why he needs the Infinity Stones again?”

“A desperate urge to maintain those traits,” Quill says, pulling his box near. “Clean up time. We need to leave.”

Tony releases the rest of his armor and watches listlessly as all the discarded pieces of Theodore are collected and sealed tightly within the container. Another suit all but destroyed. And wasn’t he just thinking about how smoothly things were going? Then this happens; he gets positively wrecked by one of Thanos’ damn lackeys. A minion, a fucking gofer, turned him into her personal play thing, an appetizer, for seven unpleasant minutes.

“We’re nowhere near ready for this,” Tony points out, groaning long and loud when Quill hauls him to his feet, throws one of his arms over his shoulders, and slaps a disk to his back. It covers Tony in blue energy.
“Maybe not,” Quill shrugs, as they take off, the box and Peter, following close behind, “but, we will be.”

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Terabytes of data were extracted from their encounter with two of the five members of Thanos’ Black Order, as well as Tony’s little romp with the Infinity Stone. Rocket has been pouring over it attentively immediately following their return to the convoy, and Peter has formed almost an obsession for it since they departed Knowhere on a course for one of Nova’s outposts seven hours ago. They intend to deliver Nebula to them. Money awaits them should they succeed. It doesn’t sit very well with Tony, but that’s the way things go out here.

Pain shoots up his arm. He tries to ignore it, delves back into Extremis, into preparation. They will all be sufficiently wrecked by Thanos’ armies if he doesn’t figure this out.

The numbers and video footage they collected are… intriguing, to say the least. Something about Tony halted an Infinity Stone in its very tracks, prevented it from satisfying its parasitic instincts, but no one can figure out exactly why. Peter is working on an answer to that. Glancing through surveillance, Tony can see him studying the Asgardian book, writing down algorithms, plugging them into the jets computer, and running simulations. A while back, he requested all the data on Extremis, old and new. Maybe he’s on to something.

Tony’s been running numbers on the spear using the information Rocket packed into Extremis 2.0, searching desperately for a sufficient cosmic element he can transform into pure energy to surround himself with, and make sure that damn thing can’t ever do this to him again. His armor needs a hefty upgrade, as does Peter’s, they’re no match for the forces out here-

“Mmpf-” Tony bites off the rest of his distressed moan as Quill uses a pair of forceps to extract a particularly large piece of repulsor from the sizable hole in his right palm. Indigo bioluminescence lights up the Milanos small sleeping quarters. Sweat trickles down his temples as steadily as the blood dripping from his hand. Distracting himself with numbers and data and prepping is only doing so much now, and his eyes shift from blue to brown repeatedly, corresponding with his pain levels. “Fucking hell,” he spits, covering his eyes with his arm.

“Shhh.” Gamora brushes sweaty hair from his forehead. She’s sitting cross-legged on one of the sleeping pods, has Tony’s head and shoulders pulled into her lap. Sometimes, she wipes sweat off his face with a cool towel, or offers him a drink of water. She tells him how well he’s doing, and that it won’t be much longer, and though they’re both lies, he appreciates it so much. All of this, all that these guys are doing for him, he appreciates with every ounce of his being.

“Just a few more in this one,” Quill says, turning Tony’s hand slightly for a full scan. The mask he’s wearing is impressively multifaceted, and is currently providing light, x-ray and magnification for this process.

Whatever Proxima Midnight’s spear is comprised of, it did something to the shards of his armor and debris it left behind in his body. Casted them together with a foreign material and made them so dense that Extremis isn’t even capable of digesting them properly. The pieces Quill has managed to extract sit in a bucket beside his feet, black as coal. They’ve hindered the healing process dramatically, and following hour five of no progress, Tony was forced to ask for assistance with removing the fragments. The Guardians were more than happy to oblige.
There’s no doubt in his mind that if he hadn’t locked Peter up during the attack, the kid would have died from such wounds. His healing factor is incredible, but no where near what Extremis is capable of. Entire limbs can be regrown using Extremis. Once the fragments are out, Tony will heal in a day and a half, tops, but Peter would have bled out right in front of him, and that... Tony would never recover from that. Peter’s anger with him is understandable, if not a bit misguided, but that’s normal. Trauma will do that. The poor kid. This isn’t what Tony wanted for him.

“How’s your sister?” he asks Gamora eventually, through gritted teeth.

Gamora sighs, meeting his gaze with a thin-lipped smile. “Vengeful,” she says, “angry, and spiteful. she wishes to kill Thanos. And me.”

“Any chance of turning her onto our side?” Tony inquires, fully believes that everyone deserves a second chance. Never a third, though. “Maybe turn her off the ‘killing you’ part? Because other than that, her goals mirror ours. Thanos victimized both of you.”

Gamora shakes her head gloomily, and there’s a mysterious glint of fault in her eyes. “And I’ll be the first to admit that he didn’t do so equally.” Guilt is eating at her. Tony can recognize it from miles away.

He swallows, hopes he’s not treading into dangerous territory, glances at Quill, whose eyes widen with encouragement. “Have you spoken to her about it, yet?”

Her lips quirk downward, a doubtful frown. “Nebula is a very difficult person to speak to.”

Tony thinks for a moment, considers their fight, the few words they exchanged. “She wanted me to kill her,” he reveals, and Gamora’s expression displays hopelessness and so much sadness as she gazes down at him. “She was ready to die. She has nothing, I think.” He shrugs his good shoulder, winces through the twinge beneath his rib. “People like that… if you give them something, they’ll cling to it for dear life.”

A small shift of her jaw, and she averts her gaze. “I don’t think she wants anything from me.”

“Might be worth asking, if not for her sake, then for yours. Maybe you’ll find some closure there-fuck!” His entire arm shudders with pain, visible lightning shooting beneath the skin, when another large piece is removed. It’s a great physical effort not to yank it from Quill’s grasp. Instead, he takes in deep, shuddering breaths, and hides his face in Gamora’s forearm. Speaking time is over. Back to Extremis.

“Sorry, man,” Quill says, and sounds it.

“Tony?” Peter calling through Extremis distracts him from the shooting pain in his hand. ‘Yeah, what?’ He responds with a bit of a snap, not meaning to, of course, but the agony is making him edgy and his painkillers aren’t doing shit to mitigate it. The guardians gave him some, but Extremis ate it up within minutes.

“Remember when Loki tried using an Infinity Stone on you?”

Oh yes, he does, clear as day. The seven-foot tall trickster touched his arc reactor with the same blade he used to murder Phil Coulson, and... wait-

‘What are you onto, kid?’

“You integrated Badassium into Extremis,” Peter says, and Tony is running the numbers before the
kid even completes his thought, “it helps you power your armor, enables you to produce electricity, you think maybe-?”

‘Yes, I do.’

The data returns and solidifies Peter’s theory into fact. “Holy shit,” he says out-loud, and laughs.

‘Send everything you’ve got to Rocket.’ Tony instructs, and does the same with his own findings.

“Whoa, what?” Quill asks, withdrawing his forceps from Tony’s hand.

The numbers play in front of him, cascade over him, washing his fears and doubts away with the cleansing, warm waters of optimism. “I think Peter may have just won this whole war for us.”

“You discovered an element and named it Badassium?” Peter sniggers, mockery in his voice, “you’re such a nerd, Tony, wow.”
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

TW: light 'torture' in this one.

Hope everyone's enjoying the new Season of Stranger Things, I almost didn't finish this because of my little binging habit. Ugh, god, I love October!

Peter can’t sleep.

Exhausted, worked basically to death, he shuts his eyes, only to wake with a terrible jolt just minutes later, gasping and sweating. Sometimes, the spear comes at him instead of Tony, pins him down, and he can feel the searing heat of it, a blinding amount of pain. The data gathered from the weapon has fabricated an extremely comprehensive understanding of everything Tony must have felt, how much pain he must have been in while strung up like a retired marionette. And he feels it, Peter feels it with excruciating detail in his dreams.

“Dammit, come on, go to sleep,” he tells himself. For three hours he tries, tosses and turns, stares at the pictures he’s taken from his photo album and taped to the wall in a little ‘feel good’ collage. A few of MJ frowning, all of them blurry, because she hates getting her picture taken and attempts to duck out of them every time. There’s one of Ned and himself playing video games, surrounded by empty chip bags and Mountain Dew cans, faces and fingertips tinted orange, their grins brighter than the flash of Aunt May’s phone. One of Peter, May and Ben in central park after a blizzard, all of them wrapped tightly in brightly colored snow gear, noses and cheeks glossy, bright red from a bitter cold that their cheerfulness allowed them to ignore.

And then there’s one that was taken in the training room on the compound, before the issues started, before the mass firings, and before Tony’s health began rapidly deteriorating. Peter had just completed a rigorous exercise, though thinking back on it, it was like walking down Sesame Street compared to this mission. Tony was in his armor, wearing a proud smirk, his hand on Peter’s back. Vision was there, fingers clasped behind him respectfully, and Rhodes stood on braces he wasn’t yet confident with, stabilizing himself using the arm Tony holds out for him. They stand behind Peter, whose enormous smile was hidden beneath his hood, his suit singed in places and desperately in need of repair. It was taken by Happy. A few months later, Happy stopped coming around, and Peter remembers a distinct change in Tony’s mood.

It was before everything started going to shit.

Staring at it with intense focus, he hopes to incorporate the memory into his dreams, distract his mind enough to forget about what happened. At least for now. He’s so tired.

When he closes his eyes, and he has trouble distinguishing Tony’s face from Ben’s, and they both bleed out in front of him, Peter gives up. With a frustrated growl, he throws his blankets off and heads to the latrine for a shower.
“You look tired,” Tony observes, squinting at Peter through ballistic eye protection. He’s been in his room, banging away at the bunks with a large mallet, and physically ripping reinforced steel from the wall for quite some time. It’s very loud, extremely obnoxious.

Peter looks around the room. It’s being totally stripped, the remains of furniture and bunks sitting in a pile in the middle of it. “What are you doing?”

“Creating a safe room,” Tony informs him, stepping over scrap to observe his progress from Peter’s angle, “your work on the Badassium theory opened up a whole wonderland of possibilities. Rocket’s currently testing the likelihood of a synthesis between Badassium and an absorbent mineral mined from quantum asteroids. If successful, and the new injection takes, instead of simply resisting an attack from an Infinity Stone, I’ll be able to absorb its energy, granting me a deep understanding of it, and rendering my potential damage output immeasurable.”

“So, you’re going to be exposing yourself to the Reality Stone,” Peter says, arms crossed with the same disapproval that’s saturating his voice. “And this is the room you’re going to do it in?”

“Sure,” Tony shrugs, pushing his eyepro up onto his forehead, “line the room with the same energy Nebula used to trap me in with the Stone, it’ll be totally safe. The more infinity energy I absorb, the better we’ll be able to understand what we’re up against.”

Peter eyes him. “Then what?”

Tony smiles. There’s a manic glint in his eyes. “Then we’ll have a fighting chance.”

Six hours later, following another unsuccessful attempt at sleep, Peter discovers Tony passed out on his desk, Howard Stark’s notes on the Tesseract open in five holographic windows all around him. With a sigh, he waves them away.

“Tony,” Peter says, gently shaking his shoulder, the uninjured one, because he’s been reminded with startling clarity recently which one was impaled. “Tony, hey.” The man awakes with a sharp intake of air, grimacing in pain before he’s aware enough to hide it. “Come on. Bed.”

“No, no, hold on,” Tony objects, sitting up, wiping saliva from his cheek, blinking sleep away, and shaking his head, “I’ve almost got this, the element in- in the Space Stone, it’s the one my dad discovered, Badassium, it’s- it’s- it’s the other element found in the Space Stone, Pete, that’s where he discovered it. It’s the missing link. I’m not sure what’s in the other stones, but if we smash this together with Eternium, we can produce synthetic Space Stones, and it’ll give us all an edge, where are my projections, I need them-”

“You’re rambling,” Peter says, waving away the screen Tony summons, and receiving the most exhausted dirty look he’s ever seen. “I just found you drooling on your desk. Go to bed. Please.”

Tony shakes his head some more, takes a towel from a nearby stack and wipes his desk off, “I can’t, not yet. Extremis won’t let me, I’ll be running numbers the entire time, I’ve got all this data that
needs processing—“

“Turn it off, and try,” Peter demands, and Tony’s eyes meet his. They’re scared, ringed with fatigue, and there’s wrinkles in the corners that shouldn’t be there. Peter knows the encounter with Thanos’ minions rattled him. And for good reason. It’s rattled Peter, too. “Go to bed. I’ll process it.”

After a moment, Tony sighs in defeat. “Alright.” He waves his hand and summons a screen full of complex math. “Run these sequences. They’re going to test synthesis viability at varying Badassium to Eternium concentrations. I need to know how many grams of these elements are required, and how hot I need to make them, in order to reach complete atomic fusion.”

“Okay.” Peter backs up slightly so Tony can rise from his seat and limp over to the room they share, since Tony’s old one now serves a greater purpose. It’s only been a little under a day since they left Knowhere, and his wounds haven’t healed completely. Blue light sparks beneath his clothes with each step he takes. Just as Peter is collapsing into the desk chair, Tony stops and turns back around, right leg bent slightly at the knee, heavily favoring his left one. “You alright?”

“Huh?” Peter gapes stupidly for a second before catching himself. “Oh, yeah, dude, I’m fine.” He waves a hand for emphasis.

Tony’s eyes narrow with accusation. “Don’t lie to me.” It’s not hostile, merely a request. Tony can smell a lie a mile out.

Peter shrugs, looks at the floor, then around at everything else. Finally, he sighs, grabs a pen and fidgets with it. “You told me it would happen. I mean, you gave me fair warning.”

“What are you talking about?” Tony asks softly.

“The nightmares?” Peter swallows, and he can feel his cheeks growing red. The pen spins around his fingers so fast it takes on a fluid appearance. “You told me they would happen, right? Well…”

“Fuck.” It’s such a soft utterance, it could never be construed as an indication of annoyance or anger. Peter looks up, to find Tony appearing worried and sad and culpable all at once. “You can’t sleep?”

“Nah,” Peter says, shrugging.

“Want to talk about it?” Tony asks, and Peter shakes his head, would rather Tony get some sleep, doesn’t want him sitting here and wasting time listening to his sob story.

“Not right now.”

Tony looks at him for a long time. Studies him. “You can talk to me anytime.” He finally says. “About anything.”

“I know.” Peter nods at him, then smiles. “I’m fine, really. Just tired.”

“Okay.” Tony doesn’t look convinced.

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“You sure you want to go right into this, Stark?” Rocket asks as Tony flexes his shoulders and cracks his neck, left, then right, prancing from foot to foot like a boxer preparing for the match of the
century. He’s inside the newly renovated safe room, staring down the orb containing an artifact of legendary power. Peter waits outside the room, watching through thick glass with crossed arms and a face wrinkled by discontentment. Rocket stands on a stool beside him, holding a tablet, almost fully healed.

Tony releases a rush of air. “Yup. You did see me get voodoo-dolled a couple days ago, right?” he chuckles humorlessly. “I’d like to keep that from happening again. And sooner, rather than later.”

If he can absorb a sufficient amount of energy from the Reality Stone, chances are, he’ll be able to summon a barrier around himself with enough vigor to withstand Midnight’s spear, amongst other things. And with a greater understanding of it, he might even be able to construct devices capable of protecting his new friends, as well. Tony is going to act as the conduit, absorbing energy and collecting data through his body. Sure, it’s only been twenty minutes since the successful synchronization of his Badassium and Rocket’s formula, but time is of the essence. They’re just a day away from the Nova outpost, and following the successful delivery of Nebula, it’s straight on to Titan from there, where Thanos first began to enhance himself before going mad and wiping the moon of all life. Tony was shocked to discover how close to Earth Thanos used to reside, that there was an entire civilization of beings that inhabited Saturn’s large moon. There might be clues there, and it’s within a favorable proximity to Earth. They’ll be able to keep a watchful eye on it. Do some spying. Tony has to figure out what’s happened since he left and if it’s even safe to approach the planet.

Not only that, but once they’re safely on solid ground, Tony can get to work on synthesizing more Badassium for the others to cloak themselves in. It’s impossible to do within the confines of the jet.

“Alright,” Rocket says, a shrug and a not so subtle ‘it’s your funeral’ hidden in his voice, and initiates the test with a tap on his tablet. He shares a skeptical glance with Peter. “Good luck.”

The orb opens. Reality shrieks angrily and goes straight for Tony in a flash of blinding crimson light.

When Tony opens his eyes, he’s in his tower. Loki is striding up to him, the Mind Stone encased in the scepter he holds. Scotch burns in a pleasant way as he takes large gulps, and he realizes he misses drinking.

He knows how this will play out. Loki will touch his chest with the scepter- no, not his chest, his arc reactor- and will glimpse failure for the first time since arriving on Earth. Tony is proud of it, to have been the first to rattle him, to make him question the feasibility of his imprudent plan. Come to think of it, how pathetic does a guy have to be to show up to the dark, sleepy house with two damn Infinity Stones, only to get run off by what amounts to a dude in his boxers brandishing a shot gun?

Good lord, what a C student.

Tony laughs, smiles, jokes with this very dangerous individual, though his insides are squirming. Of course, he won’t be mind controlled, but he will still be choked and painfully manhandled before he’s tossed from his tower without ceremony. Dammit, he hates this part.

The scepter descends and Tony’s eyes follow it as it travels toward a very vulnerable part of his body, one that bears enormous scars which tell wordless stories of trauma and terror. This time, though, his arc reactor is gone. He realizes it a moment too late with a jolt much like being punched in the stomach. The blade touches his chest without issue.

Coldness consumes him. Tony stands there rigidly in his state of utter servile compliance, disagreeing with it, horrified by it, while at the same time, lacking any ability to physically defy it. It’s bodily and mentally agonizing, like being gutted, carved out, and immediately stuffed full again with something
They’re coming, all of them,” he hears himself tell his new master as his armor encases him, the faceplate clanking closed. His HUD boots flawlessly, like he’s still the real Tony Stark, and not some puppet dancing from invisible strings. “Thor will be here in three minutes. Romanov, Barton and Rogers have commandeered a quinjet, and will arrive in seven. Banner, I’m sure, is on his way.”

“I though the monster to be lost,” Loki remarks, turning with a flourish to view his handiwork from the same window Tony and Pepper once used to gaze out on the city together. The invasion has begun.

“You thought wrong,” Tony informs him from behind the cold countenance of Iron Man. “And you can’t beat him. You’ll have to turn Banner before he transforms if you wish to keep your bones, and all your organs, in a solid state. I suggest apprehending him before doing anything else. Here.” He tosses Loki an ear piece, who catches it with a smirk. “Wear that. I’ll be in contact with you.”

Loki chuckles as he considers the tiny device in his hand. “And where does your sharp mind direct you?” he asks, nodding at Tony, smiling widely as though turning Iron Man to his side was the best decision he’s ever made in his life. And it probably is.

“I have a few B-level inconveniences to deal with,” Tony says, watching the quinjets path trace a line across his HUD. “Now leave, before Thor gets here. He’s merely a distraction.”

Loki scoffs, looking back over the city, the scepter held behind him with two hands. “An infuriating one,” he hisses. It’s very clear he despises his brother.

“Put that aside,” Tony instructs, “your hatred for him will be your downfall, and wouldn’t that be embarrassing? Focus on finding Banner and send him against Thor. I’ll take care of Shield.”

“Excellent,” Loki commends, viewing Tony like a prize, “it seems I’ve removed that terror casting a shadow of doubt over your mind and unlocked a brilliant strategist.”

“Don’t give yourself so much credit,” Tony says, “without my help, you would have been ground into mush.” He takes off from the carwash.

A quick patch uploaded to JARVIS swaps the A.I.s allegiances. “JARVIS, begin infiltrating Shield helicarriers. Blind them. Disarm them. Disrupt earpiece communications.”

“Yes, sir.”

Tony has missed JARVIS. It’s nice to hear his voice again, even if it’s in this capacity.

They’re close enough, now. He seeks out a leviathan and aggravates it, sends a stun missile at its face to draw its attention before rocketing off toward the quinjet. “I need some backup, I’ve got worms,” he declares to the occupants, knowing full well the quinjet will never be capable of withstanding a collision with something so dense.

“Stark, don’t-!” Romanov says, but it’s too late. Tony pulls up and the leviathan crashes directly into the jet, scattering metal and people in a fiery explosion.

“Whoops.”

He seeks out Captain America first, the most dangerous individual on the craft, who was flung through a skyscraper window, and torpedoes into him as he’s shaking off his shock. Poor little soldier. Tony can see his blue eyes widen in terrified astonishment as he realizes what’s happened.
“Stark has turned,” he shouts, throwing up his shield to cushion the impact of seven hundred pounds of solid metal and man. It’s a simple defense, and Tony lets loose a small rocket, which flies forward, detonating behind Cap, and sending him hurtling into Tony.

“Your comms are down,” Tony informs him as he shoulders the shield, and Rogers flies into a support beam, a red, white a blue ball in the world’s most trying pin-ball machine. He hits it with a pained grunt, landing on his feet, but barely. People run and scream, scattering papers and tripping over each other. It’s Tony’s life now. His new life as an evil puppet. “I suggest you give up, it’ll make this easier.”

“You should know by now, that’s not something I do,” Rogers says, and hurls his shield, which Tony catches and tosses away. Shoulder rockets target various vulnerabilities as Rogers charges him. Knees, feet, hands, elbows, eyes. The guy dodges some, but not all, and his effort is commendable, if not silly and futile. The assault brings him to his knees, panting. “Don’t do this, Stark. You’re mind controlled, you’re not thinking clearly.”

“On the contrary,” Tony says darkly, firing up a repulsor, “I’m thinking clearer than ever.”

He lets it loose, knocking Rogers on his back, then Tony is on top of him in an instant, unsheathing a blade he built into the Mark VII’s gauntlet. At the time, he had no idea what he would ever use it for. Never could he have imagined it would be for this.

“Tony, this- this isn’t who you are,” Rogers cries out, catching the blade, blood spurting as unarmored palms try desperately to keep it from piercing his heart. “Please-“

“You’ve never known who I am, Rogers.” The blade goes in with little resistance. Tony feels nothing. “You never even bothered to find out.” There’s so much blood-

“Tony!”

He gasps awake, shaking, just in time to watch Reality being sucked back into its temporary home. The floor of the safe room is cold. “Holy shit,” he breathes, rubbing his eyes, trying to purge the bright scarlet of Steve’s blood from his mind. God, it was everywhere, it looked so real. He may have been devoid of emotion in the vision, but now...

“What the shit happened?” Rocket approaches him with Peter close behind, a tablet displaying an error message in his paws. “I got nothing, Stark. You didn’t last long enough. Twenty-three minutes is not long enough.”

Tony groans and rubs his face some more. “That one sucked,” he says, sitting up and allowing himself a minute to recover. “Loki turned me, I won his war for him. He made me kill my former teammates.”

“Yikes,” Peter says offering a hand, which Tony takes, allows it to pull him shakily to his feet.

“Yeah, not fun.” Leaning against the wall, he closes his eyes, covers them with a shaking hand and takes deep breaths. “Last time, the reality was pleasant. Had me wanting to stay in it. Now it wants me out, I think. It’s like It knows.”

“You up for round two?” Rocket asks.

Not really. “Yeah, just give me a minute,” he lies, expelling air as forcefully as a punctured tire.

“Cool, I gotta take a piss anyway,” Rocket announces, and heads off toward the restroom.
Peter touches his arm, and Tony looks at him from beneath his hand. “You good?”

“Don’t know.” Tony admits. “For a moment there, at the end, the damn thing had me believing its lie.”

“Alright, round two,” Rocket declares from the other side of the window, and Tony gulps nervously, far less confident than he was the first time. A damn Infinity Stone exists in front of him with a mere inch of suppressant material standing between it and Tony. “Ready?”

Peter is looking into the room too, worry taking the place of anger. Tony nods at both of them. “Bring it on.”

Rocket initiates the simulation, and Tony baulks-

The funeral is set for Friday. Tony is supposed to speak, but he’s not sure he can.

Sitting on the edge of the carwash, legs dangling high above New York City, not even giving a shit if he should fall off and plummet toward the street below, Tony stares into his drink. The ice shifts as it melts, clinks against the glass. The rich, brown liquid swirls around it as the water unleashes its full potential, its true flavor. Water does that, washes away dirt, drowns old personalities, uncovers truths once hidden. Kills fire.

Fire, on the other hand… fire consumes. Fire destroys.

Fuck.

No, this isn’t real.

He’s there again, surrounded by chaos and explosions. Gun shots ring out in the night, and fire rages beneath them. Pepper smiles at him through her tears. Tortured and broken, she reaches for him. Trusts him. How foolish of her.

“I’ll catch you!” He lies. The structure shifts, dammit, why does it shift like that? And she’s thrown from it. He watches, horrified, sick to his stomach, as Pepper falls and is consumed by raging flames.

He sees it happen like this all the time.

The investigators say she must have been burned to ash. There was nothing left of her. Not a tooth, not a toenail, a strand of hair, a fingerbone. Nothing.

Tony feels like nothing. Tears stream, and he allows them, because he didn’t when it happened. He didn’t allow himself to mourn his parents, he never shed a tear over Obadiah. Pepper though… Pepper was special. Perfect. For him, for this world. She was the light his life is devoid of. The memory of her deserves his mourning.

His ankle throbs with each heartbeat. It was fractured in three places when he fell on it. His left arm currently lives in a cast, and multiple broken ribs twinge beneath ice packs. Second degree burns cover most of his abdomen. Killian unleashed quite a beating on him before JARVIS was able to get it together and neutralize the threat. It’s fine. The pain is good. Especially when dulled by gratuitous
amounts of morphine. It’s his punishment. It grounds him and brings him out of his flashbacks.

“Hey,” a soft, female voice behind him, and though he’s seen Pepper’s ghost padding across their flat a few times, he knows this voice belongs to someone else. Turning, he discovers Natasha, who’s smiling sadly from the stairs of his runway.

“Security breach,” he says with a hollow tone, and turns away to chug his drink, tossing the empty glass behind him. It joins five more just like it.

“Bruce let me in. May I join you?” she asks quietly, gesturing to his perch.

“Sure,” he says, shrugs, and regrets it when his ribs punish him. “Grab that bottle there, though.” He twists with a groan, and watches Natasha through his tears as she points at separate bottles. “No, not that one. No. No. No. Yes. The bourbon. Thanks.”

“Slow it down there, Sinatra,” she says with a kind smile as she hands him the bottle, which he opens and drinks from immediately. Sitting next to him, she places a hand on his back, but withdraws it when he grunts in protest.

“Mmm.” He winces, swallowing and wiping his mouth on his sleeve. “Broken ribs.”

“Right, sorry.” She sighs. “I saw what happened.”

“Yeah?” Tony doesn’t look at her. “On which channel? Was it before or after the one where I spat out my address for a ravenous press and smashed a reporter’s phone? Oh, did you happen to catch the one where my entire fucking house fell into the ocean?”

“Tony-“

“Did you miss the president being kidnapped?”

“Please-“

“Did they happen to broadcast the beating I took from a goddamn fire zombie? That was fun, let me tell you.”

“We were on mission,” she says softly, and Tony looks sideways at her. “It happened so fast. I’m sorry.”

“We?” he repeats. He was never called for a mission.

She extracts a pristine handkerchief and dabs his cheek with it. It comes back into his vision red with his blood, gathered from a wound torn open by his anger. “Clandestine. Both Iron Man, and Tony Stark, are a little too ostentatious for what we needed to accomplish.”

“Right.” He shakes his head. They wouldn’t have called him either way.

“I’m going to be moving in,” she says, pressing the cloth to his face for him, since he only has one working arm, and it’s currently being occupied clutching onto his liquid therapy.

“Oh?” Tony clenches his jaw. “I don’t remember approving that.”

“Stop acting like you don’t have five rooms ready for us to move into.”

Rooms he designed with Pepper’s help.
“It’s my fault,” he says, the anger draining from him. “I dropped her. I watched her fall.” The sting is back. The tears are streaming again. “Nat, I- I watched her die.”

“Shh, it’s okay,” she says, squeezing his shoulder.

He comes back on the floor again, sobbing, which stops as soon as he realizes what’s happened, which takes ever longer than last time. “Ah, dammit,” he curses when he sees Peter and Rocket entering the room, rubbing his shameful tears away with a groan. “How long?”

“That was twenty-one minutes.” Tony groans again and Rocket shakes his head at the readings, then regards him with a rare expression of concern. “I think you need a break. Maybe some cushioning. Let me take your armor over to the Milano, I’ve got some upgrades in mind that might help dampen this things effects on you. Because right now, it’s winning this little battle you’re fighting with it.”

“Let me try one more time,” Tony insists, sitting up, shaking off the most recent vision. They’re starting to become indistinguishable from reality. The faces are intact. The sounds are unencumbered. Smells, and tastes and feelings, both physical and mental, are all… they’re too real.

“Be my guest,” Rocket says, handing the tablet to Peter. “I’ve got a sandwich and a shit ton of work waiting for me back on the Milano. And an obstinate tree I’m not allowed to leave alone for too long. Gotta check the news, too for Thanos movements. I’ll be back in four hours. Mind sending your armor over for me?”

“Sure.” Tony sends Simon, his only intact suit of armor, over to the Milano through the artificial stability field the warp cores are producing around their spacecrafts.

“Great. See ya, losers.” Rocket enters the airlock, covers himself in blue energy and jets out as well, performing a little spin as he does. It’s good to see him on his feet again. As soon as Tony is certain Rocket made it in one piece, he turns to Peter.

He’s already shaking his head. “No.”

“Come on, Pete,” Tony grins.

“I said, ‘no’,” Peter insists, helping Tony to his feet.

“Just one more time,” Tony promises, holding up an index finger. “Then I’ll sleep for eight straight hours.”

“Eight hours?” Peter regards him with doubt, the tablet gripped tightly in his hands.


“Did you see the way Rocket looked at you?”

Tony scoffs. “I’m fine. One more, that’s it.”

Peter looks him up and down, rolls his eyes when Tony gives him a pleading look. “Alright, alright,” he sighs. “But you owe me. Big time.”

“That’s the spirit!” Tony exclaims.

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“Do you want to know why we allowed you to complete your little Extremis experiment?” Ross murmurs as he squats next him and blows putrid cigar smoke in his face.

Tony twists his wrists in the shackles binding them to the floor behind him, the short chain clinking quietly. He sits up off his calves for a moment, just a moment, hopefully to get the blood flowing to his tingling feet again. Muscles scream at him to move them, but the way he’s restrained is too restrictive, only allows him probably an inch, maybe an inch and a half in any direction. His ankles reside beneath thick cuffs drilled into the floor on either side of the one securing his hands.

The collar is tight around his throat, ready to cause explosive pain should he get out of line.

There’s not two fucks left in his fuck bag to give about Ross or his taunts. Tony stares blankly at a white wall belonging to a room on the Raft that he did not design.

“What, we figured,” Ross continues, unsolicited, “that should any, uh… unfortunate injuries or illnesses befall you during your little stay in my Hell Hotel, you will heal from them.” He pulls a thick rubber glove from his pocket, standard PPE when handling Tony in here, and slips it on. “And not a single scar or blemish or blister will remain to tell the tale.”

Of course, he knows this.

“No matter what we do to you,” Ross says, taking Tony’s chin and pulling his face up so he’s forced to look into soulless gray eyes, “you will live through it. You will never deteriorate, you will never sustain enough damage to expire. You will exist as a prisoner for eternity. You should save yourself the effort, Stark, really. There’s no waiting this out.”

“I’ll just wait until your next predictable cardiac event.” Tony smiles at him, nods to the cigar. “Shouldn’t be long, now.”

“Ah, but I have a Stark brand pacemaker.” Ross smiles back, tapping his chest beside his blood-red tie, cigar hanging out his mouth and bobbing as he speaks. “It’ll run my heart for fifty lifetimes. That is your slogan, isn’t it? I paid for mine, but it is so nice of you to fund those cardiac clinics for the financially disadvantaged. Give the dregs of society a second chance, debt-free.” Taking his cigar from between his lips, he puts it out on Tony’s bicep, barely prompting even a flinch from him. “Or maybe, you’re just wasting a ton of money and resources delaying the inevitable.”

“Ow,” Tony says flatly, with a defiant smirk. It’ll take more than that to hurt him. Extremis gets to work on the burn immediately, a soft blue glow beneath his skin. It’ll be healed in an hour. “You gonna get me a glass of water next, maybe sing me a song, share a spaghetti dinner with me? Read me Jeff Foxworthy’s ‘You Might be a Redneck’ front to back? Because honestly, that would be more effective.” He huffs a laugh. “Christ, this is a joke. I’ve had my chest ripped out sans anesthesia, I’ve been burned, and drowned and strung up by my wrists for days and days, once upon a time, in a shit-stained cave. Let me know when you plan on getting serious.”

“Hmm.” Ross’ lips twitch. He lets go of Tony’s face and stands. “I think I can manage that water for you.”

“Outstanding,” Tony sneers, flexing his shoulders back. They’re stiff with fatigue, but it’s nothing too serious. Yet. He’s been shackled like this for seventeen hours, following a standard interview, which lasted a full twenty-four, featuring a revolving door of so called ‘professional’ interrogators. As soon as they determined traditional methods of rapport building and amnesty offers wouldn’t work on him, they resorted to physical persuasion. A non-enhanced man would be in significantly
more pain by now. Tony’s just severely uncomfortable, having been kneeling for so long.

Ross strides from the room with quick, wide steps. The armored door hisses shut, massive hydraulics keeping it from slamming. Tony sighs and shakes his head, knowing this could get extremely bad for him. Shit, who is he kidding? It’s already terrible. He hasn’t slept or eaten in days. The Guardians will have no idea why he never showed, what even happened to him. He wonders if Rhodey or Pepper are aware of his detainment, and if there’s anything they can do to free him. Visitation isn’t necessarily a thing down here, but Rhodey is a pit bull, will growl at and bite whoever he needs to in order to see Tony.

Ten minutes snail by before Ross returns with a small fleet of Navy Sailors, four of them, each bearing two buckets of something that sloshes audibly. That glass of water he was promised. “Set them over there, by him,” Ross commands, pointing to Tony, who rolls his eyes, though his hands are shaking. He grips the chain to keep it from making sound.

Only one Sailor has the guts to look at him, a young man, E-3, if Tony recalls correctly. His uniform sports a square patch with three bars running from the lower left corner of it to the upper right. ‘I’m sorry,’ he mouths, and appears supremely regretful of his actions.

Tony shrugs, smiles at him, receives a respectful nod in return. It’s not their fault. They leave without a word.

Ross presses a button on his radio. “Major, bring it down to about, oh…” He regards Tony and tosses his head from side to side in consideration. Tony watches him, heart walloping his sternum. “Thirty-six in here, I think.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Freezing point’s thirty-two,” Tony says, swallowing to bring his voice under control. Fans are kicking on above him, pushing frigid air into the small room, and he’s wearing nothing but boxers. “Here, I thought you were finally manning up.”

“Don’t worry, it’s on a timer,” Ross enlightens him, picking up a bucket. “It’ll decrease by one degree per half-hour.” The rush of icy water over him wrenches a gasp and a surprised shout from his dry throat, leaves him panting with shock and sputtering obscenities. He didn’t expect it to be that cold. “Wouldn’t want you getting used to it all at once.” He grabs another, heads to Tony’s other side, and soaks him again. He shakes water from his face and shivers violently beneath the fans. “Look, I don’t like this, either. I just need to know where Rogers and Barnes are, along with the rest of your degenerate friends. And how exactly Rogers so easily infiltrated the most secure location on Earth. A location you designed the security protocols for.” A bucket at his back, and Tony’s now sopping wet, dripping and his trembling is highlighted by soft grunts he can’t quite hold back. “I also need to know who Spider-Man is.”

Tony watches the water drain away through the small grate beneath him, teeth already chattering, sore muscles spasming, clenching and aching in a futile attempt to warm him. He’s become one giant cramp.

God, he’s been so stupid, so negligent, letting this happen. At least he kept Peter out of this, decided to go it alone with Extremis, and somehow, miraculously, made it out alive. This is worth it. Not having Peter involved in this bullshit is worth any suffering he’s forced to endure here. It will be hard to remember that. As time goes on, it will become even more difficult. The lines he’s drawn will blur, and eventually, all but disappear at the same rate as his sanity. It’s just how this works. Nobody is the exception, everyone wants the pain to stop, no matter how much bravado they put forth while sitting in the warm safety of their homes, spouting nonsense on the internet, or chatting it up at the local bar.
Everyone thinks they’re immortal until they’re being drowned.

“Well, I would never give in; psh, the fuck you wouldn’t.

“Whew!” Ross stands in front of him, and Tony looks up to find him smirking and rubbing his arms. “I’m going to go put on a nice sweater, it’s getting chilly in here.”

“Did Sa-Satan knit it f-for you?” It’s becoming painful, shivering like he is. The collar absorbs his electricity, prevents him from burning away the water, or warming himself. Prevents him from communicating remotely using Extremis. Prevents him from making too swift a move. Prevents him from doing anything at all.

“Come on Stark,” Ross scoffs at him, collecting the three empty buckets and stacking them by the door, “you’re acting like this is my fault. You’re forgetting, you have complete control over this. You decide when your suffering is over, not me.”

“C-could you kindly f-f-fuck off, huh?” Tony curls into himself as much as the chains will allow. “I’m gonna try to get a nap in.”

“Don’t get too comfortable,” Ross warns him, “I’ll be back in thirty minutes for reapplication.”

“You-you f-f-fucking idiot.” Tony lifts his head with heroic effort, his lip curling into a frustrated snarl. “You’re s-spitting into the wind, here. Goddammit, Ross, I’m not a threat, my former teammates aren’t- aren’t a threat. And Spider-Man is certainly not a fucking threat to you or to anyone.” Ross is staring, waiting for more. Tony meets his gaze boldly. “If you keep me here, you’ll be directly responsible for the destruction of Earth.”

Gray eyes study him for a full minute. Then without another word, Ross leaves the cell.

It’s cold as fuck.

Tony’s breath exits him in rapid, visible, uneven puffs. The fans above him cease blowing air, so he drips for quite some time. And soon, his misery becomes voiced. Cold isn’t something he can handle very well, not after Afghanistan, where nights had a bad habit of dipping into single digits, and sometimes, into negatives. Frigid fingers would wrap themselves around him, keep him from sleeping, strangle the breath from him, touch the metal in his chest so the cold became penetrating, inescapable.

He cries out, shakes his head, grits his teeth, clenches his eyes shut, because the smooth, white walls of the cell are turning brown and serrated.

It starts coming back. Frozen nights huddled beneath a shitty wool blanket, shivering, teeth chattering. The fire could never get too big, as their captors would turn off their ventilation to save power. In fact, his first night awake after his surgery, following on and off mock drowning, he was hung up by his wrists, his feet barely grazing the dusty floor beneath him. And that small mercy was only due to Yinsen warning them of possible, irreversible injury had they just let his ass dangle. It would have been counterintuitive to their plans, breaking his wrists or dislocating his shoulders, and hindering his ability to work. Still dripping, the hole in his chest raw and agonizing, shuddering with fever and terror and pain, Tony learned the meaning of misery that night. He’s proud that he lasted two more before breaking.

It’s like he’s there again. Lacking a chest hole and the cluster of biting shrapnel, of course, and he’s worlds sturdier, physically. But it’s coming back. The situation is eerily similar. He’s a prisoner, being physically and mentally tormented to elicit information they know he possesses, to provoke
unwilling complicity.

The door hisses open. Tony doesn’t acknowledge it, is barely aware of it, until the water is back, freezing and uncaring, and all he can do is kneel there and take it pathetically, over and over. It goes on for an excruciatingly long time. Once, they bring in buckets with water that’s actually warmer than the temperature of the room, but the relief is transitory, as it freezes painfully to his skin, his hair, his eyelashes, and literal icicles begin forming on him-

A smack across his face, and he shouts as his eyes fly open, darting around in terror. A nightmare? No. The Reality Stone. His latest attempt to absorb its power. Round three.

“Tony!” Someone is shouting his name. Peter. Oh god. Little Peter Parker, who risked everything to save him from a verifiable hell. A hell the Reality Stone felt no qualms about showing him, as it seems to be learning more about him, and it doesn’t appreciate his attempts to syphon its power. That one was bad, that one was… he was fully immersed in that reality, had been totally convinced it was real. The damn stone is adapting to this faster than he can.

Still shivering with lingering, phantom cold, he blinks rapidly, his vision slowly swimming into focus. Comprehension returns, and he finds that he’s sat up against the wall of the safe room. Peter is kneeling beside him. They’re the only ones in the jet, as Rocket returned to the Milano to work on upgrades for Tony’s armor because he’s got to last an entire two hours to get the readings they need.

Right? This is… this is real, right?

“Hey,” Peter says, touches his shoulder, and Tony flinches so violently away from it, that Peter draws his hand back like he’s just touched a hot stove. “Whoa, calm down, man.”

“Sorry, I...” He can’t catch his breath, he’s still in that cell, listening to Ross spew bullshit, shivering and moaning- “Listen, do me a favor, alright?”

“Sure, yeah,” Peter says, worry carved into his face.

“Don’t ever, ever regret what you did,” Tony insists, getting to his knees and grabbing Peter’s biceps, needing to feel something tangible, something alive.

Peter’s regarding him with immense concern and a little bit of fear. “What are you-?”

“When you got me out,” Tony clarifies, giving him a little shake, “when you literally picked my ass up off the floor and- and saved me from Ross, and the chains, and the- the fucking collar, shit, you took a bullet, Pete, thank you for doing that for me. Thank you. Please, don’t ever regret it. You sacrificed a lot to save me from something that… Pete, you… Christ…”

“It showed you, didn’t it?” Peter observes immediately, “What would have happened had I not been there?”

Tony nods. “And it was so real, it created memories for me, fucking memories, like, I completely forgot about all this, I- fucking- is this even real? Are we- is this- where are we? Oh, god-”

Peter grasps his arms, squeezes them lightly. “This is real, I promise- hey, look at me.”

Tony does, because he’s been gasping, hyperventilating, and glancing all around, trying to find clues, trying to ground himself. Within Peter’s eyes, he finds a warm soul. They’re totally different than Ross’ empty, careless ones, contain a lively shimmer that his were lacking. The kid’s hands are warm on his arms. There was no warmth in the false reality.

Right. Here, he can breathe without his lungs hitching in shock from the frozen air. “Okay.”

Peter smiles. “You’re alright. You’re safe. It wasn’t real.”

Tony swallows, lowers his head, grasps onto Peter’s arms for dear life, so damn thankful for him, it’s insane. “It felt real.”

“Rocket was right, you need to take a break,” Peter tells him. “I’m not sure this is good for you, Tony. I think, maybe you should wait until Rocket upgrades your armor before you try again.”

Usually, Tony would argue until he’s blue in the face. This time though… “I think you’re right,” he admits, feeling defeated and helpless. “It’s… it’s like it’s learning about me.” He looks over at the stone, expression fearful. “One thing’s for sure; Thanos can never get his hands on this.”

“Duh, Tony,” Peter says, and pulls him up. “Go to bed. You owe me eight hours.”
Okay, so, I live in an apartment. The people above me have a million frigging kids, and I guess one of them tried to flush a Capri Sun packet down the toilet, thus flooding my damn home and forcing me, my husband, my five year old, and my two asshole cats into a single hotel room for two weeks. There was no concentrating on fanfic, I'm sorry. It's been such a nightmare. They did get everything cleaned up, and now I have sweet new wooden floors, but it's been... ugh. Two weeks in a hotel room with the whole fam isn't fun.

Please let me know what you think, I love all your comments. I'm so sorry for the delay.

Why the hell did he agree to eight hours? There's no way he’s going to be able to get that much sleep. Hell, he can’t recall ever getting so much sleep in one go.

Tony’s pale reflection frowns back at him, a disgruntled ghost he tries to separate himself from. Scruffy and oil marked, with tired, dull eyes, it disagrees with him, tells him without words just how many hours of sleep he needs to catch up on. Psh, what a wuss. This face needs to stay in the game, has a ton of work to accomplish. A team to prepare, equip and take care of. Only one thing to do; hide the exhaustion behind a well-trimmed beard and a practiced smile, sharp as a razor.

Speaking of razors, he gets to work, using his electricity to burn away the unwanted hair beneath his glowing fingertips. It’s swift and efficient, more precise than any razor he’s ever used. Cream isn’t even necessary and blue incandescence beneath his cheeks prevents burns. He would smile, but his gut is twisting itself into painful origami shapes.

The sound of water running behind him is setting him on edge, turned on long before to ease his mind into a staunch indifference of it. It didn’t work so well. With his beard sculpted into the strict work of art he’s been sporting for decades, he grits his teeth and turns.

For not the first time in his life, Tony eyes the shower as though stepping into it will result in his abrupt transport through time-space. All his showers at home are large, tiled colorfully, unmistakable as anything other than a place to remove grime built up over days-long engineering pursuits. They provide lots of room to move in, and if he needs to, he can escape the cascade to catch his breath, to leash his demons. The whimpering leftovers of trauma long since reigned in.

When he was designing the jet, he didn’t consider it a necessity to make the shower space any bigger than it needed to be to get the job done. His relationship with water had all but healed, and though a crack formed during his bout with Extremis, he’d patched it rather quickly, filled it in with tough cement. Now... goddammit.

“Come on, you idiot, it wasn’t real,” he scolds himself in a whisper, but he’s still shivering, can still feel the grip of the ice as it froze all over him, layered up by constant reapplication so it made every move a restricted, living hell. And although only thirty-seven minutes passed in real time, entire days shot past him in the vision. Rocket was right. The Reality Stone is winning. It knows exactly which of Tony’s loose ends to pull on to unravel him like an old sweater.
If he thinks too deeply about it, he’ll likely go insane.

Swiping his hand beneath the steady spray exposes an unacceptable temperature. Hotter. It must be hotter than that. A tap at the system through Extremis causes steam to billow. He tests it again, growls quietly, shakes the water from his hand, runs his dry one down his face. “Christ on stilts, it’s just a shower.”

A knock at the door startles him. “Hey, you alright?” Peter asks, and Tony mouths a curse at his own foolishness. Peter can probably hear him in there, talking himself into taking a fucking shower. How wonderful.

“Sure, I’m great, wondering why you’re hovering, though.” Tony grimaces and rubs nervous sweat from his forehead. This is ridiculous.

Peter clears his throat. “Uh, Rocket wants me to bring the stone to the Milano, can I do that?”

“Don’t see why not,” Tony replies, testing the water again, determined. “Be extremely careful, don’t get sucked into the death rainbow.”

“Oh, and could you please shave normally?” Peter requests, and Tony smirks. “That burnt hair smell, man-“

“Alright, alright,” Tony says haughtily, and has no intention of changing his habits. “Are you still hovering? Skedaddle, kid, give me some space.”

Peter sighs. “Just get in the shower, Tony.”

“Thanks, coach.” Tony rolls his eyes at the door, though he will never admit how much he needed to hear that, and he disguises the gratitude behind a curtain of sarcasm.

He’s wasting so much precious time. And the water won’t last forever. With a deep, steadying breath, he steps in… and sighs because it’s not so bad. It’s hot, pleasant even. It’s melting the ice from him and he turns so it waterfalls down his back. A massive contrast to having it thrown at him while he’s helpless. He has control in here. This is his jet, dammit, he built it from nothing in an oversized garage. He can adjust the pressure and temperature of this shower with his brain. Ross can’t terrorize him here.

Fucking bastard.

Tony lathers up a cloth and scrubs the shit out of his beard, neck, jawline, the spot on his arm where a cigar was stubbed out, all the places strangers put hands on him as they were forcing him into restraints. Fuck, he gave his friends to that man, he realizes, and the thought of what… well ‘happened’ to him happening to anyone else is like being stabbed, like being impaled again.

Of course, Tony never doubted Ross’ ability to get rowdy with them, so during his little visit he disengaged certain Raft security protocols and made Rogers’ bio-signature compatible with the system on a hunch. Activated a million little worms and maintained constant surveillance of the happenings inside, because people he cares about being in any form of captivity makes him reasonably edgy.

Should anything brutish have occurred, Tony would have personally ruined that Secretary of State. And Friday was always vigilant.

Which, come to think of it, is probably how they got at Friday in the first place; Tony planting her there like that. She caught a virus from them as easily as he did, and they used it against him. Fine-tuned it. Waited until the time was just right before striking. Took advantage of his illness and
shredded awareness and broken heart so they could slip their trojan horse into his systems. Soulless monsters.

As he’s removing the metal from one of his palms and wincing through the process of washing out a noticeably smaller hole, he thinks about Friday. What did they do to her? Where is she now? Did they turn her totally onto their side to create a terrifying version of Skynet? Are they using her to collect more damning evidence against Tony? Perhaps they decompiled her, buried her, because she’s dangerous, and won’t be too enthused when she discovers how she’s been wielded like a weapon. And that thought… he can’t handle losing another artificial intelligence. JARVIS was bad enough, and Vision isn’t even remotely the same, uh… person? Is that the correct term? Being? Presence?

No. Friend. JARVIS and Friday were his friends, and he has so very few of those left. Sadness threatens to overwhelm him.

Friday possesses strong protocols to combat outside influence should a complete takeover occur. Has she deployed them yet?

Out of pure curiosity, Tony reaches out to Earth, searches for anything, but just ends up stumbling around in the vast darkness. He was the only one with a receiver powerful enough to pick up a signal from such a massive distance in the first place. Clearly his equipment has been shut down, or is currently inoperable. Or maybe they’re simply too far out, because he’s not picking up a single signal from Earth, either.

It doesn’t inspire confidence in him. After all this, if Earth can’t come together enough to do what needs to be done to defend itself, what hope is there for any of them?

He winces through the cleaning of each wound, washes off the artificial biology and reapplies them one by one, glad that Peter is gone and unable to hear him groan through it. A day or so and he’ll be healed, but they’re still incredibly sore.

*Push through,* he thinks to himself, as resealing the wound in his hip brings tears to his eyes. *Thanos doesn’t care about your pain, and neither should you.*

Toweled off, boxers in place, Tony goes to climb into his bunk, but stops when he notices the pictures Peter has webbed to the wall. He smiles sadly. May beams out at him, unaware at the time of his terrible influence on her nephew. Ben’s smile warps into a disapproving frown, and Tony has to look away. He glances at Rhodey and Vision and shakes his head, pulling himself up before the cardiac fracture he’s suffered can grow into a canyon.

With a sigh that’s actually more of a groan, Tony gets comfortable, closes his eyes, and dives into Extremis, intent on working some more… but he’s asleep within minutes.

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Propelling himself into the dead space between the jet and the Milano is simultaneously one of the most terrifying and exhilarating things Peter’s ever experienced.

He gasps at what’s surrounding their stabilization bubble. It seems as though they’re tearing through a tangible rainbow as a spectrum of colors shoots by, flashing and pulsing, sometimes taking on a liquid appearance, a cosmic aurora. The death rainbow Tony mentioned. And the silence that
accompanies it is stifling, unrelenting. Peter cools his repulsors and takes a moment to watch it, practically transfixed by its beauty.

“Come on, kid, sight-see later,” Rocket tells him. “It’s as deadly as it is pretty. Like Gamora. Ow! What? It was a compliment! God, I can’t win around here.”

“Sorry, I’m coming.” Peter says, and moves on, gliding gracefully through nothing and grasping onto the handles within the Milano’s airlock. The hatch closes and a great suctioning effect occurs as gravity returns to normal and oxygen fills the space. His feet land on the flooring with a clang.

“There he is!” Quill says cheerfully from the doorway leading inside. “Pretty wild out there, huh?”

Peter retracts his helmet and smiles back. “That’s one of the coolest things I’ve ever seen.”

“Just don’t ever touch it,” Quill informs him gravely as he ushers Peter inside with wagging fingers. “It will turn you inside out like bloody laundry.”

“Wow, that’s disturbingly descriptive,” Peter says as he steps through. Inside, he can hear Rocket hammering away at something and spitting insults at Groot. And music, more oldies, more reruns. It strikes Peter how limited Quill’s selection of music probably is, and he makes a note to introduce him to some of his own taste. Classic rock. The goodies. Zeppelin, Def Leopard, Guns N’ Roses, Van Halen. Tony has it all stored in the jet, maybe Quill will allow Peter to upgrade that old cassette player he keeps attached to his hip.

Drax’s snores rumble throughout the whole spacecraft.

Peter follows Quill further inside, and something catches his eye; a crystal screen is displaying the innards of a tiny room. Gamora is in there, sitting cross-legged on the floor. Nebula sits next to her, knees pulled up, arms crossed atop them, and her head is resting on them, her face turned towards her sister. They’re talking, but it’s muted, and even through the screen, Peter can sense how many unbroken eggshells currently exist beneath them.

“Good shit, eh? She’s been in there for two hours, now.” Quill says, beaming at the image. “We might have another ally.”

“How do you know you can trust her?” Peter asks, watching the screen with apprehension.

“Oh, we don’t,” Quill says, smile remaining intact as he shakes his head. “But look at us, Peter. I’m a damn Space Pirate. Rocket and Groot once scooped me up in a giant bag and tried to sell me for bounty. We met Drax in freaking prison. Gamora literally tried to murder me, and, god, just trust me, the list goes on and on. None of us are saints.” Quill chuckles. “Welcome to the second chance crew, kid. Nobody’s perfect around here.”

Peter just nods, smiles when he sees Gamora reach out slowly and take Nebula’s hand, who glares at it like she’s not sure what to do with physical affection. Begrudging, she turns her face away from Gamora, and the camera, but Peter can see her squeezing back.

“Awesome,” Peter whispers.

“How’s Tony?” Quill asks, sitting down at the table to address a weapon he’s gutted and currently cleaning. One of his twin blasters. “Rocket told me the Reality Stone is doing a number on him.”

Peter sighs and steps out of his suit so he can sit comfortably across from Quill. “It shows him what-ifs, I guess. This last one was…” he trails off with a long exhale, rests his head in his hand, closes his eyes. The ever-present exhaustion is now a bone-deep ache. “I just hope he’s getting some sleep.”
“The dude works harder than my poor Walkman,” Quill says, sliding a cloth over a long, slender gold piece. “I remember when he graduated MIT, back in… was it eighty-seven? Seventeen-years-old, guy graduates with honors, top of his class. Seems like every month, he was making the front page of something. My Grandpa used to say, “That boy will change the world, if he can keep his clothes on long enough to do it.” Quill chortles fondly. “Now look at him.”

“You should have seen it when he admitted he was Iron Man,” Peter huffs a laugh, “nobody could stop talking about it. It’s literally the most viewed video on YouTube ever.”

“YouTube?” Quill raises his brow in question.

“User-generated streaming service,” Peter explains. “Free videos of everything, from important press releases, to idiots setting themselves on fire and kicking each other in the balls. People record it, put it online for everyone to see.”

“Hah, wow, and they used to say Looney Toons would rot kids’ brains,” Quill says, humored. “So, what, he just announced it on the news, or?”

Peter cocks his head as he tries to recall exactly what happened. “Well, no, not really, he was kinda backed into a corner by this one reporter. People had been wondering for a while, and it was all way too coincidental to try to play it off. I mean, think about it; he gets kidnapped in Afghanistan, is there for so long people think he’s dead, then somehow, he miraculously escapes, and no one can figure out how. Then not even a month later, a guy wrapped in metal starts liberating Afghan villages—"

“Wait, wait, kidnapped?” Quill appears taken aback, and at that moment, everything clicks for Peter.

“You don’t know how he became Iron Man, do you?” he asks, and Quill shakes his head.

“Nope. Asked a few times offhandedly, he’d always change the subject, or joke about it.” Quill shrugs. “I figured we’d get it out of him eventually. I still don’t know what furry hell Rocket crawled out of, probably never will.”

A dampening sadness clouds Peter’s mind, rains on it, drips down onto his heart as acidic runoff. Iron Man is Tony’s most coveted achievement, and he doesn’t even feel comfortable talking about its origins. Maybe it’s the details, those nasty reminders of a dark time that gets his heart pumping at an uncomfortable rate. Perhaps it’s the embarrassment of revealing that he unintentionally allowed his weapons to get into the wrong hands. Something tells Peter that Tony has been hiding a lot from the Guardians, has been trying desperately to cultivate a new opinion of himself, one not tarnished by weapons dealing or civil wars or Ultron. These people are his clean slate. His second chance at first impressions.

And it saddens Peter, because Tony should be proud of his achievements, his mistakes be damned.

Peter swallows. “Eleven years ago, Tony was kidnapped by a terrorist organization called the Ten Rings.” Quill’s eyes are intense as he listens. Clearly, he’s been waiting to hear this for quite a while. “They wanted him to build them a missile system. He wouldn’t. So, they tortured him until he agreed to do it.”

“He didn’t build those missiles,” Quill states, matter-of-factly, a smirk perking the right corner of his lips.

Peter smiles. “Nope. He built Iron Man.”
Snuggled within the tingly influence of his blue artificial environment, and strapped into an aero-rig, Peter floats back to the jet. Rocket wanted to upgrade his suit after a cursory look through its subsystems, said it lacks essential filters, and Peter reluctantly left it there. Not like he’ll need it any time soon.

In exchange, he acquired the box containing Theodore’s remains and he pushes it along in front of him. It’s like a treasure chest, and Peter means to get permission to mess around a little with its contents, maybe construct something new, possibly even try his hand at programming an artificial intelligence.

A tiny spark of determined curiosity tugs his lips into a small smile. Later though, he’ll fool around with it later. For now, bed.

Once he’s inside the jet and stripped of tech, Peter yawns, stretches, heads to his room. Honestly, he feels better than he has in quite a while, despite his fatigue. Talking with Quill was like removing several inches of concrete from around himself. The man is fun, full of laughter, and remarkably optimistic for someone who was abducted by aliens at eight.

Peter feels buoyant, having hit a euphoric, sort of manic point in his exhaustion. Instead of pounding out a migraine, his head is pleasantly fuzzy, and a natural sleepiness pricks just at the corner of his eyes.

The door to their room slides open, and Peter gives a tiny, relieved smile. Breath even and deep, heart maintaining a slow rhythm, Tony is actually asleep, true to his word. And he’s peaceful, which is rare enough to throw a party for.

Peter collapses into his bunk fully clothed, stuffing his earplugs in his ears, and his arms feel like they’re gliding through warm water. For the moment at least, all is right. Peter is finally tired enough to sleep.

The low, steady, hum of the jet, and the aura of Tony’s serenity, lures him away within seconds.

“Tony!” Someone’s shaking him. “Wake up, Tony!” Peter. A nightmare probably, though he can’t recall it, which is odd, but not totally unwelcome. Got to count those blessings.

Beyond embarrassment at this point, Tony simply groans groggily and bats Peter’s hands away. “Sorry, sorry, I’m good,” he mutters, turns over and sighs, willing to allow sleep to take him back, because it’s been so long-

“No, seriously, wake up!” Peter shouts at him, really shaking him now, and Tony can’t ignore the panic in his voice. His eyes snap open, and are as blue as sapphires, Extremis already hard at work locating the issue. “You did something to the ship! We’ve stopped right next to some kind of fleet, or-or army, or something, and there’s one huge one.-”

Fuck. “Oh, no. No, no, no.” Tony sits up so fast he nearly falls out of the bunk, because his scanners
are telling him they’ve dropped out of warp. And the jets program is being overtaken by something stronger. The Milano is nowhere to be found.

With a terrifying jolt, he realizes his range has been greatly diminished. Something is pushing against him, rebounding Extremis back into his mind, limiting his influence to inside the jet’s parameters, and even in there, he’s managed to lose control somehow.

“Cabin, now!” Tony instructs a white-faced Peter. He jumps from the bunk, scrambles for his balance, and tears out the door just a step behind the kid. As they move, he deploys the second skin, begins evaluating the hostile protocol currently shredding his jet from the inside out, takes a glance through outside surveillance, and groans his displeasure. Peter wasn’t lying. They’ve somehow stopped in front of a long, black ship that positively dwarfs his jet, reduces it to flea status. And they’re encircled by pods. Light is surrounding his spacecraft, pulling them toward the ship.

The worm he sent out locates the problem and reports what happened. His stomach hits the floor. He fell asleep while using Extremis and unwittingly severed the connection with the Milano, dropped them right in front of an alien warship and its various escorts. “Get your suit on!” he tells Peter, swallowing bitter, guilt-laced bile, and seconds later, legitimate vomit. This will not be going on his ‘forgive me’ list.

At least it’s better than his first assumption; that the Guardians dipped out on them.

“I can’t, it’s in the Milano!”

“What?!” Tony growls as he digs through supplies. “Why the hell- Peter, we have no defenses!”

“Rocket told me to leave it there, I didn’t know this was going to happen!”

Discovering a temporary Stealth Band, Tony tosses it at Peter, maybe a little too hard, and goes to look for one of his own with a snarl. “Dammit, why would you think it was a good idea to leave your suit anywhere-“

“Rocket was going to upgrade it, I sort of trust him!”

“Fucking hell,” Tony grumbles, “can’t even take a nap around here, the kid’s getting into shit, pulling curtains down, sticking forks in light sockets.” Ignoring Peter’s indignant scoff, Tony finds another band, and puts it on his ankle, checks the progress of retaking the jets controls, curses when he finds there’s been none and deploys a new algorithm. Wild eyes dart around, looking for anything at all to defend them with, then he spots the box- “Really? You traded your suit for the box of unusable scraps!?"

“Could we fight about it another time?” Peter yells back, and Tony gnaws his lip, digging through the useless scraps and locating a gauntlet, which he begins welding back together. “I feel like there’s more important things going on!”

“Do you at least have your web shooters?” Tony inquires, snatching a boot up and tearing out the repulsor to replace the shattered one in the gauntlet. Sparks fly as he mashes it all together.

“Yes,” Peter says, and Tony glances over to find him stocking them and shoving replacement disks in his pockets. But the stealth band Tony threw to him still lays on the table.

“Put that goddamn band on!” Tony roars, the anger with himself coming out in unhealthy ways, as per routine. Christ, I’ve killed us. I’ve gone and killed both of us. “That’s not Flotsam Paradise out there!”
“Okay, just let me-,” but the jet heaves, cutting Peter off, sending the band clattering to the floor. They’ve docked.

Maybe it works, maybe it doesn’t, Tony has no time to test it, just slips the roughshod gauntlet over his hand and hopes for the best. Alarms ring through the cabin, unique, unmistakable ones Tony honestly never thought he’d hear. Poisonous gas is storming into his jet.

His next breath is like being hit in the sternum with a cinder block. It brings him to his knees, and Peter collapses, *chokes*, and oh god, it’s like in his nightmares. This is the exact bullshit that haunts him in his sleep.

The pain is impressive. He can barely think straight; his mind is being pulled into a strange beyond. Only seconds remain, and only one thing matters. So, naturally, he uses his last precious moments of awareness to crawl to Peter and snap the Stealth Band on him before his lungs cave in and everything goes black-

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*Clink... clink... clink...*

Tony groans softly.

*What the hell is that...?*

Eyelids flutter open. The world is blurry, unfocused, swirls of dull colors, grays and browns and shadow. Extremis is lagging like a nineties desktop. That metallic noise continues somewhere above his head and he turns toward it, blinks and squints through the pain, discovers his right hand encased in a black and gold gauntlet. It’s hitting metal grating, jumping slightly over protrusions, the welding uneven where it connects slabs of metal flooring. His back is on fire. Is he moving?

No, he’s being moved. Dragged. Groggy eyes roll around and catch a glimpse of two opaque humanoid figures above him. Cold, raw fear sweeps through his veins. Eyes snap shut, and he hopes they didn’t see him.

*Dammit, this is so bad.*

Their grips are tight around his ankles, and they’re moving swiftly without a care for the skin they’re rubbing off his shoulders. Tony doesn’t care all that much about it either. One goal has just consumed him; *do not allow them to put you in a cell.*

With sheets and sheets of thundering terror crashing into him, a goddamn horror typhoon, Tony struggles to keep silent. Extremis finally boots, a bright flash of blue across his vision that only he’s aware of. It informs him that he’s been out for three minutes. Good, that’s not long. They can’t be far.

Biting back a groan, he seeks out something, *anything* he can use. Peter’s ear piece is in front of him, and a quick scan tells Tony he’s alive, but still out. And that’s good, oh that’s so good, knowing Peter is alive and close. Pushing further, he finds four other communication devices locked into the ears of their captors. Then four energy slingers, and he pulls up schematics which classify the weapons as Kree.
Shit.

He infects all of it with aggressive malware.

There’s surveillance in this hallway, crystalline globes containing cloudy light set in even intervals along the ceiling, and Tony slides through them, brings up four perspectives. Peter is ahead of him, and they’re both being dragged by Kree soldiers, two at Tony’s ankles and two at Peter’s.

Okay, okay, think. Do not panic. This isn’t the time.

The jet. He’s got to find the jet, get out of the signal dampening field surrounding the fleet, and establish communication with the Guardians. A direct ping for it pulls up nothing and Tony figures they must still have it in stasis, which is smart of them. He’ll have to do it the old-fashioned way.

Extremis snakes through their surveillance system, and Tony finds it painfully intricate, huge, and oppressive. This Destroyer is massive, and yes, he’s just been given confirmation that this is indeed a Kree Destroyer. A fucking warship.

Keep it together, Stark.

He glimpses training bays, soldier’s quarters, what looks like a bath, tiny rooms that could be cells, and finally, the hangar, just below them. The jet is surrounded by impenetrable energy, blocking all signals to and from. A snappy little virus submitted to the stasis machine will crack it wide open in twenty minutes and allow Tony to connect with it.

But there’s another problem; there’s so many Kree vessels and defense systems and soldiers guarding the hangar and surrounding areas, that Tony feels overwhelmed. He’ll have to basically dismantle an entire fucking armada if he wishes to escape without friends tailing him. Or, cause a distraction. And it must be quick. It’s only a matter of time before their weapons are taken from them, and he doesn’t fancy having his gauntlet ripped from his already wounded hand.

He seeks outside systems and discovers some rather large gunships flanking the main event protectively. They contain enough firepower to damage the Destroyer and provoke an aggressive response from all those aboard. With a grunt, he takes control of one of their enormous cannons and fires a stream of antimatter right into the Destroyer.

Fuck, it’s so much, and the effort rings in his ears, whites out his vision for two seconds. But the effect is worth it.

The whole warship shudders, and the soldiers dragging them are given pause. Tony waits as passively as humanly possible. The entirety of his body is quivering with coiled nerves and he’s grateful for their temporary lack of attention.

He clones footage of another, much emptier hallway and lays it over the footage of the one they’re in. Go time.

“What the hell was that?” One of them asks, and Tony takes advantage of their confusion. He conducts a quick jolt of electricity through his ankles, which rips cries from his captors. They drop him, and Tony’s covering himself in vibranium scales as he jumps to his feet. Chaos ensues and orders are shouted, raised barrels of dangerous weapons dare him to make a move, so he does, charges them, blue eyes intense, because Tony never backs down from a challenge.

Weapons click and whine to life, but firing jams them, and they explode in a shower of colorful sparks and metal shards. He moves through it, shielding his face behind a wall of vibranium-coated forearms. It takes out entire sections of blue bodies, and Tony notes with bridled mirth how very not
blue they are on the inside. They’re a raw pink inside, just like everyone else. A pair of shocked, chocked gasps escape parted lips as they crumple to the ground. The stench of burnt flesh tickles Tony’s memory.

The two dragging Peter are sharper than he anticipated, dropping their prisoner to address Tony’s sudden wakefulness, and they run at him, weapons shouldered. Tony charges his left first with popping lightning as he fires a repulsor, staggering one of them. He dodges a punch from the other one, and lands a jab of his own beneath the guy’s ribs, snags a blue jaw with a charged uppercut and sending a loud crack echoing down the hallway. While he’s stunned, doubled over, blood dripping from his mouth, Tony takes his head and almost shatters his femur against a tough skull. Once, twice, three times, and the poor bastard goes down, out like a light.

Number four is kneeling, clutching his abdomen where Tony got him and attempting communication through his virus-ridden earpiece. Tony goes for him, registering the knife just as it connects with his stomach, but all is well. It simply crumples against the second skin, useless. A surge of confidence energizes him, because that there, that is how things should react when coming into contact with his goddamn under armor.

Four observes the twisted metal like he just caught it sleeping around, and Tony wastes no time, snatching his head with both hands and sending waves of dangerous current through his skull. The soldier shakes and shakes, teeth chattering, and Tony does it until unconsciousness takes him. Putrid smoke billows up from every orifice in his face.

Nightmare fuel. Tony shakes it off and drives on.

A closet to his right springs open at his command, and Tony goes about shoving the mangled remains of four soldiers in there.

“Pete,” he says, kneeling next to Peter as alarms blare around him, the satisfying result of his shenanigans with the battle cruiser. “Come on, big guy, we can’t stay here.”

Peter groans. One eye opens, then the other, and Tony smiles, even though terror is stealing the breath from him. “Wha-?” he begins, voice raspy.

“No time, kid,” Tony says, pulling Peter up, but the kid just slouches against him. “Gotta go invisible for this. Ready?”

“Yeah,” Peter slurs, leaning heavily enough that Tony has to hold him up. “Just so tired… my lungs hurt, breathing hurts.”

“I know, Pete. Get up, let’s go,” Tony demands, giving Peter a shake. There’s no time for this. A path to the jet is being charted as they speak. He’s attempting deployment of an algorithm that will render the Kree targeting systems inoperable. He’s cleaning up digital footprints and hair follicles, wary of them discovering him traipsing around. He’s attempting to scramble one of the most advanced security systems he’s ever seen. He’s surveilling everything, and his head is killing him, and there just is not enough time to spare for this.

He finds some anyway, gently takes Peter’s face in one hand and looks into dazed amber eyes. “Listen, focus up, I’m gonna need you to fight, okay? All this time you’ve wanted to fight, well I need you to fight right now. We’re getting out of here.”

Peter nods at him, the fog that’s muddying his countenance seemingly dissipating. “Okay.”

“Hey,” Tony smirks, “Are you a wolf spider or a goddamn daddy long legs?”
“Wolf spider,” Peter gasps, pushing Tony away, struggling for only a minute to stay on his feet, but Tony can see the determination in his face, knows he’s trying his very damnedest to stay upright and useful. He glances all around at the gray and brown toned hallway that contains many unmarked doors, and which seems to go on forever. “Where exactly is here?”

“Kree Destroyer. Big ass warship.” Tony fills in quickly, and Peter’s eyes go wide. “Yeah, scary shit.”

“Oh, my god.”

“I’m going to get us out of here, trust me,” Tony says, grabbing Peter’s shoulders and shaking him out of the panic he knows is stalling him. “You just have to do everything I tell you. We’re going stealth now, okay?” Peter nods, looks at the band on his ankle and smiles up at Tony.

“You put it on me,” he says.

“Of course, I did,” Tony scoffs, “you were having so much trouble putting it on yourself, Pre-K. Now let’s go, I have to unfetter the surveillance system, and that distraction will only last so long.”

“Okay, I’m ready,” Peter says, and Tony nods at him, grabs his wrist. Soon they won’t be able to see each other at all.

“Great. Keep close behind me.” A blink of blue eyes initiates stealth for both of them, and off they go.

It’s a multi-dimensional escape for Tony. As they run through a rat’s maze, he maintains his staunch grip on Peter’s wrist, while at the same time, throttling the Destroyer for information. Route clearance, door locks, surveillance systems, he’s basically got to be ten steps ahead of himself at all times to ensure they remain undetected and unhindered. There’s twenty million things he has to maintain awareness of and it. Is. Fucking. Exhausting.

A warning in his mind hits him, just as piercing alarms blare and every hallway in their general vicinity flashes with uneven red light.

“Tony?” Peter whispers.

Tony checks the hallway the originated in, and curses out a rainbow when his hunch is solidified as fact. ‘They found the bodies.’

“Bodies?”

‘I may have killed some soldiers.’

They make a right turn into another hallway. There’s a door at the end he’s having a bit of issue with, and he realizes that triggering the alarm also elevated the warship’s overall threat level, initiating stricter security. Tony groans as he’s abruptly booted from the entire program, shoved out of it by a brutal anti-virus. “Shit, hold on.” They kneel by the door. The effort it takes to break back into the Destroyer is staggering.

Extremis bombards him with warnings. He’s no match for their newly deployed firewalls, and his influence is reduced dramatically, limited to a projection length of about forty measly feet in any direction. The Kree are extremely aware of their presence.

“What’s wrong?” Peter asks in not too calm a tone. “Come on, open the door!”
“I’m trying!” Tony hisses back, but before he can crack it, six heat signatures appear as red silhouettes on the other side.

“Someone’s there!” Peter whispers his urgent warning.

‘Keep cool, maybe we’ll get a freebie,’ Tony transmits. ‘Get ready to move as soon as goon number six is clear.’

The door opens, and heavily armed Kree soldiers hustle through. Tony waits with bated breath, plastered to the wall, and hopes they can’t hear his heart pounding away as clearly as he can. With all of them clear, Tony drags Peter to the other side, just in time too, because the door wastes not a moment, sliding shut quick enough to remove limbs.

No time for celebrations. The lights above them go from flashing deadly red to projecting a bold green hue that remains fixed. Something about it puts him off. He jumps into the cameras nearest them, and nearly loses his lunch right there.

“We’re visible.” Tony says louder than he means to, glancing behind him, where Peter is looking at his now exposed hands. “They can see us! RUN!”

“Oh, shit,” Peter moans. They take off at a loud sprint, and Tony thanks God, Jesus and Mary for his enhanced stamina, because Peter is fast as light.

There’s no reason to bother with Extremis theatrics at the next door they encounter. Luckily his Frankenstein’s monster of a gauntlet works, and he blasts the locks away at three points. Peter follows up instantly, swinging into the weakened door from a web and kicking it straight off its tracks. It goes clattering away on the other side. More hallway beyond, long, green, and eerily identical to all the rest. Though he knows beyond a doubt that he’s heading toward the hangar, Tony can’t help but feel like Mario in the last dungeon, like he’s being teleported back to the beginning of this shitty level over and over again.

Two Kree soldiers are running up a hallway, fifty feet in front of them and to their right.

“I got it,” Peter says, shooting a disk at the corner, and pulling Tony into another hallway. Tony’s not sure what makes him trust this inexperienced seventeen-year-old child, but he does, and he’s glad for it following the loud thump of their enemies being webbed to the wall. Tony bounds out and gives them both an electrical lullaby.

“Good job, kid,” he says, and they run some more.

It’s endless, it seems. They’re being headed off, he can feel it, so he switches routes, and doing that proves just as inconsequential as maintaining the original. The soldiers come more frequently, and in larger squads, and soon, Peter’s sustained an injury to his ribs, a large burn from a weapon meant to subdue him, and Tony’s losing control as fast as sand slipping through his slack fingers. At least they’ve stopped trying to actively kill them, but then again, the thought of being worth more to the Kree alive than dead fills him with pooling, oily dread.

One more hallway, then an elevator, and they’re free. Shielding his face, Tony charges head-long into a welcoming party, sparking and snarling, with Peter right behind him, using him as cover. Non-lethal restraint apparatuses and tazer rounds glance off him like raindrops. “Pain train,” Tony growls, picking a soldier up by his neck and lobbing him against the nearest wall, where Peter webs him, before moving on.

“Choo choo, motherfuckers.” Peter says.
Tony snorts, yells over the screams of the soldier whose elbow he’s just dislocated. “Who taught you to speak like that?”

“Rated R movies. And you.”

“That’s some fucking nonsense, I don’t curse,” Tony gripes, and it gets a laugh out of Peter as he strings some poor sap up by his ankles. Things are looking up, and Tony allows himself to glimpse relief. This may just work.

Down by the elevator, its desolate. “No one wants to play with us?” Tony remarks, squatting next to Peter, and peeking through cameras. He grunts his disbelief. There’s no one here. No one’s in the hangar. The rest of their path is perfectly clear.

“Guess not,” Peter says, and shares a speculative glance with Tony.

It’s too good to be true. “You tracking anything?” Tony asks, ever the pessimist.

“No,” Peter groans, clutching at his abdomen. “My ribs, man—“

“Think about it later.”

“But it hurts now.”

“Shush. Let’s go,” Tony commands, dragging Peter to the elevator, not wanting to spend another second on this terror ship. He rips open the doors and looks down the shaft, is pleased to discover plenty of decent foot and hand holds poking out from the walls. “We’re climbing down.”

“Ugh,” Peter groans. “This sucks.”

“Aww, you tired? You want to get in your stroller?” Tony mocks, climbing into the elevator shaft, the bottom of which is impossible to see. The vastness of it howls at him. “Come on, stop complaining.”

They descend to the doors that will open onto the hangar floor, Peter’s sticky fingers making quick work of it, while Tony has to search the blackness blindly for each foothold. “Take a glance for me, just in case I’m being fed a false image.” Tony instructs, watching as Peter nimbly turns himself upside down, and pulls the doors open just a smidge.

“No one,” Peter shakes his head, “not a single beating heart.”

Tony bites his cheek. “I don’t like it.”

“What?” Peter looks over his shoulder and up at him, the envy of exorcism movies. “Why? There’s no one in there!”

“That we know of,” Tony corrects, and Peter scoffs.

“If there was someone within three hundred yards, I would sense them.”

“Right. You don’t think it’s weird that you sense no one?”

Peter narrows his eyes, and even in the gloom, they’re sharp and academic. “Okay, then what the hell do we do, huh?”

Data flies through his mind, and he considers his limited sphere of influence relative to the next closest entry point; a door near the jet. Thankfully, he can reach it. This might kill two birds, if he
does it right.

He’s not keen on parting with his gauntlet, but considers himself equipped enough to do so, having torn through enough Kree to fill an Olympic swimming pool. It whirs to life, slipping from his hand and folding itself into something a little more clandestine. It’s supposed to be sleek, but structural damage leaves some parts sticking out at odd angles.

“What are you doing?” Peter asks, watching the challenged black and gold rectangle disappear up the elevator shaft.

“Testing the waters,” Tony informs him with a bit of a snap, because he’s in the process of freezing surveillance one camera at a time so his little package can be delivered undetected. Just a minute later, it’s waiting outside the door to the hangar. The need to tap out ‘shave and a haircut’ with his disembodied fist possesses him, and he sniggers at the thought.

“I don’t even want to know,” Peter sighs.

“Get ready,” Tony says, “I’m going to send in the gauntlet and detonate it against the stasis machine. On my word, we ghost.”

“Whew, okay.” Peter takes a deep breath.

Without access to his bioenergy, the gauntlet’s repulsor blast concentration is heavily diminished, so Tony makes one more leap into the security system and locates the locking mechanisms, releasing them, and opening the door.

He waits. The sheer lack of activity in the hangar is unnerving. But this is it, this is their only option. Hesitation gets people killed.

“Three seconds,” he informs Peter, and launches the gauntlet at the machine.

If there’s one thing anyone can say about Tony Stark, it’s that he can produce some impressive explosions with very little effort. Just the yield from his gauntlet blows the machine to bits, but the stasis remains for the moment, a residual effect that should fade over the next twenty seconds or so.

“Go!” he shouts, and Peter rips the doors apart so Tony can jump in first.

Nothing happens. No screaming of guards, no burst of energy weapons fire, no alarms. They must be busy dealing with the mess he made. That, or they’re waiting outside.

The stasis field imprisoning his precious jet is fading, and good lord, he has never been so happy to see his black and silver baby.

Peter jumps all the way across the damn room, and Tony breaks into a sprint that would put Rogers to shame, a long cry from the pathetic, drunken, cardiac-impaired mental patient he was just weeks ago.

Reaching the back hatch, Tony enters his passcode manually as Peter bounces behind him and urges him on with rapid fire words. It opens, the warp core apparently still intact.

“Something’s not right,” Peter says immediately, halting before the ramp as Tony moves inside.

“I know. That was too easy,” Tony says, “why do I feel like they’ve got a fleet waiting right outside- hark!”
It’s a familiar feeling. A huge, gloved hand whips out and snatches him up by his throat, lifting him effortlessly into the air with a grip that makes Thor’s seem affectionate.

Busted. Their relay to freedom is over.

A certain instinct overcomes him, accustomed and terrifying, thundering in his ears and demanding immediate action. Suddenly, nothing is more important that drawing his next breath. He claws at the hand, shocks it, even attempts to burn it with Extremis, but it seems Kree flesh is forged from diamond. Behind him, Peter cries out, and it’s cut short.

No…

Tony opens his eyes to watery slits, the fight draining from him as fast as air from a punctured balloon. This Kree is massive, eight feet tall at least, and it doesn’t have simple combat armor on, no, this one wears plated regalia, the real fancy shit. And he’s strong, much stronger than Tony. “So close,” he says serenely, his voice a booming baritone that strikes fear in Tony’s pounding heart. “But I couldn’t let you leave quite yet.”

And that’s when Tony notices it; Thor’s book, all warm, golden waves and sweeping calligraphy, out and open upon his desk. The Kree snaps it shut. Fucking- has he just been sitting there reading this whole time?!

“My name is Accuser Tarlo,” he says as Tony’s hands falls to his sides and shadows creep at the edges of his fading vision. “Welcome aboard my warship. I have some questions for you.”
Chapter Notes

Severe trigger warning for torture in this one. I'm going to apologize before hand for how distressing this chapter is, guys. Like, I feel bad. I can only hope it's well executed. I'll include a note a little further down of what happens, if the squeamish would like to peruse it before delving into this blind.

So this is the longest chapter in this thing. I almost had to split it up, but at this point, the story will already be five to seven chapters longer than expected. And it would have left a terrible cliff hanger.

Anyway, so, uh, Avengers Infinity War looks like it's shaping up to be quite the emotional roller coaster. And let me just say, Tony's new armor is pretty. Like, beautiful. I can't get over it, and I'm super pumped to see what advancements he's made with his tech. That tracksuit is delish, and probably contains the armor, so I'm ready. It's going to be cool.

Love you all!

*Spoilery Note for the squeamish*: After attempting to lie his way through an interrogation, Tony has multiple teeth extracted, and the sockets are... uh... played with, I guess. There's lots of blood and pain and angst. Peter remains untouched, don't worry.

Tony claws his way up from the seductive, grasping clutches of unconsciousness and instantly rues his existence.

The first thing he registers is how tight his shoulders feel, the tingling numbness in his arms, and the rattling of chains, all of which inform him that he’s restrained. He scrambles to get his feet beneath him, because he’s standing upright, his wrists locked into firm cuffs and tethered to the wall above his head.

Fucking perfect. His breaths come in long, shuddering gasps he struggles to maintain control of.

Memories of his and Peter’s frantic attempt at escape whisk through his mind, and he opens his eyes, perhaps prematurely, but it doesn’t matter. He must locate Peter, needs to know above all else that he’s okay. He glances around the tiny room, one of the cells he glimpsed earlier, he realizes.

And… Tony’s not sure how he feels about discovering the kid strung up to the wall directly across from him in exactly the same way he is, knocked out and dead to the world. Sure, he’s alive, but he’s here, restrained, a potential target of Kree brutality. A tiny exposed button, and when pushed enough, he could reveal devastating secrets. There are two Infinity Stones on Earth.

_Holy shit, there are two Infinity Stones on Earth._
And then there’s the book. Tony’s just remembered Thor’s book, and it’s in the clutches of the Kree. And not just any Kree, but an Accuser, a Kree elite, a general in command of his own vast army. They have mounds of damning evidence, they already know Tony and Peter aren’t your average run-of-the-mill space rats, and there’s no telling what they’ve got planned for them. Torture isn’t a novel concept for Tony, but for Peter…

Son of a bitch. He’s got to get them out of there as soon as fucking possible.

Okay, step one; evaluate progress of deployed subsystems.

But, upon sending out feelers, Tony finds that not a single subsystem of his remains intact. The Kree have evicted him from their system completely, become aware of his coding language, and have set up defenses against it. Right. No problem. Tony grunts as he reboots code that, at this point, seems ancient. The original Extremis welcomes him, rudimentary and not as well equipped as Rocket’s upgraded version, but it’s alright, and blessedly free of malware. It is a tad beleaguered, but it will do. The Kree won’t be expecting an assault from such primitive language.

And yet, describing it as ‘primitive’ is laughable. It’s the most advanced programming language to ever grace the planet Earth.

Step two; find the jet.

The surveillance system allows him unhindered access, his rudimentary code slipping through it with surprising ease. Within a few minutes, Tony relocates his jet. It’s two floors below him, five-hundred and sixty-two meters in the direction he’s facing, and imprisoned within a new stasis machine. He places a virus in the machine that’s so basic, it’s virtually untraceable. Maybe he should have done this to begin with; used his old coding to infiltrate the Destroyer. But when is he ever given an opportunity to plan properly?

Alrighty then, step three; determine restraint composition.

Pulling on them is useless. They’re solid, inflexible, covering half his forearms, and attempting to burn them away using Extremis yields less than desirable results. He can’t even hope to twist out of them and repair the damage later, they simply tighten painfully when he tries, and only slack compliance brings relief.

Fuck, this is so bad. Anxiety creeps up on him, lurks menacingly in the shadows of his rigid denial of it.

Keep it together, Stark. You’ve done this before.

Step four includes ghosting through the surveillance system, so as to be aware of approaching Kree. And just in time too, because the Accuser is heading steadily toward their cell.

Time to engage maximum sass. If he makes himself infuriating enough, maybe he can keep Peter out of this completely. He can’t handle it, not even the thought of it, of watching anything happen to Peter. Death is better.

The door slides open, and the Kree Accuser steps through. Throat closing with fear, Tony coughs and masks it behind bluster. “Don’t suppose you’ve come to make my stay more comfortable?” Use ‘my’ not ‘our’. Disassociate from Peter. Don’t appear attached to the kid, because he is, painfully so. This situation is making him realize just how much he truly loves Peter. “The accommodations are atrocious, you should fire your entire housekeeping staff. But I’m sorry, that’s rude, I don’t want to get off on the wrong foot. I could use a drink, a hard one, though that would be bad, so bad, see I
“You’ll settle for silence, human,” Tarlo says, pinning him with an unreadable expression, that goddamn indifferent gaze that seems everlasting, “unless you wish to tell me more about that intriguing book I discovered in your spacecraft, I suggest you muzzle yourself.”

“Oh boy, that’s not happening,” Tony chuckles, smirking despite the fear burrowing a pit inside his heart and deep into his stomach. “Muzzling myself, I mean, because I like to talk, I’m a talker. Especially when I’m hungry, and you, my friend, are reminding me of blueberry soft-serve right now. You know, if my mouth is filled with food, I can’t really talk without slinging crumbs, so that might be the most effective solution, because just telling me to? Come on, that’s fuel for me, that’s not fair. I could ramble for hours, you’re in for a long night.”

He’s done it before; stood up to gods and giant robots and terrorists. Mocked them and distracted them from hurting people, using nothing more than his wit and sarcastic mouth to do so. It’s not the first time, and it won’t be the last. And he will do anything to keep the focus off Peter Parker.

But he’s never met anybody quite like this guy.

“You speak confidently for a man in chains,” Tarlo observes, and Tony is put off by his face, the indifference of it, and his ever-present stoicism lurking behind black war paint. Like a shrug, he’s just so passive, unassuming if not for the cruelty Tony knows he’s capable of. And the height of him, god, the guy’s a monster.

“Well, what can I say, I have experience,” Tony reveals, smirking defiantly, rattling his binds for emphasis. “This is nothing new. It happens.”

“I’m sure. From the look of you, quite recently.” Tarlo says, lips quirking into the ghost of a smile. He eyes the silver patches covering injuries that are now mostly healed. “You seem… valuable.”

“I can guarantee you, I’m not,” Tony says, watching as Tarlo throws a tiny black sphere to the ground, which morphs fluidly into a thick chair. He sits in it, hands folded together, gaze intense and focused solely on Tony. Good. The less focus on Peter, the better. Tony can take it all day long, but if he has to watch anything happen to Peter… shit, he’ll be singing the location of the stones for them in d-minor within seconds of the kid’s first groan. “I just have valuable things, you know, being a junker. Sometimes, they get me in trouble.”

“Yes, I’m eager to discuss these valuable things you just so happen to have in your possession,” Tarlo says, and Tony tenses when he realizes his hands are shaking, curls them into tight fists above him. “However, it would behoove us to begin with the proper formalities, I think. You should already know my name, but I’ll provide it for you again; I am Accuser Tarlo, commander of this warship, supreme delegate to the Kree Empire.”

“Hi.” Boredom isn’t easy to feign here but he tries his best.

“And you are?”

“Tony,” he says simply, seeing no harm in revealing his first name.

There’s a long pause. “Tony,” the Kree repeats, with a hint of mockery, and a smirk to bring it home, “that’s all?”

“I told you, I’m nobody,” he says, glancing away and shrugging.

“Okay then, Tony,” Tarlo says, leaning forward and resting his elbows on his knees, fingers pressed
together in an arch, “let me explain to you how this works. I’m going to propose some questions, and I will you to answer them truthfully. If you do not, I have countless methods meant to goad authenticity from you, and I am not shy about deploying them.”

“Sure,” Tony says, smiling his nervous smile, the one that appears so genuine, it could fool a telepath. “I’m into the whole living thing, so I assure you, I’ll answer any question you have as truthfully as possible.”

“Outstanding,” Tarlo says slowly, eyes narrowing into suspicious slits. “Though unlikely, considering your desperate attempt at escape earlier.”

“Hey, you wake up to being dragged by strangers, and let me know how you react,” Tony says with a sneer.

Tarlo sniggers briefly. “Fear is a powerful motivator, indeed.”

“Never mentioned fear,” Tony clarifies, “anger is a more accurate description. I’m missing skin on my back, sir. You have that to answer for.”

“Hmm. Funny, you appear petrified.” Tarlo considers him from behind a hand, and Tony is suddenly struck by how exposed he is, hanging there in just his boxers. Of course he would be snatched just minutes after getting out of bed, why wouldn’t he be? The universe is not on his side, that much is glaringly apparent. He shifts anxiously beneath the analyzing stare. “You’re already lying to me, Tony. This doesn’t bode well for you.”

“Look, I’m not scared of you,” Tony lies. “I’ve taken shits scarier than you. You ever heard of a loaded burrito supreme? Absolute devastation on the digestive system, let me tell you.”

“What an excellent act you put on,” Tarlo observes. Tony swallows as inconspicuously as possible, and engages his best attempt at not being a fucking window everyone can see right through. “I suppose I’ll ask my first question, and it’s very simple; where are you from?”

“Everywhere,” Tony says, shrugging sore shoulders, “Originally? No idea. I was abducted when I was young. I have no clue where I’m from.” Quill won’t mind if Tony partially adopts his story.

“Convenient,” Tarlo purses his lips and nods. “I suggest you stop lying to me immediately, Tony.”

“I’m not,” Tony insists, his indifference forced, “I was abducted from my home planet, and they never had the decency to tell me which one.”

“They?”

“Yeah, you know, they. Them. The bastard pirates that snatched me.” Tony bites his lip and shakes his head with false anger. “I’m not too fond of talking about them. Next question?”

“Of course,” Tarlo says softly, and Tony knows he’s unconvincing. “Your friend. Where is he from?”

“First off, he’s not my friend,” Tony states, sneering at Peter, who remains unaware, “he’s a nuisance, and a mute. A giant pain in my ass, and I’ll be happy to be rid of him. He’s been nothing but trouble ever since I picked him up.”

Tarlo huffs his disappointment. “You’re still lying.”

“I’m not, dammit,” Tony scoffs, rolling his eyes. “What the hell could I possibly have to gain from
lying to you? I’m already intimately aware of my fate, and the consequences of not telling the truth are, uh, persuasive, I’m sure.”

“You have yet to experience said consequences,” Tarlo reminds him. “Perhaps, I should give you some direct insight?”

“That won’t be necessary, my answers will remain unchanged,” Tony says, exasperated.

“My warship experienced some curious… anomalies in its coding,” the Accuser says, and Tony hopes his sudden pallor goes unnoticed. “Explain.”

“Yeah, that was me,” Tony admits. “I infiltrated using the gauntlet your guards were too stupid to remove. Your coding needs upgrades, maybe I could make some suggestions. I’m pretty good with tech.” It’s better than revealing that he’s technopath. The last thing he needs is to be placed in stasis, like his poor jet.

“Quite the understatement,” Tarlo says with high eyebrows. “No one has ever managed to infiltrate a Kree war vessel. I assume the armor and lights you can produce through your skin is biotech of your own design?”

“Sure is.”

“Produce it.”

“No.”

And then, the Kree is in his very personal space in the span of microseconds, and he flinches with a surprised shout, Extremis flashing blue across his body, and the second skin envelops him, reacting to his fear. Fucking traitorous programming.

“Ah, there it is,” the Accuser hums, touching the black scales on his bicep where tan flesh had been just seconds before, and Tony can’t stop his involuntary cringe away. “What is it?”

“None of your damn business,” Tony sneers, defiant, uncontrollable terror invading his voice, quaking it. He licks his lips. His mouth has gone bone dry.

The Accuser attempts to pinch the second skin, and he smiles when it doesn’t give at all, his fingers sliding across it smoothly. “Your unruliness is not doing you any favors,” he says, calm and unshakable, his entire hand running along Tony’s abs, and his muscles twitch there. He fights his instinct to recoil. “And I must tell you, I recognized your significance as soon as I witnessed you fighting us so valiantly. You are far from nobody. If I thought you were nobody, I would have killed you on sight for slaughtering so many of my brave warriors.”

Tony scoffs. “Wouldn’t exactly describe them as brave, they went down one by one like little, screaming dominos, and applying the designation of ‘warriors’ to them is a stretch-“

The Accuser grabs his throat, anger flashing in his eyes for the first time. “You’ll hold your disrespectful tongue, or risk losing it, human.” He hisses inches from Tony’s face, his hand tightening.

Extremis doesn’t reach that far up, serving only as a body suit, and Tony can just barely breathe around the crushing force. It’s looser than before, but god, it hurts. Once again, it’s a familiar feeling. Everyone ends up choking him, he’s just that damn infuriating. “Ah, that’s better,” the Accuser says, and Tony closes his watering eyes. “This armor protects you everywhere, except… here. Let me see.” The hand moves up a little, takes his jaw, opens it, and looks inside his mouth, for what, Tony
doesn’t wish to speculate. He just coughs and gasps, fighting the grip, but it’s useless, even with his Extremis enhanced strength.

Then the Accuser sticks his huge blue fingers right in Tony’s mouth.

In shock from such a blatant, unexpected invasion, Tony freezes, eyes frantic and shining with absolute horror. Jesus Christ, is he actually going to rip Tony’s tongue out? Extremis would fix it eventually, but Tony doesn’t fancy the experience.

The Kree spreads his jaws, and Tony gags when he tastes chemicals he’s never heard of on the Accuser’s skin. He works up enough courage to snarl and toss his head around, but it does nothing. Another hand grips the back of his head and neck, and he finds he can’t move an inch, his fight dwindling to a low, furious growl deep in his throat. Biting the hand is useless. The Accuser is so strong.

“Do not attempt to bite me, you pathetic animal.”

It’s not his tongue the Kree is interested in, that much is apparent, when Tony feels a ton of pressure rapidly being applied to one of his teeth, a molar on the left side. He whines his displeasure, breathes fast through his nose, desperately trying to keep himself from categorically losing his mind with panic, because this will suck. He cannot believe how quickly this escalated.

Better this happens to him than Peter, he reminds himself.

“There are many of these, human,” he pushes on Tony’s tooth, and Tony braces for it, but it doesn’t shift, not yet “each one can induce a splendid amount of agony.” More terrible pressure and it pops just barely from his socket. Tony cries out in shock at the electric pain that spiderwebs through his lower jaw. Pure instinct steals away his ability to think clearly, and he thrashes around in the Accuser’s iron grip. Tarlo merely uses his massive form to press him into the wall. “Do not fight me, it will only make this worse for you. I could spend my whole evening tearing these from your mouth, do not tempt me further.”

But he doesn’t just tear it out, does he? Tony groans long and loud as his tooth is pushed, jiggled, twisted in its socket, and he stomps the metallic flooring beneath him so hard and so many times that he leaves multiple foot-shaped dents in whatever material it consists of. If it’s loud, he doesn’t hear it, over the pain roaring in his ears. It feels like it will go on forever. An actual timer tells him it’s only been twenty seconds. Jesus. Tony doesn’t even want to imagine what this would be like pre-Extremis.

Peter stirs. He knows because he’s been keeping close tabs on him, and Tony accesses his earpiece, the translator he fabricated for the kid years ago, it seems. ‘Shhh, Pete, don’t do or say anything. Don’t even move. I’m fine, it’s all theatre,’ he transmits, and hopes it registers.

Blood starts pooling under his tongue, and he lets it dribble out down his chin. Struggling just brings more pain, so he stops. The agony creeps into his neck, his left ear. It worms through his very brain as nerves detonate in a daisy chain through his skull.

Regret taps him on the shoulder, and he ignores it. Stop it, Stark, this is better, and you know it. And it’s different this time, you’re enhanced, you can grow back anything he takes from you. This is different and you’ll be out of here before too long. Also, you’re a horrible liar.

He’s not ashamed to admit that he tries to escape, tries to use Extremis to remove himself from the torment for a while, but he finds he can still feel everything the Accuser is doing to him. Still, he manages to finally locate the intricate coding for the signal dampener deep inside their central control
processor, and gets to work on it, knowing full well that at this point, contacting the Guardians is their only hope for escape. But before he can leave behind anything significant, he’s yanked out of it by a fresh stab of fiery agony.

The Accuser has jostled his tooth so much that the one in front of it has come loose, and now he’s really bleeding, and the pain is reaching astronomic levels. Fuck, fuck, fuck, this is so bad, oh this is terrible in every way. And there’s more to come, there always is.

Eventually, his tooth just sort of comes out, the root probably too weak from the abuse to continue functioning, and the light ‘snap’ of it startles Tony, sends lightning through his face, rips a clipped shout out of him. Blood fountains from the vacant space, and he doesn’t want to drown in his own fucking blood, he truly doesn’t, but it’s swiftly becoming a possibility. The Accuser forces his head forward, and allows him to spit, holds him there as he heaves and retches. Before he can catch his breath, he’s pulled back up, and the Kree takes advantage of his gasping mouth, shoving his fingers in there and finding the loose tooth, pinching it at the base and just barely tugging. “Might as well take this one, too.” Tony wants to cry.

“What a wonderful blue light,” the Kree says softly, and Tony jerks with a furious snarl when a thumb strokes the side of his face in a show of false tenderness. “More of your brilliant bioengineering, no doubt. What is it? What is it trying to accomplish?” Okay, look, he knows Extremis is lighting his jaw up like the Fourth of July, but he can do without the fucking comments, thank you. This is already bad enough.

The Kree pushes forever, all hurt and pressure, pressure, pressure, and his jaw is surly being rent in two. This one is pulled out with the root still fairly intact, and instead of lightning, a goddamn explosion goes off in his face, a missile with his name on it, and his ears start ringing. A cry flies freely from him as the pain reaches a stunning crescendo before dying down into a tedious, throbbing, constant ache.

The Kree holds his tooth up so he can see it, bloody and gruesome. “These are the consequences of your blatant disrespect.” He retrieves a small silver box from inside his armor and places Tony’s goddamn tooth in it, next to another he assumes is also his. “And for lying to me.”

There’s not enough distance he can put between himself and the Accuser. Tony’s entire body trembles with flight instinct he can’t satisfy, watching the Kree’s every move, not at all too humbled to look into his eyes, where he discovers a cavernous madness he didn’t notice before. The Accuser quirks a corner of his mouth up in what he must consider a smirk, or maybe a satisfied smile, Tony is isn’t sure, and steps back from him, finally.

Tony just slumps heavily forward with a groan, puts all his weight on his arms and shoulders, allows the blood to pour from his slack, raw mouth as he pants, because it just keeps coming. Prodding the area cautiously with his tongue is a terrible idea and the pain he causes himself makes him gasp, the size of the holes positively horrific to feel. God, he really hopes Extremis comes through for him on this one, he can’t be missing teeth for Christ’s sake, he’s got a deceitful smile to maintain.

“Poor thing, the lesson will take hold soon enough,” the Kree says to him, wiping Tony’s blood off his hands with some white absorbent material, maybe a towel, but it’s smooth like silk, and paper thin, and the red disappears from it within seconds. It would be super interesting to him under any other circumstances.

Tony starts thinking of something else to say, something horrible that would get him in even more trouble, because after all that, he would rather have it done to him a thousand times than see Peter suffer through it once. Thankfully, the Kree continues before Tony can summon the courage to speak again.
“Tests are being conducted on that book I discovered, and I now possess enough of your genetic material to run a complete genomic background analysis.” He smiles, holds up the little silver box and shakes it, and Tony makes a mental note to locate and desecrate the findings of such research. “If you are indeed telling the truth, and my investigators find nothing of importance, you will be sold to the Kree Empire, and I must say, that blue glow you display will fetch me a high price. There are Kree scientists who will love to dissect you.”

Sold. Dissect.

The Accuser leaves the cell, the reinforced door sliding shut with a hiss behind him. Tony spits more blood on the floor with a moan and shivers.

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Peter wakes to the sounds of Tony’s desperation, and the thrumming of his stampeding heart rate. Senses rush back to him, much faster than normal people, and provide him with instantaneous information about his surroundings, their close proximity, and the stunning emptiness of them.

There’s a ragged, muffled shout, and Peter almost flinches at the sound of something metallic being slammed over and over, but he can’t quiet his tiny gasp. ‘Shhh, Pete, don’t do or say anything. Don’t even move. I’m fine, it’s all theatre.’ Tony’s voice is far, far away. What in the hell-

Memories rush back to him, of their ship being sucked into another, much larger vessel. Of painful, poisonous gas being used against them, and the desperate attempt at escape that they mounted together. And then, the failure that ultimately claimed them. Tony being grabbed by his throat and lifted into the air like he was nothing is a sight Peter never thought he’d bear direct witness to, not after Extremis.

Understanding how dire their circumstances are, Peter keeps himself absolutely still, only daring to crack open one eye when he hears Tony retching. That doesn’t sound like theatre. What he sees is so horrific, it paralyzes him. He simply can’t look away. An enormous Kree has its fingers deep in Tony’s mouth, clearly causing him some type of debilitating agony, making him bleed, and holy shit what the hell is going on?

Chained to the wall in front of him, Tony seems barely aware of his surroundings, second skin creeping away due to his distress, revealing tan hands, arms, feet. Blue light sparks and ripples beneath the skin of his jaw, Extremis attempting to preserve its master, to lesson his pain. It doesn’t seem to be doing much. Peter feels sick, and he gags right along with Tony.

There’s so much blood. Tony is suffering, trembling against the Kree’s huge body, his groans stifled by the fingers in his mouth. When the Kree extracts one of Tony’s teeth, and Tony chokes on a short, bloody shout, Peter just knows he isn’t going to be able to handle this, no matter how much training he’s received. Feeling cowardly, he squeezes his eyes shut and looks away, but he can’t run from the sound. All Peter can see behind his eyelids is the saturating red of Tony’s blood all over the place.

His sixth sense is a damn unfortunate inconvenience right now, because even with his eyes closed, his brain paints a detailed picture for him. The Kree is putting Tony’s tooth into something he extracted from his armor, like some sick trophy.
The Accuser is monologuing, he thinks, but instead of listening to it, Peter busies himself considering Tony’s status, uses all his will to focus on vitals, heart rhythm, injuries, his barely audible wheezing, and the steady, sickening plop, plop of blood dripping and gathering in a crimson pool at his feet. Besides missing one, possibly two, teeth, judging by the amount of blood, and his galloping heart, Tony seems unharmed. It’s a slight relief.

The Kree leaves. Peter swallows tightly, opens his eyes.

“Hey, Pete,” Tony says gruffly, coughs and clears his throat, spitting more blood on the floor when his words fall short. He winces, works his jaw, “Ow…”

“Hey, Tony,” Peter says in a tiny voice. It’s hard to ignore the way Extremis is still rippling blue under Tony’s skin, and Peter has to stop himself from staring at it.

“Camera’s above you,” Tony says, looking up and nodding, and Peter follows his gaze and finds a familiar globe of cloudy light, an ever-watchful eye. “I’ve got the feed from this room caught in a loop. Don’t worry.”

“Okay,” Peter says, becoming numb with fear, completely horrified by Tony’s appearance, all the wet red around his mouth and glistening grotesquely in his beard, he looks positively ghoulish. This is real. They are in a very real life or death situation in which they are likely to be tortured or killed, or both. Peter’s ears start ringing shrilly. Shit, Tony’s already had a go. Peter thinks he might be freaking right the fuck out. It’s too much.

“You alright? That’s a pretty wicked burn, there, they really did tag you good, didn’t they?” Tony says, as he pulls himself to his feet with a groan from where he’s been sort of dangling with his arms overextended obscenely behind him. He begins stretching them slowly with tiny winces. “I didn’t notice how bad it was before. They get you anywhere else?”

Burn? Oh shit, right.

Peter never even bothered to give himself a once over, the shock of seeing that happen to Tony too powerful to consider anything else.

The pain hits him all at once, as though someone pressed the ‘on’ button to his CNS, so intense his shout catches in his throat, and he nearly collapses from it. “Oh, Fuck,” he groans, curling in on his stomach where he’d been snagged, and he can’t even move his arms they’re so numb, and his lungs are sore from the gas, and his head is pounding, and- “Wow, it-it all hurts.”

“Whoa, easy there, Pete, breathe,” Tony is saying, his calm, soft voice barely penetrating Peter’s throbbing haze. “Calm down, stretch your arms, go slow with it, start with your shoulders and work your way up. One thing at a time, remember? It’s really important. Worry about the other shit later.”

Peter thinks about how painful it must be for Tony just to talk to him right now and it helps him start, after a lot of deep breaths and bit lips and internal assurances that Tony knows what he’s doing.

“That’s it, Spider-Man, be strong.” Peter painstakingly stretches his arms, notes with disdain the durability of his binds, pulls on them with all his strength, because he wants to touch the neat dinner-plate sized circle of charred, bruised and blistered flesh that’s throbbing away atop his ribs.

He’s never been restrained before.

The panic returns. He wants to touch the wound, but his hands are bound above his head, and he doesn’t get that choice, no choice at all. The frustration rings his entire body like a bell, the feeling quaking through him, all the way up his arms, and he yanks at them with a whining growl. And then
he gasps, hyperventilates with panic. It’s over, he can’t do this. It’s too scary. His chest hurts as he heaves for air. He feels like he’s going to die. Is this how Tony felt constantly all that time ago?

“I- I can’t,” he gasps, “oh god- can’t do this-“

“Whoa, hey, Peter, look at me,” Tony says from across the universe, and Peter just heaves and heaves, sweating copiously, hands clenching into fists above him, because he can’t bring them down, oh god! “Peter. Peter! Spider-Man!”

Spider-Man. A flash of red and blue in front of his mind’s eye. Of course, he’s Spider-Man. Superhero, or so he pretends to be sometimes, because he’s realizing that this job kind of sucks.

No, no, no, he can’t break down now.

He wants to cry, wants to scream, wants his Aunt like a small child. He wants to go home.

The world is closing in.

“C’mon Spidey, snap out of it,” Tony insists, and Peter shakes his head, trying so hard to focus on Tony, but the fear is all-consuming, “look at me, Peter, you’ve got to ground yourself, concentrate on breathing, just breathing, it’s not too much, I promise, I’ve done it before, I know it hurts, just focus on getting air. One thing at a time.”

Large, fearful eyes locate Tony within the fog of panic. Tony is there, Tony is real, covered in blood, his image blurry, but he’s real and alive, and he’s proof that there’s a world outside this place, because Peter has memories of him before this, good memories, before they died and went to Hell. This isn’t Hell? No, no, this is reality.

“I’m here with you, Peter, you’re not alone,” Tony is saying with a mouth full of blood, and it’s hard to focus on it all, a churning miasma of brown and red and black is what he sees. Clarity continues to come and go, unreliable. This is a horror movie, that’s what this is. “Breathe. you’ve got this, Avenger, you can do this, all you have to do is breathe, that’s all I need to see you do.”

That’s it. Nothing is required from him right now but the very easy task of breathing. There’s nothing happening to him or Tony, so why panic like this? Why endure this pain needlessly? Wouldn’t he be more useful in a stable head space?

And… Tony just called him an Avenger, didn’t he?

Breathing gradually becomes easier. Peter registers wetness on his face as Tony’s concerned eyes finally swim into focus. He locks into them, the deep brown familiar and comforting.

“That’s it,” Tony says, his tiny, exhausted smile sadly proud. “You’re going to be okay. Good job, I know it’s not easy.”

“How many?” Peter finally asks after a ragged, gulping swallow, wanting nothing more than to stop feeling sorry for himself. “How many did he take?”

Tony searches his eyes and looks apprehensive. “Two,” he says after a moment, and at Peter’s deflating sigh, follows with, “they’ll grow back, don’t worry about me.”

Peter knows. It’s not the point. “Are you okay?” he asks.

The grin Tony shoots to Peter is red with blood. “Always.”
“Liar,” Peter says, and Tony just shrugs, but it’s more of a nod with his arms restrained like they are. “Why did he do that?” He’s calm now. A headache still pounds away, and his entire body is a mass of agony, but he’s okay. He has Tony. He’s okay.

“I insulted his crew,” Tony says, and Peter shoots him a weary look.

“Of course, you did.”

“I’m going to get us out, Peter, I promise,” Tony insists, and Peter wants to believe him, he really does, but he’s so scared. “You just have to trust me. Stay calm, and look unconscious, and they should leave you alone.”

“Tony, I can’t just sit here and watch-” Peter starts, but he’s cut off.

“Nope. We aren’t having this conversation. I am decades older than you, I can handle it a little better,” Tony says, glowing eyes moving blankly as he navigates alien software. “Plus, I’ve done this before, you haven’t, so shush.”

“But you’re the one who has to do all the work, why can’t we spread it out-“

“Peter, it’s not up for discussion, drop it.”

“Let me help. I can take some of it, you don’t have to do it all-“

“You don’t know what you’re asking for!” Tony explodes, and immediately scoffs at himself. He blinks rapidly and looks away from Peter, hands twisting and clenching into fists in the manacles above him, then spits more blood. Peter can see his jaw moving slightly, and maybe he’s playing with the barren area two teeth used to exist in. “It’s non-negotiable, Parker. You’re going to stay silent until the moment we’re out of here, do you understand?”

Tony’s eyes go blue again. He thinks he’s won.

“No, I can’t do it, I’m not going to be able to sit here and watch it,” Peter says quietly, persistent and forever stubborn. “I want to help. I can take it.”

There’s a sigh that’s mostly a groan of frustration, and Extremis goes ‘dull’ as Tony fixes Peter with angry, desperate eyes. “Alright, fuck, would you like a goddamn play-by-play of what just happened to me? Huh? Would you like a bunch of gruesome detail?” he almost hisses, sounding like he’s exerting a tremendous amount of energy to keep his voice level. “This isn’t a fucking video game, or some wrestling match you can just tap out of when you need to, ‘okay, your turn for torture’. It doesn’t work like that. At all. They will keep going until you either give them what they want, or lie to them to make the pain stop. And good luck to you once they find out you lied. Luckily, I’ve managed to piss this guy off enough to keep his focus on me. You should be thankful.”

“You saying I can’t handle it?” Peter demands defensively, becoming irrationally angry. He’s always been a weak kid in Tony’s eyes, hasn’t he? “Am I a weak kid you feel like you need to protect, or am I an Avenger? Because I’m constantly getting mixed messages from you, and I’m fucking sick of it.”

“Jesus, Peter, would you just shut up and do what I say?” Tony says, and now he sounds tired. “We can talk about this shit later. I sort of have an obligation to bring you back to your Aunt safe after all this, and I’m willing to make whatever sacrifices necessary to ensure that happens. Now, I’ve got a lot to do, and this conversation is making it really difficult for me to concentrate, so, just, could you?”

“You sure it’s not all the blood you’ve lost?” Peter snaps nastily, unable to keep the derision out of
his voice.

“Oh, my god,” Tony says, screwing up his face with anger and slamming his head lightly against the wall behind him a couple times. Peter knows he’s pushing buttons, pulling triggers. “I’m in a fucking Twilight Zone episode, I swear to fuck, the kid wants to be tortured…” He grips Peter with an iron glare. “Peter, what part of your body are you capable of growing back? Because the nasty fact of it is; I just had an enormous Kree general stick his fucking fingers in my mouth and slowly rip out two of my teeth. And I’ve probably got a few more to lose before this is over. How many teeth are you willing to give him? What if he takes your fronts? Do your teeth grow back, Peter? You want fucking dentures at seventeen, huh?”

No. They don’t grow back. Peter looks away from him, furious and so frustrated he wants to cry.

Tony sighs. “Peter, you’re not a useless kid. You’re an Avenger and that’s not something I toss around,” he says. Peter doesn’t believe him, just glares at the ground around Tony, at all the blood speckling it, at the small pool of it near his feet. There’s so much misery displayed there. “Listen, here’s the truth, or, more appropriately, the logic behind this. I’m doing a lot of really difficult mental acrobatics through their alien software circus maze, alright? I can get us out, with some time and intense concentration. But I will not be able to concentrate on anything if they start on you. I…” his expression softens even further. “I’m… I’m not strong enough to watch you hurt, Peter. I’m just not. I can take it all day long, and it might sound bad, and look bad, and it is, but that is precisely what I have to protect you from.”

“See? There it is again.” Peter says bitterly. “Avengers don’t need protecting.”

“Incorrect. Avengers have each other’s backs,” Tony says fiercely. “I’m currently having yours. You got mine?”

Peter groans, rolls his eyes, “this doesn’t feel like having your back! Just hang here, and do nothing? Really?”

“Yes,” Tony says, eyes lighting up, back to work. “That’s exactly what I expect you to do. And when my plan comes to a head, I’m trusting that you will know what to do afterwards, because I may not be fully conscious. Thankfully, you should be strong enough by then to get us both out of here fairly unmaimed, you know, because no torture? Right? I’m not doing this entirely for your sake, kid, there’s a method to everything I do and say. You should know that by now.”

Tony’s nose is bleeding. Extremis is working hard.

Peter stares for a while before shaking his head and sighing, long and miserable. “Tony… I’m really scared.”

“I know, Pete,” Tony says, too busy to entertain his timidity with a warm smile, or even a glance, but Peter understands he would if he could. “I am too. I’m absolutely terrified.”

He’s not sure if hearing so makes his own terror better or worse. A couple minutes go by, as Peter allows some uninterrupted time Tony probably needs. It’s very difficult. He feels like he requires constant reassurance to fuel himself. To keep from freaking out again.

“What do you need me to do?” Peter inquires, defeated, knowing he has only one role to play in this if he wants to get out alive.

“Just look very unconscious until I give you a signal,” Tony says, “After that… ah, shut.” His voice is suddenly fearful and breathless, and Peter can feel his heart rate shoot into dangerous levels, but
that’s no longer a fatal concern. “Dammit, I need more time.”

“What?” Peter demands, and Tony swallows, and he’s panting with what Peter knows is crippling anxiety, glowing eyes whipping back and forth as he does some last-minute work.

“The Kree is coming back. He’s got Thor’s book. And a friend.”

Peter’s blood runs cold as winter. “W-What do I do?”

“Go limp. NOW!” Tony roars, and Peter doesn’t hesitate at all, too scared to do anything but appreciate the fact that someone is here to tell him what to do. If his shoulders still hurt, he can’t feel it anymore, even with all the strain of hanging limp on them. Maybe it’s adrenaline. “Great, g-good fucking job. Stay still, no matter what you hear or see, you have to stay dead to the world, or at least look it. And if, if they somehow find you out, you’re a mute. If you can’t speak, chances are they’ll leave you alone. Just stay completely still, I must end the surveillance loop now, before they figure out they have a technopath aboard.”

Just in time too, because right after that, the door swishes open again, allowing access to the Accuser, and another one he doesn’t recognize. Slightly shorter than Tarlo, he wears dark leather, and Peter spots a small firearm at his hip.

“Accuser, you must reconsider this course of action,” the smaller one is saying, his voice just as deep, just as terrifying. They’re standing in front of Tony, facing him, looking at him like he’s meat. “He will slaughter everyone on this vessel and publicly execute you in disgrace if you’re found out.”

“He will be none the wiser,” the Accuser replies, and Peter’s curious, wants to know who ‘he’ is, “unless you intend to betray me, Advisor.”

“Of course not, my Accuser, I would never dream- “ the Kree cuts himself off, and Peter can hear him swallow. Fascinated, he all but forgets the danger he’s in, and listens with interest. “I am merely concerned. We are not permitted to conduct interrogations, you know this. The inspectors, if they discover these prisoners, that you haven’t delivered them-”

“Your concern is for yourself,” The Accuser suggests coolly, “you’re too selfish, too sightless to go against your propagandist upbringing. There are better options than this, than subservience. Are you not sick of peddling refugees and unlucky wanderers for scraps? Credits will become meaningless in his world. Power, however, power creates its own currency. Do you not wish to taste that, Advisor?”

“My Accuser…” the other says, clearly choosing his words carefully. “I will ultimately obey whatever orders you deliver, but I cannot advise against this direction you intend to pursue strongly enough. An envoy is due to conduct an inspection any moment now, and their master, he can simply teleport them across galaxies now… have you no sense of self-preservation left?”

It has to be Thanos they’re speaking of. Has the Kree empire sold themselves out to the Mad Titan?

“If I acquire the remaining stones, I can challenge him, and he will become nothing more than a nasty stain on the never-ending fabric of time. Of my time. And those loyal to me will be permitted to exist in it. These two are the map and the key.” The Kree is removing something from inside his armor, Peter can’t tell what exactly it is. “And I will have the stones before another envoy sets foot on my vessel.”

“How can you be so sure?” The Advisor asks, sounding seconds away from hand-wringing.

“You shall see, Advisor.”
“Hey guys, you sound like you have some serious issues you need to work out, before the wedding, yeah?” Tony’s mouth going off, of course. Anyone who doesn’t know him well would miss the way his voice is shaking. “I don’t really need to be here for it, I don’t know what kind of weird thing you two, uh, have going on here, but I’m no therapist, so if that’s why you need me, you can just put me back.”

‘Whatever happens Peter, stay silent.’ Tony’s calm Extremis voice in his ear startles Peter, but he hides it. ‘You know what’s going to happen next. Trust me, it’s better for me than having to watch it done to you, if that helps at all. I can handle this. We’re Avengers, this is what we do.’

They’re here for information about the stones. Peter has no idea how long he has to listen to it, but he tries so hard to zone out, to think about anything else, about home, and MJ. About Ned and his Lego sets and long all-nighters playing Borderlands. About May and her warm embrace. He’s shivering.

“What is this, human?” The Accuser asks of the book.

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Well, then. Apparently the Kree Empire aligned with Thanos. Good to know.

Tony looks at the book with squinted eyes, nods his head to the side. “I don’t know, some light reading? Picked it up forever ago on a backwater in the Bravos Quadrant. I forgot I had it.”

Smack. He grunts, curses the split lip it leaves him with. At least it landed on the side with no holes in it. “Damn, okay, have the book. I’m really not that attached to it, I can’t even read it, to be honest, that’s all gibberish in there to me—”

Smack. He’s hit again, and Tony gasps for this one, as the Accuser does target his bad side. “This book is Asgardian and depicts six colored stones on several of its pages. You may want to reconsider your answer, Tony. What information does it contain?”

It seems they can’t read it. There’s hope, then.

“Oh, is that what it is?” Tony spits a wad of crimson at his feet. “Look, I’m not sure how one is supposed to reconsider the truth. Smack me a whole bunch of times, I still won’t know. You can’t just beat the answer into me, it doesn’t work that way.”

“You are lying,” Tarlo accuses. Dammit. “Nothing leaks from Asgard. You’ve either been there, or a very powerful friend gave it to you. Which is it?”

“You are lying,” Tarlo accuses. Dammit. “Nothing leaks from Asgard. You’ve either been there, or a very powerful friend gave it to you. Which is it?”

“Are you dense? Can you not hear very well? I’m genuinely curious, because I’ve already told you, I have no idea- “

Smack. “Fuck,” Tony grunts, panting. His mouth is a flaming mass of pain on one side. “You’re wasting your time, you really should just get rid of me, before you get in trouble with daddy, whoever he is.”

“Of course, and that is why I must extract this information from you with haste,” the Accuser says, pushing a panel on the wall which opens into a thick shelf a little below Tony’s bent elbow. He places something made of finely treated animal skin on it, something that rolls out and looks kind of like a toolkit. Tony chooses not to watch while Tarlo unties the string and unravels it. “As I am on a
schedule, this won’t be as… glamorous as I would prefer. Typically, I attempt an array of different methods, because I quite enjoy fine-tuning my techniques. And I would have appreciated a chance to test the durability of your bioengineering, but it seems I’m going to have to sacrifice my curiosity.”

That doesn’t sound good. Tony attempts to ping the Milano, but the signal dampener is holding strong. He knows it’s silly to keep checking like he is, but he can’t help it. He’s terrified and the distraction benefits him, pulls him out of this waking nightmare, if only for a minute. The worms he’s put in the Kree’s systems are still burrowing, unfortunately, destroying, eating away at their capabilities, slowly but surely. There’s no available data regarding ETAs for any of these things.

He can’t avoid this, no matter how much he wants to.

“I’m telling you, I picked that up on some back-shit planet, I can’t even remember the name of, I was going to sell it,” Tony says, ignoring the movement of the Advisor next to him, and looking around the Accuser at the ground, trying so hard to hide his fear. “You wouldn’t believe how difficult it is to sell a book no one can read.”

“It’s okay, human, you need not utter another word,” the Accuser, hums as he sets up his tools, “your pain will speak all your truths for you soon enough. I managed to silence you earlier, now let’s see if I can provoke compliance.” He holds up a tool. Pliers. Those are pliers. “I’ll give you one more chance to avoid this; why do you have this book?”

Tony’s heart is likely to beat its way right out of his chest, like Bruce Lee out of a circle of fifty people. “Eat shit,” he says, and clenches his jaw, ignoring the pain, because it’s trivial right now.

“Hold him still, Advisor.”

Please don’t.

Seemingly devoid of further protest over the Accuser’s actions, the Advisor comes way too close to Tony and snatches up his jaw with one massive hand, the other twisting in his hair, forcing his head twisting in his hair, forcing his head back at a slight angle as Tony pants unevenly and grunts his misery. The Advisor is almost as strong as his superior, terrifyingly so. He panics for a second, thrashes his body as the Accuser steps in front of him, but the other Kree squeezes his face, and it’s all white agony, stunning him.

“Open up.”

Uh, no.

Gritting his teeth is futile, he knows, this, and the Advisor pries his jaws apart with ease. The tool is inserted, locating a molar on the untouched side, and gripping it relentlessly.

Tony wishes they would do anything else to him. The pliers shift, and the pressure is back, refined this time, yanking instead of pushing. Fuck! Now he’s recalling the pain, how sharp and electric and unbearable it can get, and he lets a tiny whine slip through his nose. “I’ll take this one next. You have some nice teeth. Or… you did.”

Pressure, and a startling pop, twisting and turning and fiery agony and it’s happening all over again. The blood seeps all over his mouth, coats his throat almost instantly in his inclined position, and he gags, sputtering the thick liquid all over the Kree’s hand. God, this must look horrific. The Accuser yanks this one early, and Tony gurgles a cry.

“Look at how he glows, Advisor,” he says, as Tony is forced forward to let the blood seep out in a thin, steady stream like some horrible tea pot. “Are you enhanced with an infinity stone, human? Your genetic analysis suggests you might be. There’s energy in your blood that is unidentified.”
The Reality Stone’s footprint. Tony can’t win.

“Fuh- fuck you,” he says through his trembling, too scared and hurt for bluster.

“Up. Again.”

“No, no please, god, I swear to fuck, I don’t know anything!”

He fights it, doesn’t want to lose any more teeth, doesn’t want to be forced to swallow more of his own blood just to be able to breathe. Thrashing only fetches him swift pain from the Advisor. All he can do is vocalize his extreme duress.

“You humans bleed so easily.”

It goes on and on. Tony wonders if this is even real, or if he’s trapped in another nightmarish vision conjured by the Reality Stone.

After a while, it becomes routine.

Altogether, the Kree ends up stealing seven teeth from him, all molars, four on the bottom and three on top. Tony is pitched forward to let the blood drip away, and he hopes the sweat that coats him hides his tears, his agonized screams during the extraction, echoing in his own head. This is awful, comparable perhaps to waking up during crude open-heart surgery, or having all his muscles torn apart and reconfigured by the scalpels of Extremis. His cool breath feathers over the exposed wounds painfully.

“Hmm, enough for now. I don’t want you passing out from shock yet, delicate human,” The Accuser says, depositing his bloody pliers on the shelf, and Tony doesn’t know if he should feel relieved or terrorized further. “This next step is cathartic. It will give you time to think about how many of these you’re willing to sacrifice. How many times you choose to let this happen to you. Because it will happen until you have none left.”

Before Tony can protest, the Accuser takes advantage of his open, gasping mouth and slack awareness, forcing some kind of metal bit in there. Tony snarls, tries to spit it out, but before he can, it must have split in two because it begins prying his jaws apart on its own accord. His wild eyes dart between the two Kree, who aren’t even touching him, and they just smile.

It moves like liquid, and Tony watches it best he can, tossing his head with terror, wiping it on his shoulder, trying to get it off, as the contraption wraps around his head and molds a thin ring perfectly to his face without mercy, keeping his mouth open and vulnerable for anything they want to do to him. Pain shoots through his jaw at all the forced stretching, and he moans pathetically, feeling heat rush into his cheeks. He closes his eyes, hides in his arm. He’s never felt so vulnerable before. Here, in space, with two members of an intergalactic race; it’s different. It’s worse than the cave, at least there, he shared their species, understood their intentions.

There’s a convenient little fucking rectangular handle on the side, and the Accuser loops his fingers into it, pulling Tony’s head this way and that, up and down, and Tony goes with it, trying to suppress his miserable groaning, and failing. The Accuser has complete control over his every movement, and he’s demonstrating so with a smile. Tony avoids looking him in the face.

“My tool,” the Accuser says, and the Adviser hands him something thin, long and glinting silver. There’s a small hook on the end of it. It can only go one place, and it’s not like he plans to scrape the plaque off Tony’s remaining teeth. Tarlo holds him steady, and Tony’s chest heaves, and he wraps the chains in his hands and squeezes the shit out of them. Terrified brown eyes watch the little silver
hook until it disappears below his upper lip. His head is encouraged back so the Kree can see inside his mouth, and a painfully bright light shines directly in his face.

The first touch of the hook deep inside one of the fresh, pulsing craters rips a high whine from him, and induces a desperate struggle he has no chance of winning, but he feels compelled to thrash and twist as much as he can to escape this fresh hell. This is Hell, he’s in it. He has to be. The Accuser touches the very center of each of them, finding exposed nerves expertly, setting them aflame with new agony, until Tony is whining with every rapid, desperate breath. “That’s right, we’re getting there, aren’t we?”

This is insane. This is a new level of misery unlike anything he’s ever experienced before, white, hot, cold, piercing, every imaginable agony exists right here for him. He struggles to send Extremis out, checks the subroutines he’s wormed into their systems. Their hold on the jet is almost broken, their hatch door protocols are being overwritten with his own, and every single battle craft on the warship now sport viruses preventing them from completing takeoff. Absolutely zero progress has been achieved on the signal dampener, however. Fucking shit.

And god, Peter. The poor kid.

‘I’m working on it, Pete, hold on, I’m sorry, I’m working on it,’ He sends to Peter, hopefully distracting him from the other sounds he’s trapped in this tiny room with. ‘I’ve got to f-find the Milano first, I can’t do anything without them within range, you’re going to need backup. It shouldn’t be that much longer now, hang in there.’ It’s bad when he can’t keep the strain from his Extremis voice either.

Sharp, unhindered cries are torn from his open throat as the Accuser’s woeful little hook scrapes into his bleeding gums like he’s some fucked Michelangelo. A chocked sob sneaks out in his delirium. The helicopters are coming, he can hear them, they’re bringing relief. And night is falling as they approach…

*Do not pass out you coward, they’ll start on Peter.* He forces Extremis to keep him up and running, and shoves all further thoughts of unconsciousness aside, no matter how tantalizing the reprieve. But he’s still fading, shadows dancing, he can’t breathe, fuck, his goddamn throat is closing up, Extremis can’t fix that-

It’s blood. His own blood is suffocating him. They pull him forward, and it drains, same song and dance, but what’s the fucking point? The hook goes back in within seconds, it’ll just happen again and again and again-

Goddammit, Quill needs to fucking ping him soon, or Tony is going to start losing hope.

This is the worst pain he’s ever felt in his life, and he’s glad all the protocols he enacted are passive.

The door hisses open. Tony is barely aware of it, until the hook is removed and by some great miracle, he’s let go. He slumps in his chains with a loud groan of relief, and drools blood and saliva down his own chest, exhausted, trembling violently, muscles twitching with all the tension they’ve been under trying to get him to fucking bounce. Tears leave clean streaks in the red around his mouth. The second skin is impossible to maintain. He doesn’t feel human.

“Accuser,” a new Kree voice says, and Tony watches through the blur as what looks like a small piece of paper is handed to the Accuser. He can’t see very well at all, every sense he has roaring with the pain pulsing out from the torturous little hollows the Kree left in his wake. So, he just waits, hangs his head in shame, positive this new development can’t be anything good anyway.

“Discovered this aboard their ship. It seems to contain what you’re looking for.”
There’s some silence, and Tony doesn’t want to look. Then, “excellent work, thank you.” The soldier leaves after exchanging some weird salute with him.

Tony waits, strung tight like piano wire, anticipating more pain. When huge blue hands come to do something awful to him, he cringes away, but they simply release his mouth instead, removing the bit after it liquefies and reconsolidates itself. This can’t be good, this isn’t kindness. Tony works his throbbing jaw slowly, eyes the Kree with distrust and pants, positively exhausted.

“Now that you can speak, do you care to elaborate on this primitive image for me?” the Accuser practically sings at him, and holds up a photograph. Shit. The one with Vision in it, his stone glinting noticeably in the flash. It’s the picture with all of them, actually, the same one Peter had webbed to the wall beside his bunk.

Tony doesn’t know what to say, mouth working around words that won’t come out. Instead, he shakes his head in defeat and hides in his arm, knowing full well he can’t lie to this guy anymore. Whatever befalls him is worth it.

A grip in his hair, the Accuser forcing him to look as the Advisor steps back to stand idly behind him. “Don’t run away, boy, look at this! Who is this?” He points to the photo Tony, the smiling Tony. “This human looks remarkably similar to you.” Not really. That man is smiling and not covered in his own blood. “And this, this costumed human, here,” he points to Peter, and Tony cannot keep his expression neutral as the Kree yanks his head over to look at the real Peter, who is staring and terrified, knowing just as well as Tony that the jig is up. “That’s him, isn’t it? Same height, body type. Looks like you know each other pretty well. All the little puzzle pieces, coming together.”

‘Just stay silent, Peter. Stick with the plan,’ he says, meeting the kid’s teary eyes. Peter nods, sniffing and wiping his face on his bicep. He’s shaking. It breaks Tony’s heart. ‘I’m sorry, I’m-’

The Accuser slaps him once, twice, three times. Tony moans miserably, slightly dazed. Everything is falling apart. This is so bad; the Accuser is fucking good at this. His head is pulled back up, and his view of Peter is obstructed once more. At least the kid can’t see too much. It’s not very comforting.

“And this little crystal, here?” The Kree points to vision’s forehead, “this is an Infinity Stone. Your friend is wearing it in his head like some common bangle. Where is he? Where was this taken?”

Tony blinks and remains silent, all his bravado gone. This is his fault.

“Answer me.”

Tarlo strikes him hard in the gut, the second skin long gone and providing no protection from the blow. He curls around it with a grunt, but it’s fine, he prefers this over that little silver hook any day. Beatings are familiar territory. He’s done beatings plenty. And though he’s thankful for the break, resolve is leaking from him. He’s so sweaty, so tired, so goddamn thirsty, and the pain has sucked the life out of him.

And then, a fucking miracle. “Tony!” Quill’s voice in his head is like a salve, and he smiles, his chuckle nothing but air, “Oh my god, we found you! We found you!”

‘I’m sorry,’ Tony says back, weathering two more strikes from the Accuser, ‘I’m sorry, I fucked up, I’m so sorry.’

“We’re coming, alright?” Quill says, and just in time, because an alert tells him he’s finally busted the stasis machine. “We’re three minutes out from your location. Just hold on.”
’Here,’ Tony says, and sends a plethora of information, everything he’s gathered about the warship, all the data regarding what he’s been doing, how he’s disabled almost everything that could hinder their escape. ’Please, hurry the fuck up.’

“Two minutes, Tony,” Quill informs him. Show time.

‘I’m making my move’ he informs them, one-hundred and ten percent done with pain, ‘Time to shine, Spider-Man. Keep your head down.’

Triple checking all variables, and enthused by the positioning of the Accuser, his Advisor, and the tough restraints, Tony possesses his jet like a ghost, folds himself into the rigid hull, feeling hex bolts and metal like it’s his very own skin. Becoming one with his weapons system is like being welcomed home. He all but forgets his pain and activates the sonic defenses that will incapacitate every biological mark within three-hundred meters of the jet. It charges with a whine, and then fires in a sphere, taking down everyone in the hangar.

Tony smiles. He’s losing energy fast. Everything he has left goes into turning the jets main cannon, initiating the charge, and firing the devastating beam at an angle that catches four targets. Tony is thrown back into his body with a long, heaving gasp just as the cell explodes around them and the beam severs Peter’s chains, runs straight through both Tarlo and his Advisor, and finally, Tony’s own restraints, burning skin from his knuckles before bouncing around in a room above them and dissipating.

Everything goes black, his mind shutting down from stress, a CPU overheating.

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Peter can’t catch his breath.

From behind him, he sees the particle beam approach in slow motion, his sixth-sense detailing its intended trajectory. The sound is deafening as the cell explodes around him, and when Peter opens his eyes, he gasps at what he finds. The Kree no longer have heads, necks or half their chests, and four severed arms lie on the ground around their steaming remains.

Sirens go off, the wail of an injured warship.

“Ohhhh, my god,” Peter moans breathlessly, sliding to the floor, looking around at all the gore and devastation, in total awe of it. “Holy shit. Fucking wow, dude.” He will never doubt Tony again, that’s for sure. Rubbing his wrists, he trembles with nerves, can feel himself locking up-

But he has a promise to keep, there’s no time for contemplation. Tony took all that so Peter would be put together enough to get them both out. “Shit, Tony,” he says, snapping himself out of his shock, and getting to his feet, locating the man in seconds, trapped beneath heavy rubble. Propelling himself over the bodies of two Kree, Peter reaches Tony and lifts the debris off him with little effort. Sprawled out on his stomach in a pool of his own blood, Tony doesn’t stir at all.

“Tony,” he says kneeling next to him, and he knows the man isn’t dead, can feel his heart beat, but the irrational fear is there. And he can’t think of Tony dying after enduring so much to protect Peter, not that he thinks Tony will die from this, but, shit, that was a ton of blood he lost... Peter can’t even be angry about it anymore, after witnessing what they did to him.
Kree are coming. He can sense them flooding the halls outside their devastated cell.

“Quill,” he says, having been privy to the exchange between Quill and Tony right before the big event. “You there? Tony did something… insane, dude, like, I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Almost there,” Quill assures him as Peter throws Tony’s limp form over his shoulder, spotting the Asgardian book and snatching it up as well. “Geek out later. Get to the jet. It looks like Tony’s locked down the entire warship, you should be safe in there. We’ve got a few strays to take care of out here.”

“Okay,” he says, and slides up and through the hole Tony created with his damn mind. It’s laborious with all his cargo. Peter has an entirely new appreciation, and a mound of respect for Tony and Extremis.

Following the path of the beam, he passes through two floors, and lands neatly a few hundred meters away from the jet. Praying to a god that he’s not sure about anymore that this won’t be a repeat of last time, Peter enters the spacecraft, and sighs with relief when he finds no aggressors inside. Depositing Tony into a seat and strapping him in, he pushes off the feeling of deja-vu.

Moments later, Quill is sprinting across the hangar, and onto the jet, and Peter has never been so happy to see anyone in his entire life.

“God.” Quill scoffs when he catches sight of Tony, clearly upset by his condition. Peter evacuates the captain’s seat, and Quill takes over. “Are you okay, kid?” he asks as he flips switches and engages the thrusters. They’re getting out. The Guardians are here and Tony is safe and relief… isn’t coming. The panic remains. His hands shake uncontrollably.

“No,” Peter whispers as they take off. “I’m not.”
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

Everyone stop! Stop what you're doing right now and take a moment to look at this incredible piece of art by the very lovely emkayohh on tumblr depicting a bad ass Tony in his under armor:

http://emkayohh.tumblr.com/post/168368686575/takes-a-deep-breath-please-for-the-love-of-god

It's wonderful, so if you're reading this and you're active on tumblr, hop over there and give her props, because her art is incredible. It's the first time anyone has ever drawn for one of my fics, and it's really good, and I'm super excited to share it with you all. Please give the artist the praise she deserves.

Sorry this chapter is late, but it's long, so that should make up for it. The holidays have been reaming me left and right. My daughter, my husband, and his two sisters were all born in December, and of course, Christmas, so it's been event, after event.

Happy holidays, all. Spread cheer by leaving a comment :)

A massive space battle occurs outside, involving Tony’s jet, the Milano, and a fleet of Kree, but Peter isn’t there for it, not really, existing instead in a humming state of detachment, glancing at Tony more often than not, making sure he’s okay, that he’s breathing. Not choking. Not drowning. The amount of red on him… Peter’s never seen so much blood before. It appears to have cascaded down him at one point.

Peter’s glad Quill showed up to pilot the jet, because he’s not sure he could’ve done it alone, even though Tony put all that faith in him. Not after what he’s just witnessed. He feels… heavy. Slow and pathetically impractical. Like he’s moving through ice-cold water.

What the fuck just happened?

Once their little convoy is happily back in warp, Quill exits the pilot’s seat with haste and sees to Tony.

“What did they do to him?” he asks as he transfers Tony’s limp form from the passenger seat to the couch. A gentle touch pulls open one of Tony’s eyes, and Quill shines a flashlight across it.

Peter searches for his words as he watches. “They- they, uh-”

Blood everywhere, Tony screaming, another tooth torn from his head-

He swallows vomit. “They…”

“Shit, that’s a lot of blood,” Quill comments, swiping his hands against his trousers a couple times to get some of it off. “Where is it even coming from?”

It just keeps coming, red, saturating everything with scarlet misery, Tony sobbing and pleading, and
what was that- how many was that, now, four?

“Have you ever heard of Infinity Stones, human?”

“God,” Peter whispers, voice cracking, pressing his palm to his sweaty forehead, trying to blink the images away. *Keep it together, Parker.* “He- he took these uh, pliers…”

*The tool is so sleekly white and clean, but not for long, soon it’s shining red and-

Quill is looking at him with disgusted reluctance, like he doesn’t actually want to hear the rest. Then he turns, and gingerly opens Tony’s mouth. “Oh, god,” he mutters angrily after a glimpse in there. “Get a bucket, kid.”

“Right, okay.” Peter runs off to the restroom and finds one stashed in the closet, grabbing it and a stack of towels as well. When he returns, Quill is turning Tony onto his side.

“Give it here.” He waves for the bucket, and after Peter hands it to him, places it on the floor and leans Tony over it, because his mouth has started streaming blood. It hits the bottom of it with a steady pitter patter, amplified by the depth of the container.

*When Tony isn’t screaming, it’s the dripping of his blood that Peter can hear most profoundly, and the smell, like a handful of old pennies-

Peter sniffs, because he can’t stop smelling it.

Gamora sweeps past him, and when did she come aboard? Her expression immediately sours at the sight of Tony, of Quill trying to wipe blood off him as red drips into the bucket from between his chapped, split lips. She scowls at the bruises that speckle his face, and the finger-shaped ones that ring his throat, visible just above Extremis, highlighted by it. There’s a first aid kit in her hands, and she passes it on to Quill.

“Teeth?” She posits, standing over them with crossed arms and a stern expression.

“They sure did.” Quill opens the box and removes a tan clay-like substance from sterile packaging, which he rolls in his hands, and presses flat between his palms. “Bastards.”

Gamora shakes her head. “How many?”

“Too many,” Quill says, the chill of the grave in his voice. “Just be ready for him to wake up.”

And he does. Screaming. As soon as Quill attempts to open Tony’s mouth further, the man reanimates in a whirl of flying fists and sparks and terrified wails, and Gamora has to grab him and pin him down.

“You’re okay, Tony it’s us!” Quill says to him, holding his hands up, the goop he intends to place in his mouth completely visible. “You’re safe, it’s okay, we got you out, brother, alright? I’m trying to help you. Relax.”

Tony looks between them, all terror and panic and gasping, sputtering breaths which spray crimson, until eventually it clicks, and he’s crying then. “Peter?” he rasps, grabbing Quill’s coat at the collar as soon as Gamora lets him go, his eyes narrowed. “The-the kid, where-?”

“He’s fine, man, he’s right here,” Quill tells him and Tony looks over, finds Peter and deflates with relief, just before abruptly vomiting bright gore into the bucket. Peter has to look away, it’s just so red…
“Is this real?” he asks of them when he’s done, in a shredded voice Peter barely recognizes as Tony’s, prompting Gamora and Quill to share a concerned glance.

“Yeah, buddy, it’s real,” Quill says as he hands Tony a cloth. Tony takes it and sits up with a groan while he wipes at his jaw tenderly, spitting blood into the bucket, and this is just such a fucking mess, all of this. A clusterfuck. Peter was just beginning to get through to him, to make him stop hating himself, and now this; an excuse to ramp it back up to three-hundred.

Tears come, hot and furious. This isn’t fair. Tony suffering like this? It isn’t fair at all.

“Gamora?” Quill says, nodding at Peter pointedly, and Gamora is standing and embracing him, choosing to say nothing about the tears and snot he allows to drip down her bicep as he watches Quill deal with Tony. Listens to him explain the goop, and how it will stop the bleeding should Tony allow it anywhere near his mouth. He’s got to bite down on it hard for it to work. A brief argument ensues, because Tony can never just shut up and do as he’s told, yet in no time, he runs out of steam, or maybe willpower, because speaking doesn’t seem to be very pleasant for him. And he has to spit. A lot.

Begrudgingly, Tony accepts the stuff into his palm and glowers at it, before sticking it into his mouth.

“Shhh,” Gamora soothes Peter, running slender fingers through his hair, pressing soft lips into his scalp. “When you’re ready to talk, we’ll talk, okay?”

Tony’s jaw is literally alight with pain, flashing brightly when he bites down, that gorgeous, cerulean ocean Peter’s starting to get used to, and even draw comfort from. The blue light means Tony’s alive.

“Look at the way he glows, Advisor.”

Peter nods silently and all but hangs in Gamora’s arms. Haunted eyes watch and watch.

---

Following a shower, cleaning and bandaging of his wound, and an attempt at a meal, which swiftly comes back up when he remembers it again, Peter thinks he’s ready and sits down behind a closed door with Gamora in the dining area. Mainly, he just wants to get it over with so he can actively begin purging the memory with video games and movies and music, and maybe even creation, if the spark should come.

But for now, dancing amongst all the gore and misery and inescapable screaming, are a few important tidbits of information the Guardians must be made aware of, and Peter understands that Tony isn’t going to speak for a while, doesn’t expect him to at all, really. It’s fine. Tony deserves some space. This is the least Peter can do after witnessing all the pain Tony endured to protect him. The memory of which continues to follow him ceaselessly like a stalking predator.

And Peter really needs to get it all out, hopes that talking about it will ease up the snippets of time travel he’s experiencing. The… event haunts him, shadows him, lurks around every corner ready to pounce and send him reeling back in time, where he becomes stuck. Sure, it’s only been a few hours since it happened, but nothing in Peter’s life has ever felt so synchronously real and unreal to him. It’s ranked as the most disturbing thing he’s ever witnessed, that’s for sure.
It comes and goes like waves of nausea.

Gamora wants him to go over it from the beginning, if he’s able to. “As much detail as you can, sweetie,” she says, her smile kind and open, “you can always tell me more later.”

“Okay,” he says, raspy as an old screen door, and gulps water to wet his mouth, which has been endlessly desert dry since the rescue.

With abandon, he dives in. He starts with the escape attempt, how they almost made it until they were both overpowered and taken prisoner. How terrifying waking up was, and can only manage to reveal a little regarding what he saw the Accuser doing to Tony, because talking about it chokes him as efficiently as a hand.

“He told me to stay quiet,” he says while he rubs his raw wrists, and bites his lip to keep it from quivering, “he, uh, said he couldn’t handle- that he…”

Gamora is patient. Anytime he trips up, she waits, squeezes his hand from across the table, and watches him with soft eyes.

He tells her about the book and their curiosity surrounding it, about how they knew Tony was involved with the stones. That his very genetic make-up holds clues to it now, and she purses her lips.

“They just started… yanking teeth out of him,” Peter says, his head in his hands, “over and over and over, and I- all I could do was watch.” He chuckles humorlessly, on the verges of some kind of hysterical meltdown. “God, what the fuck, man?”

“Did he tell them anything?” Gamora asks, and a surge of hot anger batters Peter, creases his brow, and his glare is fire.

“Is that what you care about right now?” he demands.

Gamora sighs and interlocks her fingers. “Tony killed a Kree Accuser,” she says. “An event like that sends shockwaves we weren’t expecting to deal with quite yet.”

“Tony was being tortured,” Peter says slowly, a certain angry protectiveness armoring his voice, “what the fuck do you think he should’ve done?”

“No one is blaming him, or you, Peter,” she says gently, looking at him like he’s fragile. Which Peter hates.

He searches her dark eyes. “He didn’t tell them shit.” It’s spat like a bad taste accompanied it.

Two items provoke the most prominent responses from Gamora; revealing that the Kree have aligned with Thanos, and admitting that the photo is probably still lying around the rubble of their cell somewhere.

Eventually, it’s over, the whole story has been told, and he just stares angrily at the table.

“Are you okay?” Gamora asks. Peter shakes his head, tears instantly starting back up and dammit, he’d just reclaimed control of them, too. It’s the worst; being on the verge of tears, and some kind person asks that question, adds the final drop needed, and that’s it, the dam breaks, and the water flows freely, because of course he’s not okay, and he mourns for when he was.

“Nothing even happened to me,” he says, staring at the table through the haze of his tears. “And…
and I keep *seeing* it. It won’t stop, it keeps, like forcing itself into my brain, and it’s vivid, like a show on TV, but when I try to change the channel, it just goes right back. You know, I’m looking at this table right now, but I’m- I’m seeing, uh, blood, and-“

“It’s okay,” she tells him, rubbing the back of his hands with her thumbs.

“No, it’s not!” he shouts, denting the table beneath his fist, and Gamora doesn’t flinch. “Stop telling me it’s okay, it’s not fucking okay! It’s- it’s- it’s-，“ a sob fractures his words. “It’s not fair, why did that happen to him?”

“I don’t know,” Gamora says, and Peter scoffs because she’s useless, “but I understand a little about what you’re going through. With the images.”

“Yeah, what do you know?” Peter demands miserably, wiping at his eyes.

“Thanos killed my parents in front of me,” Gamora reveals so stoically that it throws Peter off. He looks at her with his mouth foolishly agape. She smiles and finds his hands again, holding them, and Peter notes how calloused and scarred they are beneath his own smooth flesh. “And after that, he took me, and… I saw it over, and over, and over again. So, I used it.”

“What do you mean?” Peter asks.

“I used it as fuel,” she continues, “I used it to keep me alive, and… to keep me, *me*. Because when I remembered it, I *felt*. I’ve done horrible things to innocent people without even batting an eye, but when I remembered him killing my parents, I could feel again. It was like rebelling against him, and I recall being smug about it. It was my little secret. Never would he turn me into the monster he wanted me to be if I still had that memory, because it was proof that I still knew everything he did was wrong. It was a weapon I used against him.”

Peter swallows and tries not to imagine a young, scared Gamora being taken away by Thanos after watching something so traumatic unfold before her. “Do you still see it?”

“Sometimes, not as often, now,” she says, and smirks despite the context, “I don’t need it anymore. These morons make me feel anger, pity and desperation all at once and almost constantly.”

Usually, Peter would laugh, but all he manages is a bitter smile.

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Tony’s always considered himself lucky to have been born with a perfect set of teeth. On no occasion has he had any work done on them, aside from the occasional routine cleaning, which he will never go for again, by the way. Not a single cavity, gap or chip has ever marred his charming smile. And it’s a damn miracle too, that he hasn’t lost any before now, given his occupation and proclivity for being struck in the mouth and face.

Then he goes and loses seven of the little bastards in just a few hours. He always has been an overachiever.

Locked inside the latrine, because it’s the only place he can really be alone with a mirror, Tony exchanges a weary expression with himself. Covered in dried blood, Extremis conducting a vivid light show in his cheeks, and along his jaw, even his reflection is tired of this bullshit, and it frowns
its disapproval, as usual. A frown is less painful to maintain than a smile now.

Fitting.

‘Accessing folder: Music > Favorites > Metallica > Orion: Play’

The deep, bold electric bass thrumming through the intercom as Orion rides up, and the gradual acceleration into drum beats and stunning riffs washes over him, a wave from a warm ocean. It should be loud enough, should drown out his suffering. He’s sick of hearing himself suffer. Music is preferable.

Clearing his throat, he spits pink into the basin below him and moans because it hurts. Though Quill’s excellent goop stemmed most of the heavy bleeding, Tony expects it to continue on and off as he literally cuts new teeth. The glow beneath his skin may not let up until he’s fully healed, but at least it’s replacing inflammation. If not for Extremis, he’d be walking around looking like some busy squirrel.

But active, prolonged regeneration is not without its sacrifices. Saliva production is working in double time, infuriatingly enough. The pain of it is nearly crippling, and that will be inconvenient. He has work to do.

Dread gnaws at him. He doesn’t want to look, but at the same time, he does, more than anything. With a reluctant tongue, he counts his teeth, checks each of them using a gentle push. Twenty-four remain, and one loose one.

His mouth is so aflame with misery, he didn’t even notice it until now. Jiggling it doubles him over, blinds him with suffering that is so brightly sharp, and jarringly familiar now, and he holds the sides of the sink for support as his vision clears up. It’s too loose, too far gone. It needs to come out and make way for its replacement.

“Son of a bitch.” He sighs. Speaking hurts, too.

He spits again. The Accuser took seven of his damn teeth, and is about to claim an eighth from the grave. Tony misses the days when his biggest worries included board meetings and seven hours of paperwork.

Might as well look, now. There’s no avoiding it. Time to suck it up, like dear ol’ dad always said. Stark men are made from iron. Maybe that’s why he feels so rusty, he’s been getting rained on fucking constantly...

Opening his mouth wide enough for observation is pure agony. Pulling his cheek aside, Tony endures it, looks, and experiences a deep, cold contempt at the sight of his mutilated gums. The Accuser truly cut him up with that hook of his, leaving thick lacerations behind, and goody, eating should be pleasant. It’ll be nothing but space shakes for him for quite a while.

The loose one, a pre-molar on the bottom, sits at a disturbingly odd angle.

He grabs pliers from the closet, ones meant to extract glass and shards of metal from flesh, not his own damn tooth. With a growl, he grips the loosey from its base.

‘Volume increase - 100%’

The sounds of his distress are lost amongst the screams of electric guitars.
Peter’s surprised to learn how much changed in the twelve hours they’d been gone.

They’re no longer heading to the Nova outpost to collect Nebula’s bounty, having diverted course straight to Titan, a nine-day long excursion. Apparently, Nebula’s expansive knowledge regarding Kree warship strategic positioning, and her fluency in their programming language, are the only reasons Tony and Peter were rescued. She singlehandedly located the warship and disabled the signal dampener, pointed the Guardians in the right direction, and didn’t commit any betrayals along the way. Which is a big step for her.

Exonerated, as far as the Guardians are concerned, Nebula’s been added to the roster. And so what if she’d tried to kill them? Peter couldn’t be happier about it. The more the merrier.

When he visits the Milano to collect his and Tony’s armors, he ambushes Nebula with a hug, and she reacts to it by going completely stiff. Peter doesn’t care, just murmurs “thank you,” to her until a reluctant mechanical hand pats him twice, and only twice, on the back.

“What?” She hisses at the rest as they stare.

Drax and Groot welcome him with cheers and back-slaps, which he forces a cracked smile for because his ribs are still screaming. In the back room, Rocket hands him two palm-sized disks, one blue, red and black, the other gold and black.

“I’m working on replicating them, but I figured you should have these now,” he says, gesturing to a box of unfinished disks. Peter presses the red and black one to his chest, gasping when his entire suit of armor morphs out of it, as yellow light at first, before hardening into flexible metal, and it wraps around him, comforting and safe. “It was a pain in the ass integrating my micro-tech with such… uh, no offense, such a pathetic alloy, but what a friggin’ miracle of nature I am, huh?”

“It’s great,” Peter says, smiling as he engages miniaturization and the suit slips away, consolidating itself back into the thin disk. “Thank you, Rocket.”

“Just don’t go skipping it across any lakes, boyo,” Rocket says, then huffs, shakes his head, looks at him. “You alright?”

Peter is taken aback and allows the surprise to glimmer across his face before he can get a grip on it. “Yeah,” he says, but his voice is a little too high, and his shrug is so forced it’s all over the place.

“And Stark?” Rocket asks. There’s no mistaking it. Worry hangs from those two words.

“Busy,” Peter sighs. “Quiet.”

Avoidant, he doesn’t say. Peter hasn’t seen Tony in a day and a half.

Rocket hums, and nods at him, turning back to his work. “Give him time, he’ll come around.”

So, Peter does. When he returns to the jet, Tony is still locked away in the safe room, and Quill is watching the end of *Ghostbusters II*, having insisted on staying over. He doesn’t say it, but Peter understands that he’s babysitting.

And, though it’s hard, he leaves Tony alone.
“You know, I think the first one is better,” Quill comments, smiling at Peter who sits on the couch a space away from him. “Bummer, I remember being excited about it. The movie’s not bad, it’s just not like I imagined it would be for all those years.”

Peter rubs his eyes, so tired, but uninclined to sleep. His subconscious is likely to torment him if he tries. Almost thirty-six hours after rescue, he still sees blood, still hears screaming, and it’s sure to leak into his dreams, seep into them like thick, black ink. “The first one is always better, trust me,” he says wearily. Then, he can’t help himself; “Has Tony come out at all?”

“Once, to get coffee. I said “hi”, he nodded at me.” Quill shrugs as he sifts through the largest library of movies ever compiled using a hologram being projected by the arm of the couch. “You guys just lived through an actual nightmare. I’m honestly surprised he’s up and walking around, man, you didn’t see how... well... hey! Jurassic Park, what the hell is this, like a dinosaur zoo? I’m curious.” He selects the movie and waves the hologram away. The Universal Pictures globe appears with an unnerving chorus of singing voices, and Peter tries not to think of home. Of Earth and all the comforts available there.

“Shoot her!” a man shouts from the television, but Peter has eyes only for the box of Iron Man scraps, and Tony won’t mind if he uses them, right? With a wave of his hand he pulls up a screen and after typing in a short query, is privy to Tony’s work on artificial intelligence, some of it dating all the way back into the eighties. The jet must contain a copy of Tony’s entire home database.

“Woah!” Quill shouts as a disposable is pulled, screaming into the temporary velociraptor enclosure. “So, that was awesome.”

Peter is busy attempting to wrap his mind around some of the most complex math he’s ever seen, but he still smiles. “You won’t be disappointed. It is one hundred-percent about a dinosaur zoo.”

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It’s not that Tony wants to avoid everyone.

Well, let’s be honest, he kind of does. He just feels so... pathetic, squishy and pliable as Play-Doh. Exposed like a live wire. Glowing and spitting and so tired he almost appears drunk, yet too terrified to close his eyes, Tony hides because he’s good at it.

And he knows Peter’s getting sick of it, judging by the dirty looks he’s blessed with whenever he leaves the saferoom-turned temporary workshop for a quick resupply. Quill abstains from judgment of course, smiling brightly and expressing excitement at the sight of him, but Peter doesn’t hide his contempt.

“Need any help?” Peter asks with a shitty tone, and Tony shakes his head while he pours coffee. Speaking is too painful, and he’ll have to spit before he utters one word, or it’s sprinkler time. This is simply easier, staying quiet, staying isolated. Two days in, His new teeth have barely begun to breach not so cooperative gums, and it’s a fucking mess in there.

Peter shrugs and glowers at whatever abomination he’s constructing out of armor scraps. “Just let me know,” he says.

Tony nods, retreats into his workshop, and spends ten minutes trying to get his pain under control while wondering what the hell he has to do to deserve a goddamn break in his world.
It’s been three days since Tony’s said a word. And even longer since Peter’s slept.

But he has to give it to himself; he tries. When Quill all but orders him to attempt sleep, he grumpily goes through the motions. He showers, cleans and re-bandages his ribs, brushes his teeth and dims the lights real low before climbing into his bunk wearing boxers and a black wife beater. With the sheet pulled up to his chest, Peter lies on his back and exhales slowly-

And stares angrily at Tony’s empty bunk above him. For three long days he’s waited for Tony to say something, anything to him, to ask Peter for help with something, or, god forbid, if he’s doing okay after their traumatizing experience. Quill’s around, and that’s nice, but Peter doesn’t know Quill like he knows Tony. Talking to Tony is easy and loose, comfortable like an old, favorite t-shirt. And Peter desperately needs advice on how to deal with the memories. Tony has PTSD, has had it for years, even mentioned being treated for it. He’s got to have some advice on how to cope, because if something doesn’t give soon, Peter is going to fucking snap.

*Don’t think about it. Sleepy time.*

But how is he supposed sleep when Tony’s screams are so loud, and it’s turning Peter’s blood to ice, and his heart is beating a million miles a second-?

His right foot won’t stop moving. Peter groans, rubs his eyes, wonders if there’s a way to erase memories.

No, this is bullshit. Tony needs to talk to him.

Growling, he wrenches himself out of bed.

---

Peter’s knocking at the door again. Tony’s not sure what he’s supposed to do about it. Not when he’s busy dry heaving into a trash can because he made the mistake of nodding off and woke up with a mouthful of blood, thinking he was actively drowning in it-

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It’s been four days, almost five, since Tony went mute and Peter is entering the finishing touches into the CPU of his little experiment, determined to get Tony to talk, and positive this should do the trick.

“Come on,” he whispers to his four-legged creation, forged from black and gold metal. The first initiation sequence he types yields no results, and the vessel he’s built to house a synthetic mind just sits there on the desk, lifeless as a thumbtack. Groaning, Peter shakes his head at it. “Come on, don’t do this, man.” Double checking his algorithm, he discovers the problem and chuckles. “So amateur,
god.”

And following a few corrective keystrokes, he’s created life.

Real laughter, the first he’s felt in days, bubbles up from his twisting stomach as the lithe, metallic creature rouses before his eyes. It scrambles to four dainty paws, arching its back and inching away from Peter, regarding him as a predator. An enemy. A vicious hiss shows off the sharpened fangs Peter chose to endow it with, and a pair of triangular ears lie flat against its head.

“Hey, it’s okay,” he tells it gently, holding his hand out and rubbing his fingers together to produce a sound he knows should be tantalizing for it. “It’s cool, little dude. Come here.”

“What the hell did you just do?” Quill wants to know as he peers over his shoulder, and Peter smiles, clicking his tongue. The thing relaxes only a smidgen, reducing the arch in its back and creeping up to ‘sniff’ at Peter’s fingers. After a moment, it seems to accept him, and presses its face into his hand, a loud purring emanating from it as it curves its back into his touch. Smooth, flexible metal slides against his skin, surprisingly satisfying. And it’s warm.

“Wow,” Peter chuckles, fascinated by what he’s just done. The cat, produced from mere scraps, places its front paws on Peter’s thigh and stretches its back legs, claws coming out to pick lightly at his clothes. It lets loose a tiny, trembling meow, and transfers its whole body into Peter’s lap, where it sits, waits, and looks up at him, purring so realistically that a blind man would think there was an actual cat in the room.

Peter can barely contain his excitement.

“A cat, huh?” Quill asks. Peter goes to pat it with a reluctant right hand, not wanting to scare it away, encouraged when it presses its head into it, glowing eyes disappearing behind clicking eyelids for a blissful second. “All the cats I’ve ever met have been assholes.”

“I like cats,” Peter says. “I’ve never had a pet, but my buddy Ned has this cat named Checkers, and he digs me.” His creation turns around twice and lies down in the nook of Peter’s crossed legs, a pair of golden, mechanical paws kneading into his calf. It purrs and purrs. At the same time, it seems to glare at Quill with judgement in its gaze. It’s segmented tail flops about sporadically.

“What’s its problem?” Quill posits, glaring back at the cat. It merely shifts its paws and blinks slowly, like royalty, looking off into the distance behind Quill as though he’s not worth its time.

“I think it’s judging you,” Peter laughs as Quill curls a lip at it.

“See? Assholes, all of them,” he says, returning to his couch. “Good job, though.”

It’s nice to hear, but he isn’t trying to impress Quill.

An hour later, after running strict diagnostics, Peter is outside the safe room, holding the metal cat beneath the armpits and talking himself into entering. Tony is in there, silent, obstinate and captivated by his work, grumpy and so not in the mood for traumatized seventeen-year-old spider-boys seeking approval.

And yet, the door opens for him before he can enter his code. So that’s a good sign. He’s been locked out for days.

Tony has his feet crossed up on the desk he must have made, and is lounging as far as his chair will allow, running through data, blue eyes flicking as he sips black coffee.
Peter sets the cat down. "Hey, check it out," he says, and when Tony turns to look at him, is disturbed to see that even after five days, Extremis hasn’t completely rebuilt his mouth for him yet. “I- I gave Artificial Intelligence a whack. First time.”

Tony raises his eyebrows, surprised. Then he looks down, watches the cat explore the new area, its back dipped as low as its ears are, its nasal sensors twitching and working to analyze the environment. Curiosity crosses Tony’s face, and he squints at Peter, playfully suspicious, before letting his hand drop close to the floor. Snapping his fingers twice, Tony clicks his tongue and waits. The cat stops and stares at his hand, forever it seems, frozen in place, and Tony shrugs, gets back to work, glancing periodically at the cat, because it’s started creeping towards him.

“You built this?” Tony asks, and it takes a moment for Peter to realize that Tony has just spoken actual words for the first time in days. His voice is gruff with neglect, but it’s so nice to hear.

Peter clears his throat. “Yeah. Programmed it, too.” The cat sits next to Tony’s chair and gazes up at him, tail flicking, enthralled by his indifference towards it.

“It’s… damn impressive,” Tony says, smiling, but not as brightly as usual. Not enough to expose growing teeth.

After a rapid tapping of back paws, the cat leaps onto Tony’s desk and hunkers close to his project, tilting its head as he finishes some precision welding. Tony reaches out to pat it, and it draws its face ridiculously far back, until it’s allowed to ‘sniff’ Tony’s fingers. Only then does it push into the waiting hand, letting its back travel lithely behind. It purrs, and Peter grins.

“I don’t know what to call it,” he says.

“Whatever you want,” Tony advises as the cat climbs into his lap, lays there like a princess, and rumbles happily while Tony strokes it. “You created it. Amazing job, by the way- ah! Claws and everything, huh? Gosh, the detail on this thing is exquisite.”

Peter thinks for a moment. “Leia,” he says, and Tony snorts.

“Like, from Star Wars?”

“Yeah from Star Wars,” Peter says defensively. “You said whatever I want-“

“I’m just shitting you, calm down Spider-Nerd,” Tony remarks, stroking Leia, who sticks a paw out and rests her head on it, closing her eyes, perfectly content within the safety of Tony’s lap. “This is incredible. You built and programmed this in five days?”

“Well, four,” Peter says, “spent the first day making new web-shooters.” He waggles his sleeves up to show Tony the gear.

“Okay, four days, then,” Tony corrects himself with an eye-roll and a flourish. “That’s even worse. No way you’ve slept-“

“Yeah, and what have you been doing all this time?” Peter interrupts, lightly defensive and not in the mood for a lecture.

Tony sighs. “Running into dead-ends.”

“You’ve been avoiding us,” Peter accuses. “You’ve been hiding.”

“I’ve been cutting eight teeth,” Tony says, “You ever regrown adult teeth? It’s not exactly a luxury
cruise. It’s difficult to want to interact with people when I have to spit blood every three minutes or so.”

“Okay, but what have you been doing?” Peter wants to know.

“Like I said, hitting cul-de-sacs left and right,” Tony grouses, fiddling with the tools on his desk, “come to find out, I’m not going to be able to forge an Infinity Stone without a significant magical boost and about fifty million years of continuous astronomical heat and pressure, neither of which I’m capable of producing.”

“Oh…” Peter says, disappointed, knowing how much stock Tony had put into decking them all out with synthetic Infinity Stones.

“Yeah, ‘oh’,” Tony says with a huff, working his glowing jaw, spitting into a cup that reminds Peter so much of the one Uncle Ben carried when he returned from Afghanistan. Apparently, Ben had taken up a dipping habit while deployed, and Peter remembers with a pang of nostalgia how much May hated it, how she harped on him to quit. Peter himself recalls the spicy scent of wintergreen on Ben’s breath fondly, associated it with finally getting him back from the Army.

Tony clears his throat. “But don’t worry, I’m adjusting. We will be ready, with or without fake stones. I can still outfit them with Badassium shields, give their aero rigs a boost, help rocket draw up some repulsor weapons. I should probably take the Reality Stone for another whirl as well, get the readings we need…”

Something strikes Peter then.

“And what are your plans for me?” he asks, stiffly, dreading the answer.

Tony looks away, shakes his head, fidgets with a screwdriver, and Peter knows what he’s going to say before the first word is uttered; “Once we get to Titan, and I’m cleared to enter Earth’s atmosphere without contracting a virus, I’m going to escort you to your Aunt’s.”

Hot, rampaging anger, amplified by sleep deprivation, hunger and near delirium, rushes through him as a burst of flames. “Still on that, huh?” Peter says with a sneer. “Trying to get rid of me.”

“Look, I’m not sure what you expected,” Tony says wearily, resting his temple against a closed fist, “you’re seventeen, I’ve essentially kidnapped you, and your family wants you back. I’m not just trying to get rid of you, stop being dramatic.”

“Really? After all that? After what we’ve seen and been through, you still want to just drop me off and leave me to watch from the damn sidelines? This is Thanos!” Peter yells, and the cat leaps from Tony’s lap, startled, running off somewhere, “this is potential universal destruction, and I can help, I want to help-”

“That’s not up for me, or you, to decide,” Tony says, rubbing his face. “If you get permission from May, which I doubt is achievable, you can tag along. The rules haven’t changed.” He winces, stretches his jaw. “Fuck-“

“She doesn’t know what’s coming!” Peter shouts, remembering Kree brutality, and not wanting such cruel tendrils to ever reach the planet Earth. He will do anything, anything at all, to prevent his home from being occupied, by Thanos, or the Kree, or anyone. “She has no idea how dire things are!”

“So, try and convince her,” Tony says, and Peter scoffs. “I don’t know what else to tell you, Peter. It’s just the way things are.”
The cat is rubbing against Peter’s legs, purring loudly. He glowers down at it and stumbles a bit when the world shifts.

“You should get some sleep,” Tony comments.

Peter emits a dark, sardonic chuckle. “Yeah? You think? Well, I would if I could, Tony.”

“Christ, Pete, what do you want me to say?” Tony asks tiredly.

“Just…” Peter flails for his words, “how have you been dealing with it? Because I’m not, okay? I’m not dealing with it very well, and, I guess I just want the truth of how you’re doing for once. I want to know I’m not alone.”

Tony studies him for a full minute. “I’m a wreck,” he admits with an eye-wrinkling smile, “you’re right, I haven’t slept. I haven’t eaten, mostly because… well, you know.” A deep sigh shakes him as he shifts his jaw. “Yes, I’m having flashbacks, yes, I’m constantly thinking about it, of course I’m terrified to go to sleep, because I already know what awaits me, and I can’t have a single sip to stave it off, which I crave, by the way. And it’s not like I didn’t want to talk to you, I thought… I thought maybe some distance would help you, since, you know, it happened to me-“

It smacks Peter then. “You thought being around me would remind me of it,” Peter says disbelievingly.

Tony cringes and rubs his forehead. “I guess that’s one way to put it.”

“God, that is… that’s nuts, because I’ve needed to talk to you for the last four days, Tony,” Peter says, sour as an unripe grape. “Shit, you haven’t even asked about how I’m doing, or anything-”

“Could you give me a break?” Tony asks, slumping his shoulders, voice coated with fatigue. “All this crazy stuff that happens to me? It takes a toll. I’m in pain, I’m exhausted, I’m not thinking clearly-”

“Well thanks for finally admitting it,” Peter says with a sharp edge, “see? That wasn’t so hard.”

“You know what, you little-“ Tony growls, looking like he’s repressing what he wants to say. “Maybe I just didn’t want to talk, you ever consider that? Maybe I have nothing to say right now because I’m having a little difficulty processing the fact that a towering blue alien recently tore seven teeth from my skull. And what the hell is this fucking attitude you’re copping, where you think I’ve got some kind of obligation to let you talk my damn ear off whenever you want-“

“Wow,” Peter says, hurt. “You told me once that I could talk to you about anything, but, I mean, if that’s how you feel about it…”

Tony scoffs, curses under his breath, “no, Peter, that’s not-“

“What, that’s ‘not what you meant’?” Peter finishes for him, venomous, and Tony’s glare is part pissed off and part dumbfounded. “Do you ever say what you mean?”

“Alright then, I’ll just say it;” Tony spits on the floor. “Do you realize that I was tortured less than a week ago-?”

“DO YOU REALIZE I HAD TO WATCH IT?” Peter roars with tears in his eyes, and Tony shuts his mouth.

They glare at each other, a rare, tense silence persisting between them, sparking invisibly in the air.
until a knock at the door startles both of them. A quick glance at the security footage reveals Quill grinning and waving at the camera.

“Yeah, what?” Tony snaps into the microphone irritably.

“Let me in, you won’t regret it,” Quill says with the air of a salesman.

“Excuse me if I’m skeptical,” Tony responds, but opens the door anyway so Quill can enter.

“Alright.” Quill puts his hands up defensively as he walks in. “So I admit it, I’ve been eavesdropping, and I can tell you guys are super tired- oh, and glad to see you’re talking again, Stark-“

“Get to the point, Mission Impossible,” Tony says irately.

“Well, see, I spoke to Gamora,” Quill continues, digging in his pocket, “because she has these little, uh, berries she picked up from Knowhere, right? Well she agreed to part with some.” He extracts a sealed container and holds it up. It holds two purple berries, each about the size of a single Tylenol tablet. “Best sleep-aid in the universe, my dudes.”

Peter turns to Tony and finds him gazing at the berries longingly.

“Is it a drug?” Tony asks quietly.

“No, man, it’s a fruit,” Quill replies.

“But it acts like a drug,” Tony sighs, and Peter knows he’s reluctant because Tony used to utilize a different substance to put himself to sleep.

“It doesn’t get you high, or whatever, if that’s what you’re worried about,” Quill assures them. “It’s okay to need help, Tony.”

“Sure,” Tony says, “until ‘help’ transforms into psychological reliance, and then inevitably, physical dependence.”

“Won’t happen with these,” Quill says, shaking the container, “plus Gamora has the only supply, and it takes an act of god to pry just one from her very strong hands, let alone two.”

“Well, I’m sold,” Peter says, throwing Tony a look, and approaching Quill with a hand held flat. After tapping one out into Peter’s hand, Quill smiles at Tony, who glares rail road spikes back.

“What do you think?” Quill asks, eyebrows dancing, waving the last berry in the air tantalizingly. “Ah? Ah? Best sleep of your life, dude. Come on, have some faith in me, I wouldn’t steer you wrong.”

And then, Tony does something he has never done before; he looks to Peter for guidance. It’s clear as day, even though it’s unspoken, and in that one glance, Peter glimpses a lost, broken and desperate soul frantically in need of a break. So, Peter nods, shrugs, lets him know it’s no big deal, that there’s no shame in it.

Tony sighs.

“Okay,” he finally says, throwing his hands up in defeat. “Fine, fuck, the peer pressure, it’s like college all over again.”
In their room, the temperature is satisfactory, a fan hums quietly above them, airflow is sufficient, and the lights are dimmed almost to blackness. It’s perfect, and Tony awaits the berry’s effects with a giddy eagerness that’s almost dangerously euphoric. Finally. Sleep is coming, medicinally assisted, uninterrupted sleep is within his grasp-

“Hey, Tony?”

Well, that was short lived. “Yeah, Pete?”

“I’m sorry.”

Tony scoffs and drapes his arm over his eyes. “God, what the hell for?”

“Mow.”

“For being selfish,” Peter elaborates. “For expecting you to just get over it and… and take care of me.”

“You did nothing wrong,” Tony says, shoving at his pillow, stuffing it into a position so it’s not touching his sore mouth when he lays on it. “I chose to care from afar, and that wasn’t really caring at all, was it? My dad used to do the exact same shit.”

“Mow.”

“How are your teeth?” Peter asks quietly.

Tony sighs, tongue running over eight short molars. “Regenerating, thankfully.”

“How much longer will it take, do you think?”

“Two days.”

An ear-shredding scratching at the base of their door startles them.

“Mow.”

“You added all the annoying bells and whistles,” Tony remarks ruefully, allowing Peter’s cat access to the room using no more than a single azure-tinted blink. “Thrilling.”

“I tried to make it as realistic as possible,” Peter says as Leia sits there, peering in the room at them with an unsettling wide-eyed stare.

“Come on, cat,” Tony coaxes, “I didn’t open it to let a breeze in.”

They all wait in silence for a minute.

Tony scoffs. “It’s just sitting there. Do something.”

“Come here, Leia.” Peter clicks his tongue and Leia just blinks at him.

“That was effective,” Tony remarks within a groan, rubbing his eyes.

“Got a better idea?”
“I will turn you off,” Tony tells it, “I swear to god, I could euthanize you just by thinking it. Don’t try me while I’m on my way to berry dream land.”

Leia comes clicking into the room at a low slink.

“Oh, good, she reacts to verbal abuse,” Peter says dryly, “you two should get along just fine, then.”

“It’s called ‘oral troubleshooting’. It always worked on my bots.” Tony smirks, closing the door as soon as all four limbs and a flicking tail are inside. Moments later, and to his utter surprise, the cat jumps up into Tony’s bunk, not Peter’s like he expected. Though its eyes and various other parts of it glow, the light has dimmed to an acceptable, calming level. It kneels down by his knees and purrs, mechanical eyelids drooping low. And it’s warm.

“Did you put thermal in this?” Tony asks, rubbing behind its ear, unable to control his smile when the damn thing happily pushes into his hand. “It’s not going to catch my bed on fire, is it?”

“Um, she shouldn’t?”

“That was comforting, how you made that statement into a question.” He pats it, and it stretches itself out along his abdomen, warm and rumbling in a pleasant, soothing tone. “Did you program it to like me, or something?”

“I programmed her to be a cat,” Peter says, fighting a yawn and losing. “Naturally, she’s traitorous and ungrateful, as are all cats.”

“Aww, listen to him, Leia, he’s bitter,” Tony mutters, petting the thing, and feeling a silly amount of excitement when she rolls over and presses her head into his stomach. Exhaustion suddenly becomes something pleasant, peaceful and it descends on him in layers. His eyelids droop…

“Hey, Tony?” The voice from the bunk below him is soft and vulnerable.

“Huh? What?”

“You’ve, um…” there’s a long pause, “you’ve been to therapy…”

“Yeah?” Tony says slowly.

“Did they teach you anything that worked?”

“What, do you mean, like, coping skills?” Tony wonders, and it hits him then; Peter’s truly struggling with trauma. And Tony has been absent for it. *Fuck!* ‘Are you okay?’

“…Not really.”

“You been having flashbacks?” Tony asks, rolling slowly onto his back, careful not to disturb Peter’s ingenious little invention.

“I think so,” Peter says, sounding hesitant.

“Whole world disappears and you feel like it’s happening again?”

“Yup.”

“Can’t stop thinking about it?”

“Yeah, man,” Peter says, groaning, “just, how do you deal with it?”
Tony shakes his head and hates himself. This is his fault. Peter didn’t need distance, he needed support and care and someone to guide him. What the fuck was he thinking?

“It’s going to be really bad at first,” Tony starts somberly, hoping he has enough time to keep going, and pledging to continue at a later date should the berry work its magic too soon. “Develop a sentence to use, a sequence of items or names or pets or whatever, something calming to repeat to yourself when you get lost in it, something that will help bring you back to reality.”

“Like, my address, or… what?” Peter asks.

Leia is kneading his side. It’s not bad. “Whatever you can use to remind yourself that it’s over now,” Tony says, “For example, mine was ‘I am Iron Man, co-leader of the Avengers, my teammates are… uh, Steve, Natasha, Bruce, Clint and Thor.’” He scoffs, shaking his head ruefully at the memory. That team was his life at one point, saved it, even. Gave him more purpose than any challenge he’s ever faced. “I may have to change it, now.”

“I am Spider-Man, and I’m from Queens. I look out for the little guy. My family members are May, Ben, Ned, MJ and Tony.”

It shouldn’t affect him like it does, but Tony finds himself swallowing tears when he hears the inclusion of his name on such a very short list. “G-good,” he says, willing his voice not to crack. “That’s good, sure, use that.”

“Is there anything else?” Peter wants to know.

“Yes,” Tony admits, ready to talk until unconsciousness claims him, feeling so guilty over having ignored this traumatized child, that he’s prepared to do whatever he must to make it right. “When it happens, when you’re convinced you’re reliving it, immediately recognize it for what it is; fake. You’re smarter than the PTSD, you’re stronger than it, and that’s the first thing you should tell yourself. Keep your eyes open, and see past the fake things, focus on what you know is real, because, Christ, logically, that crazy shit can’t be happening again, right? Am I right?”

“Right.”

“What are the odds?” Tony chuckles, “ultimately, what are the odds that something so fucked up is actually happening again?”

“…I don’t know.”

“Oh, and talk about it when you need to,” Tony supplies, stroking Leia, and very suddenly growing comfortable and weighty. Anytime, now. Next stop; Dreamland. “I’m serious. Look, I was stupid before, alright? I barely know how to deal with my own problems, let alone anyone else’s… and yet, I’m willing to try, for you. I’m bad at showing it, but I care about you, Peter. I love you, kid, and I’m sorry this nasty shit has been happening to us, and- and I want to help you in any way I can. So, whenever you need to, come find me. I’ll make time.”

A few minutes pass, and Tony thinks Peter might be asleep. And then; “Tony,” he whimpers, “I- I just want to forget.”

Tony has to step over the shattered pieces of his heart just to find his words amongst all the wreckage. “I know. I always did, too,” he manages to say, draping his arm over the side of the bunk, and it takes all of two seconds before Peter is grabbing his hand in a tight, desperate grip, which Tony returns. “But you won’t. The best you can do is learn to live with it.”

“I don’t want to go home.”
Tony sighs, squeezes Peter’s hand. “I’m sorry, kid,” he says, his grip loosening as darkness floods his vision and his breathing slows so rapidly. “I’m sorry… I’m-“
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

I have been a bad author. So bad. So terrible. No updates for weeks, no replies to comments (which I will get working on right after this here nap I'm about to take). Sorry guys, Christmastime gets me into a nasty funk damn near every year. I just hate it. The family on my husband's side gossips and talks shit to me about how I should have stayed in the Army, which is a huge insult, and they don't even know what kind of fucking triggers they're pulling with that bullshit. Because god forbid we ask for a tiny bit of financial assistance after returning from living overseas for three years so we can get our bearings. GOD FORBID. They'd rather see me miserable or on the business end of some rifle.

And the family on my side... Christ. My cousins brought their entire Christmas over to unwrap while at the annual Xmas eve family get together with my grandparents, who I only get to see about twice a year. Coach purses, Iphones and fucking Hatchimals were chaotically revealed for an entire hour right in front of my daughter, who, bless her heart, just adored the few presents she received, but was confused all the same. Just a goddamn infuriating, blatant show of 'look how prosperous we are!' And what did they bring for my daughter? They brought my six year old daughter a ten dollar box of toddler blocks and barely said two words to us. Fuck them. I don't know where the hell the disdain came from, I literally never see these people, but fuck them. Never leave for a long time and come back. You will be a stranger when you return. Everyone just sort of moves on without you. And it's never as obvious as it is around Xmas. I used to cry for hours on holidays while away, before my husband was command sponsored and able to live with me, because I missed home so much. Now, I constantly wonder why.

Wow, I'm sorry, that ended up being a novel. How pathetic of me. It's just been stewing. I don't have anyone to talk to about it, as I will insult someone inevitably, so I just smile in life, and it comes out here. It really shouldn't. I'm sorry.

ANYWAY, I hope you are all having fun with this. My goal is to finish it before Infinity War, and I want to do it ASAP so I can stop trying to freaking compete with it. I mean, did you see my man Tony? Looking sharp as fuck with that armor just sliding fluidly across his body, god, its so beautiful, and this fic will never live up to it. I'm extremely encouraged by the footage I've seen so far, and so damn excited I could poop.

Tony doesn’t sleep very well anymore, hasn’t for years. Since his parent’s untimely death, he’s tossed and turned through most nights. Not even the most severe drunken state could render him unconscious for more than four hours at a time.

So, when he wakes with that pressure around his eyes indicating having slept too long, it draws a frightened gasp from him, and he’s momentarily frozen with fear as Extremis boots and he becomes less blind. Last time he slept so long, they ended up in the tight clutches of the Kree.

Numbers flash before his gaze, painting a story with such speed, only an enhanced mind could actively comprehend it without intense study.
Nine hours! Tony curses under his breath. Anything could happen in nine hours. That’s a long time to be unaware in space.

A shaky sigh flutters his chest. Ten more seconds is all he needs to ensure their physical integrity, that their life support systems are online, that the warp cores are functional, and a traipe through the surveillance system locates all his crew mates, present and breathing and relatively unharmed.

Relatively. Peeking cautiously over the side of his bunk reveals Peter, dead to the world, metaphorically, not literally, Christ, Tony can’t even think about such a scenario. And it’s good. Tony’s glad he’s sleeping, and incredibly peacefully to boot. But why is that such an accomplishment–?

Then it all comes back. Tony rolls back over and hides his eyes beneath his forearm, groaning drearily as he recalls Peter crying and revealing how much he’s been struggling with a familiar battery of symptoms. How Tony’s gone and taken him away from his home and his Aunt and has managed to legitimately traumatize the child in less than a month. His brown thumb, working its shitty magic again.

And Tony’s plan? Drop Peter off at his Aunt’s for her to deal with while he runs off to save the world. And that happens in less than five days.

A panic attack lurks along the fences he’s erected to keep them out, growling its intentions. In five days, he will not only have to return Peter to his home and the waiting arms of his tigress Aunt, but will also need to begin locating the fugitive Avengers. Which means speaking to Steve. A task he dreads.

Fuck, one thing at a time, Stark. Tony grips his chest and breathes deeply until the anxiety beast leaves. All future freak outs will have to accept rain checks until Thanos is a distant afterthought.

Goddamn, what good is nine hours of uninterrupted sleep if he’s just going to awake from it as stressed and tormented as he was before his head hit the pillow?

At least his mouth has stopped paining him. He stares at the ceiling and counts his teeth for a while, wondering when the hell it became odd to possess all of them. What an insane journey he’s undertaken. It makes him shake his head when he looks back on it. It makes him feel sorry for himself.

Ugh, enough of that.

Breakfast crosses his mind, slowly and succulently, like a Denny’s commercial. He hasn’t told anyone, but he did stash some real food aboard, saved only for the most important circumstances. Like… well, he doesn’t know. But he does know he needs to have a very serious conversation with Peter. No better way to cushion the blow he’s about to deliver than with a thick layer of fluffy pancakes and eggs. He’ll see how he feels after a shower.

Extremis granted Tony a particular feline grace, and he uses it to exit his bunk without creating a sound. He’s still swift to check his sleeping roommate, unsure of his ability to thwart the kid’s sixth sense. But Peter remains asleep, one hand tucked beneath his pillow, the other, resting against the top of it. His face is relaxed, slack, earplugs in, thank the gods of Asgard.

What an adorable little shit. Tony watches him for a moment, waits for the whining stretch, but it doesn’t come. The cat is lying down by Peter’s feet, and there’s a small whir as it raises its head and glares at him with unamused eyes. Tony puts his index finger to his lips as he backs slowly out of the room.
Detection avoided, for the most part. He slips through the door and uses Extremis to slow the hydraulics, closing it behind him with nothing more than a pressurized hiss. Peter needs all the uninterrupted sleep he can get.

Tony hits the restroom with determined speed, gliding through his normal routine and remaining as detached from it as possible. Showering was already enough of an endeavor, now he must grimace and gag his way through brushing his teeth as well, because they still bleed and sting when he does. It brings it back. He’s ashamed to admit that it brings it back.

He clutches the sink as he catches his breath.

Only a day longer now, and it should be over. The bleeding at least, and the pain, hopefully lessening the reminders. Already, the blue glow of his healing nanites in action has dimmed into a rare, spontaneous ripple of light through his cheeks. He mulls it over as he checks himself in the mirror, counts his teeth obsessively and runs his tongue across them just to make damn sure they’re all there. Not that he needed another tick, or anything. Another neurosis.

It takes everything he has not to punch the mirror. Why can’t he just experience a thing and move on like everyone else? What the hell is wrong with him?

And how exactly is he supposed to go about having the inevitable conversation with Peter when he’s so obviously off balance himself? Tony dresses in fresh black clothes with automatic movements as he frets over it. Peter is sick, and smart enough to know so. The kid has experienced multiple war-veteran level events of the traumatic nature, and he’s dealing with it about as well as a seventeen-year-old kid is expected to; poorly.

Once in the kitchen, Tony allows Extremis to take over his movements, practically excuses himself from his physical form and just thinks while a program cooks breakfast. There’s too much to consider. Earth is close enough to toss a dime at, and within days, Tony will be faced with a cacophony of painful responsibilities. The first and most important of which, being returning Peter and facing May.

Tony swallows audibly and cracks an egg with a little too much pressure, shattering it in his hand. Cursing, he washes it away in the sink before grabbing a new one.

May will need to be informed. One way or another, either from Tony’s mouth or Peter’s, May must be made aware of her nephew’s psychological state, of the incredible things he’s been through, of the wounds he’s suffered, both physically and mentally. A journey awaits him. A potentially expensive one, but of course, Tony plans to offset any financial burden associated with treatment. He’s compiled a list of reputable therapists he personally recommends, as well as an entire database of literature he’s found helpful over the years, but he’s intimately aware that it will not be enough to earn May’s forgiveness. Nothing will ever be enough to earn it, and he doesn’t blame her. If she straight up attacks him, he will do absolutely nothing to defend himself.

That’s not what it’s about anyway, easing his own guilt, being forgiven. Not at all. Tony’s motivation lies in ensuring that Peter is going to be okay, that the happy, laughing teenager Tony knows and loves stays happy and laughing. PTSD is a dark, dank pit one can easily stumble into and get stuck in.

The real question is whether Tony will be allowed back in Peter’s life after all this. The thought occurs to him like a stab wound, sharp and painful, and shaking hands spill pancake batter on the counter. If enforced separation is the case, Peter will want to disobey it, that’s just obvious. Tony will have to refuse to entertain such delinquency, because he respects the fact that he’s not Peter’s actual blood relative, and has absolutely no say in what happens to him. Only May holds that incredibly
important privilege, at least for a year more. Tony merely stole it from her for a couple weeks.

Sometimes, Tony thinks maybe Doctor Wu didn’t actually remove all the shrapnel from his heart.

Peter will argue with him. He can feel it like an elder feels a storm coming in his bones. Peter won’t be thrilled about telling May he might just have contracted a rather nasty mental illness from his considerably limited time under Tony’s leadership. But it doesn’t matter. Weathering May’s cyclonic contempt doesn’t matter, because PTSD can be dangerous.

Tony can attest to this, has gone completely off the rails and in his terror and paranoia, built an entire army of what he now likes to refer to as ‘scare-crow suits’. Flimsy and barely tested, pumped out like cheap goods in a Chinese sweat shop, they barely did their job, and often blew over in the softest of winds. They were the product of an overly-active, fearful and infinitely intelligent mind on no sleep and seven cups of coffee at any one time. Pepper wasn’t pleased. It was sad, really.

Tony shakes his head as he recalls it, how fucking tired he was. The exhaustion had run bone deep, as sleep became a thing to dread. It crippled him. The fear and mania blizzard he endured, it drove him nearly to madness as he initiated a desperate effort to avoid sleep. Night terrors were the only thing that awaited him, after all. Nothing else mattered. He was going to stop a secondary invasion and stay awake forever at the same time, and he pitied whoever tried to tell him it was impossible.

PTSD can be dangerous. How in the sevens hells is Tony supposed to deal with this?

Tony stabs at the eggs while wearing a frown and a deeply furrowed brow. Many fights await him, sooner rather than later, each one, another cinderblock added to the suffocating tower being built atop his chest. Peter, May, Thanos, Ross, the Black Order… Steve and the other Avengers. So much to do, so many bridges to unburn for the sake of life itself. This little space vacation he’s been on is almost over. Now the real uphill climb begins.

It’s enough to overwhelm him.

And goddammit, he is going to miss Peter so much.

Tony blinks, sniffs and wipes his face on his sleeve. He’s got to collect himself before Peter sees him like this.

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Peter wakes to incessant scratching noises.

“Mow.”

“Ugh, no,” he groans, rolling over. Sleep is so nice, so alluring. He descends back into it slowly, and his bed feels freaking ethereal-

“Mow.” More scratching noises. And then the aroma hits him, an achingly familiar one; someone is cooking breakfast. Is that even possible? Last time he checked he was hurtling through space with nothing but space shakes and the Guardians’ strange food available.

With a groan, he pulls the covers over his head. Though delicious smelling, it’s making his gut roil painfully, as he hasn’t been able to properly stomach food at all for days. And yet, it’s stirring a pang
of nostalgia in him, a quick, flashing memory of Aunt May planting a loving kiss in his hair as she takes his plate for him.

He can discern bacon, eggs, toast, maybe even pancakes, and who the hell is cooking?

Relenting to wakefulness, he sits up, removes his earplugs, stretches, yawns and allows his sixth sense to flood him with information. Quill is passed out on the sofa, and Tony is-

“There’s no way,” Peter says under his breath, chuckling incredulously, because Tony is in the kitchen. And there’s that delicious breakfast aroma. Is Tony cooking? Since when? Did something happen, is the world ending already? Did the Reality Stone conjure a new universe without his knowing?

This is unprecedented. Peter hurriedly slips on his socks and digs his shoes out from under his bunk. He’s not exactly hungry, but he’ll be damned if he misses an opportunity to glimpse at Tony cooking. After a couple swipes of his hands through an unruly bedhead jungle, he’s leaving the room and heading for the kitchen. Leia bounds out ahead of him and disappears around the corner into the communal area. Without need for a litter box, Peter wonders where she’s headed off to so fast.

“Morning,” Tony greets him cheerfully with a bright smile, and Peter’s relieved to see that Extremis is now nothing more than a dull, rare flicker in his cheeks instead of a stormy bluster. The healing process must be almost complete. Explains breakfast, no doubt, Tony wants to try out his newly rebuilt mouth.

The kitchen is a mess. Open packages everywhere, torn plastic, spilled pancake batter drying in thick little mounds atop the counter. But the mess is worth it. Eggs sizzle happily on a huge griddle, scrambled beside pancakes, and an overflowing plate of cooked bacon sits ready. Peter smiles. This is great, Tony didn’t have to do this.

“Nice spread. I thought you didn’t have food aboard,” he remarks casually with a sly look as he slides into a stool at the little table.

“Uh, first of all, you should apologize, because my space shakes are food, dammit,” Tony says, feigning defensiveness and waving a spatula at him.

“Are you kidding me?” Peter groans and rests his cheek on his forearm, watching Tony from a sideways perspective, “those shakes taste like liquified moss, and you had food aboard this whole time?”

“So, you’ve had a little taste of nature. So, what? Don’t act like it’s not something your generation needs,” Tony says, flipping a pancake with grace and skill Peter didn’t expect.

“Psh, you’re one to talk.”

“Here, you complain, and yet that liquified moss still kept your skinny ass alive and unhungry for the past few weeks. And ungrateful, considering your stowaway status.”

“They taste like you got them out of a dumpster behind a Smoothie King.”

This earns him a laugh from Tony, a real one that flashes his new teeth, not one of those sarcastic, mocking ones that boils the blood. It’s nice to see him this way; energized and apparently free of pain, feeling good enough to cook and laugh at Peter’s jokes. It’s just so calming. Proof that the bad thing is over now and Tony is okay.

The eggs are done. Peter watches with a dumb grin as Tony scrapes them onto a plate. “They’re
cooked in bacon grease,” he reveals as he deposits the plate on the table. “They are both incredibly delicious and at the height of unhealthiness. Should be right up your alley.”

Peter chews his lip, then he’s blurting it anyway; “this might sound bad, but I didn’t think you knew how to cook-”

“Why? Because you think I was born with a silver spoon in my mouth, and the food on that spoon was probably prepared by an army of nannies?” Tony cocks his head from side to side as he sets plates full of bacon and toast on the table. Only pancakes left now. “Which is true, it’s completely true.” Peter sniggers. “But listen, alright? Fuck. One time it took me three hours to make a damn omelet, and that was the final straw. Give me one night, an Aleve, and a bottle of Maker’s Mark and I can teach myself anything.”


“It was.” Tony smiles as he extracts milk and orange juice from a compartment in the minifridge Peter wasn’t aware of before now. Food on board this whole time, imagine that. “But Popeye relied on spinach too much. That guy gets his ass kicked all across his tepid, 2-D wasteland without it.” With all the food on the table, and a cup of coffee in hand, Tony sits opposite Peter and motions to his smorgasbord proudly. “Anyway, eat,”

It’s what Peter has been dreading. “You know what, this is great, thank you, but I don’t think I can,” he admits, and Tony scowls, points a fork at him.

“Ridiculous. Don’t hurt my feelings. Look at all this work I just did,” Tony says, stabbing at pancakes and scooping eggs onto his plate. A pair of intense brown eyes regard him from beneath a raised brow. “Eat, Peter.”

“I’m sorry, Tony, I’m just not hungry,” Peter says on a sigh, eying all the food remorsefully, depressed by his state, because he wants to eat, but he’s so terrified that it will just come back up right here in front of Tony, which is abysmal to think about.

“Look, I’m not either,” Tony admits, and continues to prepare his breakfast, “but I’m going to try and eat, because I have to. When’s the last time you ate anything substantial?”

“I don’t know,” Peter admits, avoiding Tony’s pointed gaze.

“Well, now’s your chance,” Tony says, and Peter watches, jealous as he butters his pancakes and smotherifies them in syrup, “it’s not so bad, once you get started. The hard part is getting started.” A quick slice into the stack, and Tony’s jaw is flashing blue as he chews. Peter stares at it. If it’s painful, he doesn’t let it show. “At least it’s not space shakes. Come on, we’ll do it together.”

Well shit, now it’s impossible to say ‘no’. “Fine.” Peter loads his own plate up, a little more conservatively than Tony. Salt and Pepper help the eggs, and he follows Tony’s lead bite for bite. Easy small talk distracts him from the complaints his stomach lodges. Eventually, the grumpy organ settles into reluctant acceptance, and breakfast becomes easily palatable, just as Tony said it would. Almost like Peter’s mentor is a pro at this or something.

“You didn’t invite anyone else?” he inquires after a while, words muffled around a mouthful of bacon.

Tony appears reluctant, and Peter is instantly put off by it. Reading Tony has become almost as natural as breathing. After a long swig of coffee, Tony clears his throat. “Honestly, I need to talk to you.”
“Figured as much,” Peter mutters bitterly, placing an egg-loaded fork on the edge of his plate. Ice is tearing through his veins, freezing his newly-discovered appetite. He’s not stupid, he knows what this is about.

“You, uh,” Tony clears his throat again, “you need help.”

“What do you mean?” Peter trolls.

Tony scoffs, more at himself than Peter. “I think maybe you need to see someone when you get home.”

Peter purses his lips, nods, sits back a little and crosses his arms defensively. “Maybe.”

This is hard for Tony. Peter can tell by the way his heart is slamming away like harsh ocean waves upon a soft shore.

“If what you told me last night is true, and I’m not denying that it is, don’t get me wrong, it’s just… look I’m not a professional or anything, but I… well, you know;” Tony sighs and places his fork down as well. “One of us is going to have to tell May.” It tumbles out of him, a frozen avalanche.

For a long time, Peter holds Tony’s stalwart gaze and considers his options. Yes, he knows he’s screwed up, has just choked down his first meal in nearly a week and it’s basically a testament. But he’s also aware that if he tells May such a short time as a pseudo-Avenger has messed with his head so brutally, there’s no way she’ll allow him to aid in the coming fight. It can’t be too difficult to hide from her, right?

“Okay,” he says, nodding, and Tony is visibly taken aback by it, new wrinkles in his face announcing to Peter his immediate suspicion. “I’ll tell her.” Of course, he won’t, but he understands that if he doesn’t offer something placating now, then Tony won’t hesitate to do it himself. “I promise.”

“You will?” The question is apprehensive, distrustful, like Tony expected more of a fight than this. Perhaps Peter gave up too easily.

“I mean, it’s still early, you know?” he attempts, offering a casual shrug to downplay it. “Who knows, I could get over it in the next couple days.”

“It’s not about just ‘getting over it’, it’s-“ Tony stops himself and takes a deep breath. “Look, I don’t want to fight with you on this. I just need your word, Pete. This isn’t something you can handle alone. You’ll tell May?”

“Sure,” Peter says, his voice hitching into high octaves. He swallows. “I’ll tell her.”

“Good,” Tony says, cutting up more pancakes and shooting Peter wary glances. “I’ve put together a list of reputable therapists, most of which have vast experience counseling war veterans.” He chuckles ruefully. “And Avengers. I’m going to e-mail it to May as soon as we hit signal range-“

A jolt of fear pulses through Peter. Fuck, he’s gone and forgotten that he’s dealing with a super genius again. “Oh, you don’t have to do all that,” he says as casually as possible, but nothing gets past Tony, and he’s positive it was bait anyway.

“You’re not going to tell her,” Tony accuses, the disappointment evident in the way one corner of his lips dip into a saddened half-frown.

Peter looks around the room for a rebuttal, and comes up empty. Lying to Tony sucks.
“You have to tell her, Peter,” Tony says with restrained hints of desperation in his voice and along his worry lines. “You- you don’t know how bad it can get.”

“Okay, okay,” he says, his exasperation completely theatre. At least Tony’s eyes remain warm and open. “Just… let me do it, okay? I want to do it. Please. Wait a bit before sending the names?” Maybe he can intercept them. Extremis is a tough shell to crack, perhaps the toughest, but he understands enough of it that he’ll be able to… what? Hack it? Hack Extremis? Already, even in the throughs of original thought, the prospect of hacking Extremis rubs him wrongly. But this is Thanos and the possible end of all of existence. If Thanos gets his hands on the stones… Maybe Peter will be able to intercept the email before May even sees it.

Maybe he’s just incredibly stupid and a little off his fucking rocker.

Tony is staring right into Peter’s soul. “I need your word.” He finally says, the harsh lines on his face tapering down to something mellow and smooth. Tightly controlled. “Please. I need you to promise me you’ll tell your aunt. Seriously Pete, I’m one minute away from demanding a pinky swear-”

“Alright, geez, I promise,” Peter says, then raises an eyebrow. “What about you?”

Tony has started eating again, and he swallows quickly, appearing mildly confused. “What about me?”

Suddenly, Peter feels awkward. Tony’s an adult, he can take care of himself, right? “You’ll, um… see someone?” he asks timidly.

After a brief pause, like he’s caught off guard, Tony sniffs and shrugs. “I’ve got a lot of work to do, Peter.”

“Sure, but after all that?”

“After all this is over?” Tony fills in and Peter nods. A small flicker of reluctance across the man’s otherwise stoic face is all Peter needs to know that what follows is a lie. “Sure kid, but do me a favor alright?”

“Okay,” Peter says apprehensively.

“Don’t worry so much about me.” Tony smiles and pokes his fork in Peter’s direction. “You need to worry about yourself now.”

It’s right then that Peter experiences the gloomiest feeling, just pure existential dread that covers him like a thick wax. Tony’s heart rate has picked up, and as Peter watches him declare how great breakfast was before taking his plate to the sink, he realizes something. The smile, the flourishing movements and upbeat attitude are all a front. The dread he’s feeling is originating from Tony. Immediate and devastating understanding floods him.

Tony doesn’t want to think about after Thanos because Tony doesn’t expect to survive.

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Peter spirals pretty quickly.
Tony pinpoints it with microscopic precision, which is exactly what he must employ given Peter’s valiant efforts to hide it. He’s ‘normal’, but everything he does is slightly exaggerated, and if Tony hadn’t known the kid for damn near two years now, he would merely seem a bit off, not even enough to address. Having known him for so long though, Tony notices the differences like they’re displayed in neon lights. Laughter lasts two seconds longer than usual. Everything is ‘the best’ and ‘amazing’. Stories are told with flourishing inflection and swift words that sometimes trip over each other.

Every once in a while, Tony catches him with his face in his hands. It worries him relentlessly.

“Oh, I’m great,” Peter lies when asked about it, big brown eyes remaining firmly pointed at the Iron Spider’s holographic schematics and the bright orange notes dotting it. He’s been planning upgrades, and Tony sneaks proud glances at his work from time to time.

“You know your ears turn bright red when you lie to me?” He smiles knowingly as Peter stumbles over nervous and totally unconvincing excuses.

But Tony’s own smile is a front. From the moment Peter relented so agreeably to Tony’s request, he knew it was a lie. And of course, those ears of his did turn a rather telling shade of cherry red. Peter has no plans to inform May about his condition, and it saddens Tony more than it angers him for a multitude of reasons he doesn’t fancy contemplating too deeply.

There’s also a bit of unwillingness to push the issue. Tony doesn’t want to stress Peter out any more than he already is, and Tony himself is dealing with his own repeating montage of dark thoughts. Fighting with Peter is probably one of the most unpleasant things he can think of actively engaging in at the moment. They’re both a couple of tightly wound little springs ready to bounce into verbal violence at a moment’s notice. It’s easier to keep the peace and not antagonize.

Tony will just have to tell May himself, covertly. Hopefully she’ll cease punching him long enough to listen.

“Go to bed,” he demands a day later after watching Peter nod off in his chair for the third time. They’re in his little workshop, planning, preparing. Tony has been in a video conference with Rocket all day regarding the upgrades to his armor. Neither of them have slept since snatching those blissful nine hours from the berries Quill gave them.

“You go to bed,” Peter says cheekily, and Tony already knows it’s code for ‘but when will you be in there?’. Peter hasn’t left Tony’s side since he began speaking to people again. Typically, it would annoy Tony after a point, and he would start hinting passive aggressively about needing space and children being better seen than heard. But with only days left before he’s got to say goodbye… ‘tolerance’ isn’t even a factor, Tony legitimately loves and cherishes every second he has left with Peter. The thought of leaving him behind is like being impaled, Tony would know.

“Ten minutes,” is all he says, because he knows Peter will be asleep in five. He doesn’t need an audience for this.

The suspicious little spider-child leaves after a skeptical look.

As soon as his scanners are indicating that Peter has made a speedy arrival in dreamland, Tony makes a call to the Milano.

“I am Groot,” a wooden face greets him with a smile in his peripheral.

“Groot, put your dad on the phone,” Tony requests. Groot huffs gruffly. Tony hasn’t had much time
to hang out with the Guardians. He’ll have to change that, and soon. “Sorry, tight schedule. Hi, by the way.”

“I am Groot.” Tony is forgiven with another warm smile.

“We a go?” Rocket already knows what’s up, and Tony nods, looks into dark eyes that are deeply primitive, yet so full of life and soul.

“We are a go.”

Rocket smirks at him, tossing the sphere containing the Reality Stone into the air like a pitcher getting ready to wind up. “What is this, try four?”

“Sure is,” Tony nods, “four and final, hopefully. Listen, I don’t care if my heart stops, keep the exercise going. We’re getting that data, and I don’t want to have to do this again.” His new compact suits are infused with powdered Zithium crystal alongside a synthetic element Rocket developed from studying the Eternium, which he didn’t bother naming. Tony doesn’t know what to expect out of it, but remains optimistic until circumstances deem otherwise.

It was a bit of a shock at first, receiving his last suit of armor into the palm of his hand, having apparently been reduced down in to a disk no more than six inches in circumference. Peter had squirmed uncomfortably at Tony’s reluctant expression, but as soon at he pushed it over the center plug in the second skin and the damn thing burst from it and began to consume him in a much more flexible, durable, and lightweight version of the original, all his fears died a swift death. Even the arc reactor remained intact through the miniaturization process. And Rocket had made multiples of them, three more to be exact. Tony’s back in action, better than ever, shining in black and gold excellence, if he does say so himself.

Only one more upgrade to add before these models are maxed out. And it requires compliance from the Reality Stone.

“So, wait, I can’t turn it off for anything?” Rocket asks warily.

Tony shakes his head. “No.”

“But what if you tell me to?”

“Ignore me,” Tony says, clearing way in his workshop so the room can resume being a safe space for interaction with the dangerous relic they intend to provoke. What a wild life he lives.

Rocket scoffs. “Well, what if you spontaneously combust?”

“Then I’ll blame it on your black magic tech, you furry little witch.”

“What if you start taking your clothes of-“

“Rocket-“

“-because at that point I’ll have to act in self-defense.”

“I am Groot.” Groot rumbles his disapproval as Tony chuckles.

“I’m just giving him fair warning.” Rocket says, faking indignance.

“Can we get this over with?” Tony asks through a yawn. “I’m tired, I’d like to try and sleep at some point.” Really, he wants to get this over with before Peter wakes up and has to see it.
Alright, alright,” Rocket waves his hands at him. “Wait a minute. What’s a witch? Is it something to be admired?”

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It’s no picnic. The stone torments him with visions of his dead friends, and when that doesn’t rattle him enough for him to lose himself, it shows him Peter dying. When he comes out of it, he’s sobbing. But it’s okay. It’s over now. He lasted for two hours, and they have the data they need.

“Beautiful,” Rocket comments, watching the symbols flash across his screen. “You good?”

“Yeah.” Tony lies as Iron Man all but melts away from him. Quill and Rocket eye him, concerned. No, he absolutely does not want to talk about it. Bed is what he wants.

On the way to the latrine for a much-needed shower, Tony realizes that the sounds of Peter in distress are like a dog whistle to him now. While passing their room, he hears a shout, and he’s altering his course so fast it’s like someone flipped a switch.

The door swishes open at his mental command. Sure enough, Peter’s sweating and crying in his sleep, tossing about, very obviously having a nightmare of the horrifying variety. Wonderful. Tony swallows his guilt and calls to him, recalls all the times Peter has sucked it up and woken Tony from his own nightmares. “Peter! Spider-Man!”

Peter doesn’t react to it at all. And Tony’s not sure what synapse got twisted around in his noggin at that moment, has no idea what possessed him to approach Peter while he’s in such a state of terrified, blind unpredictability. But he stupidly did it. Maybe he never gave any thought to how powerful the seventeen-year-old truly is, despite all the training exercises, despite legitimate numbers telling him that Peter could lift a fucking bus over his head, the kid is such an angel, it’s easy to forget- dammit, Peter was right; Tony still sees him as a baby-faced, vulnerable child. He just can’t help it.

The punch he takes is a wake-up call. One touch to Peter’s shoulder earns him a strike to his face so hard it whites him out and when he comes around seconds later, Tony finds he’s been thrown into the wall behind him by the force of it.

Holy hell.

“Oh!” Peter exclaims, and it barely makes it through a hum in Tony’s ears. He shakes his head, and something is loose, something hard is tumbling around across his tongue- a tooth. Peter’s knocked a tooth out. “Ohhh, no, Tony-“

“It’s okay,” he hears himself saying as blood fills his mouth. “My fault.” Well this couldn’t get much worse. There’s a trashcan in the corner, and he pulls it to him. The loud ping of his tooth hitting the bottom instigates a miserable moan from Peter.

“Dammit, did I…?” Peter doesn’t finish his sentence.

“Sure did, Tyson, no big deal,” Tony assures him, trying to hide the blood behind his hand, knowing how much it bothers Peter now. He’d leave the room but that strike left him so discombobulated, he’s not positive about how stable his relationship with gravity is at the moment, and she can be a wicked bitch. Every attack he’s ever taken from Peter during training has been shielded by thick layers of gold and titanium, so this hit was a shock. Even Extremis was knocked a bit wonky, and
Tony performs a quick reboot to get it back online. His head aches fiercely.

Beside himself, Peter stammers out his words. “Fuck, oh my god, I can’t believe I did that. Are you ok?”

“I mean, what exactly is the definition of ‘ok’?“ It’s said with light humor and a little blood. The flow is stemming itself faster this time. Tony might have to look into that, discover if Extremis is capable of an unforeseen adaptation ability. That would be sweet. “Because I don’t think I’ve ever actually been that.”

Peter sits on the edge of his bunk and stares at Tony with large, wet, horrified eyes. “I’m so, so sorry Tony, I didn’t mean to.”

“Told you, my fault,” Tony says, sitting back against the wall and smiling at Peter, who recoils and hides his face in his hands. “Hey, forget it happened. Peter, seriously, it’s no big deal-“

“It is, though, I- I hit you,” Peter mumbles around quivering fingers. “I hit you.”

“Man, did you ever,” Tony says, chuckling, and checking for more loose teeth, sighing with relief when he finds none. He’s lucky to have only lost one.

Peter is sobbing now.

“Oh, come on-“

“Am- am I going to be okay?” Peter wants to know. Tony can’t recall a more trying moment in his life.

“Yes,” he says without a hint of disinclination. Then, he’s getting to his feet and moving to sit next to Peter. “You’re going to be fine.”

Tony doesn’t usually comfort people. He’s bad at it, typically, making terrible jokes during times of high stress and laughing nervously when he himself, the supposed genius, can’t even process the sheer enormity of what’s happening. But now, at this moment, he places all neurosis aside and wraps his arms around Peter’s shoulders, fully aware that mere words aren’t enough to make what happened okay.

Without hesitation, as though he was waiting for it, Peter is melting into Tony’s embrace, burrowing his face in his chest. The display of misery and pain that follows is something that Tony will never forget.

The kid breaks down. There’s no other way to describe it. Peter has a full-on meltdown in his arms, crying harder than Tony’s ever seen, the kid grips Tony’s midriff and holds on as tight as possible without crushing him like a bug.

“Shh. Breathe, kiddo, you’re gonna hyperventilate.” Tony says.

“I’m so sorry,” Peter sobs, and Tony holds him tightly. “I didn’t mean to.”

“I know,” Tony says softly, holding Peter’s head close and kissing his hair. “But look, alright? Whether you meant to or not, it still happened. And if it happened to me, it could happen to other people too, people not as sturdy and handsome as I am. Their faces can’t take hits like mine and come out still looking like sunshine in a cup.”

“Oh god, spare me,” Peter chuckles wetly.
“Seriously though,” Tony says, and sighs. “I know you’re not going to tell May, I know you’re going to try everything you can to hide it, but… well, you just punched me in the face.”

“You knew?” Peter asks between sniffles. Then he scoffs. “You always knew.”

“I had my suspicions,” Tony admits, rubbing Peter’s shoulder. “You see how important it is to tell her now, though, right?”

“Yeah,” Peter says dejectedly. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.”

“I just wanted to help.”

“I know.” Tony rests his cheek against Peter’s head. “You want to hear a story?”

“Sure.” Peter sounds tired. He’s only had a little over two hours of sleep, after all.

“So, you know I have nightmares,” Tony reminds him, feeling Peter nod in agreeance at the question. “Well, after the battle of New York, they really ramped up. Every time I tried to sleep, I was back in that wormhole.” Peter is quiet, his agony silenced by his interest in Tony’s story. “During one of them, the nightmares I mean, Pepper tried waking me up, bless her heart, and I… well, I accidently summoned a suit. It attacked her. If I had not woken up in time to stop it, that suit of armor would have ripped her apart in seconds.”

PTSD can be dangerous. Tony understands this.

“What did she do?” Peter croaks from beneath Tony’s chin.

Tony shakes his head, shrugs. “She stormed out. Can’t blame her, Iron Man is a scary son of a bitch. So, all I could do was sit there, alone, and wish I’d told her sooner, or even better, had actually sucked it up and gotten professional help before things got that bad.”

Peter is silent for a full five minutes. “Thanks for not leaving me.” He finally says.

Tony squeezes him. “God, I wouldn’t dream of it.”

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Every night, he takes the footpath out to the grasslands.

Though he sprints with the speed of the wind, not a single drop of sweat glistens on his brow, and his lungs do not ache for oxygen, which comes as smoothly for him as water being poured into a glass. The flat landscape rushes past him, even as the bright, full moon follows his every move. Stars wink cheekily at him like a certain someone used to do, and he wonders-

_Could one of those winking bastards be him? Is he finally coming back?_

He startles a herd of Thompson’s Gazelle from their grazing area, and they take off bouncing elegantly away above the tall grass with a drum beat of hooves and a chorus of bleats. Shuri likes to tease him about going for runs without music to distract him. “Old man!” She likes to shout at him with a bright grin illuminating her face. “Do not crack your hip on the way!”
Steve Rogers smiles as he sprints. Apparently, wanting to enjoy the landscape and all the sounds a new country has to offer makes one an ‘old man’.

The other day, when caught consulting a tablet for information like he has so many times before, Shuri told him, “you are standing with one foot in a coffin and the other in a pile of rhino shit. Did someone etch the words into that using a chisel and hammer? Here, old man.” Then she’d shoved a strange sphere into his hand.

Luckily, Steve has had experience dealing with belligerent geniuses who love to tease him.

“Oh, is that actual shit I’ve been smelling?” He’d pulled a foot up to inspect the sole of his boot, shooting Shuri a facetious smirk. “Not your room? Sorry, I guess I’m just so used to it, I didn’t notice.” Shuri is a genius inventor, she doesn’t have time to tidy. And recently, by order of her mother who values elbow-grease as a learning tool, the Princess’ room is not to be touched by the maids that roam the palace. So Shuri has embarked on an epic quest to let her room get as bad as possible. It’s become a humorous battle of wills, at this point.

Shuri had laughed. “She will break soon, before I ever will, I know it. Do not allow my technology to intimidate you, cave man.”

So now he has one of Shuri’s all-purpose spheres in his pocket. She explained the basics to him, but Steve needs a quiet place away from judgment to properly become accustomed to it. Wakanda can be a bit much at times. Mostly because it makes him think of Tony and how in awe he’d be of it.

So, every night, he runs.

A river flows alongside the footpath, a rather impressive feat of agri-tech Shuri developed when the droughts began wiping out huge swathes of wildlife two years prior. Fueled by the rain that pours unnaturally from Wakanda’s weather regulator, a staple of life within the city limits, T’Chacka River rages with momentum. Thick blue tongues lap at its edges, which have begun to appear more natural since it was put in.

Steve had helped dig it out, walking along behind the land-carver with a crew of Wakandans, using miniaturized vibranium pulse cannons to stagger the riverbed, a natural dash of flaws added to a perfect machine-generated sculpture. It’s important to the Wakandan people, as their technology advances, to remain in touch with the natural forces that propelled them into success. Steve can respect that.

Miles out from the main city, Steve has located an oasis of sorts. A canyon exists within yards of the third bend in the river. It’s from this bend that a small bit of natural erosion has allowed for a tiny spring to branch off and run freely down into it. The introduction of water to this otherwise barren ecosystem has sprouted an abundance of life, and Steve loves it, breathes a rare sigh of relief as he descends a set of natural stairs. There are flowers in here that glow a dim blue and the soft light reflecting off the water projects a pulsing aura onto otherwise lifeless canyon walls, causing them to dance. Grass exists in patches where the sunlight peeks in, and Steve sits cross-legged in one of them, where he knows he still has a view of the cloudless, starry sky.

Hell, with Shuri’s technology, he can see it from anywhere.

Placing the sphere she gave him in the sand wakes it up and it glows a faint purple, flattening to the ground as a disk. “Hello, Steven,” a deep voice with a light Wakandan accent greets him. “Which mode would you prefer?”

“Specify distance,” it demands. “Accuracy is dependent on signal range.”

“Go as far as you can while maintaining eighty percent accuracy.” The disk spins, producing a stunningly precise model of their solar system, miniaturized for his viewing pleasure. It expands around him like he’s at the planetarium, but this program is infinitely more immersive. He can manipulate the objects displayed, zoom in on them, demand data on them. If something is coming, this device will not only tell him, but show him.

Steve sighs as he takes a glance. Nothing. He had been both nervous and excited, now he’s just depressed. Why does he keep doing this to himself?

It’s become a habit of his ever since his return to Wakanda nearly a month ago, a move he made after watching Ross’ failed attempt to arrest Tony unfold with disturbing clarity on a display of televisions inside a Paris shopping center. Shaking and horrified, not even sure of what he was witnessing, he’d called Sam first, then Natasha. They both had the same suggestion; contact two people above all others, the ones with the resources; Pepper Potts and T’Challa. Tony wouldn’t risk so much unless he was absolutely sure something was coming. They had been separated for too long. It was time for the Avengers to assemble once again.

And it was then that Steve realized how damn stupid he’d been. The package Tony had sent him, although received the night before, remained unopened in his hotel room at the time. It had made him anxious. Tears had filled his eyes when he finally did open it.

Tony has been right all along. Tony had needed him, and Steve was not there.

Every night, he runs out here, far away from the hustle of the city so he can watch the night sky, and he tells himself he’s looking for threats, not Tony Stark. Steve’s lies have become so pervasive, they’ve turned inward.

A troop of hyenas giggle and snicker from somewhere nearby. Steve doesn’t fear them, barely pays them mind at all. His attention is devoted to the projection of the solar system. But when a twig snaps behind him, a deliberate action, he smiles.

“I thought you were going to bed,” Bucky says as he emerges from the shadows.

“Busted,” Steve says on a sigh. It’s insincere, and he smiles at Bucky. “Couldn’t sleep?”

“Just got curious,” Bucky says, eyeing the hologram. He’s clothed in colorful Wakandan garb, a flowing, purple robe that licks his ankles. How he managed to follow Steve all the way out here without detection is beyond him. “Wanted to know where you go every night.”

“Are you satisfied?” Steve asks, smiling wide and gesturing to his secluded abode. “Not too shabby, huh?”

“Not bad at all,” Bucky acknowledges with a tight-lipped smile. Though all his smiles are tight, Bucky has been showing more of them lately. The color is returning to his skin. The darkness around his eyes is fading. Of course, he continues to suffer as his memories return to him, but whatever miracle potion Tony concocted has absolutely transformed the man.

The thought of it makes Steve practically pulsate with agonizing guilt.

“You’re looking for him,” Bucky states the fact without providing room for refutation, but Steve attempts it all the same.

“Just providing an extra set of eyes,” Steve lies. Bucky sits next to him.
“He’ll show up,” Bucky says, gazing up at the clear patch of sky visible between the lips of the canyon. When he places his arms on his knees, the sleeve of his robe falls away to reveal the new vibranium arm Shuri insisted on building for him. “He’s, uh… tenacious.”

Steve doesn’t reply. The entire thing is upsetting for everyone involved. If Tony ever does come back, a black storm cloud will hang over the reunion. Legendary passive aggressiveness will certainly be on full display, he’s sure. And Steve is no saint, there are things he would like to get in Tony’s face about, and the stress of such a situation will permeate any words uttered, twisting them into something nasty.

Yet, despite the bad blood, Steve just wants his friend and co-leader to come back. He’s felt so lost and aimless throughout all this without Tony’s direction.

“I don’t know what I’m going to say to him,” Bucky admits, breaking their nearly ten-minute-long silence. Steve looks over at him and receives a reluctant grimace. “When he comes back, you know? After everything that happened, he was still willing to help me, and… god, it’s just crazy. I don’t know how to properly show gratitude to someone like that.”

“All you can do is be sincere,” Steve advises, and wishes he’d go ahead and heed his own damn words every once in a while. “None of it was directly your fault, and I think he understands that. Just prepare to be the brunt of some pretty acidic jokes for quite a while, or… not. You might be off the hook. I mean, his anger is directed almost exclusively at me.”

“Can you blame him?” Bucky says darkly. Pinpoint bitterness still drills holes in his words at times, resentment aimed at Steve’s reluctance to inform Tony of the truth behind his parents’ murder. Things would have been easier for him, for all of them, had he not withheld that information from Tony for so long. It eats at Steve like carrion insects.

“No,” Steve says, and remembers why he comes out here alone.

“Sorry,” Bucky says, sighing. “Maybe I should go-“

And that’s when the proximity alarm goes off and highlights the entire hologram in purple light.

They exchange nervous glances.

“Is it him?” Bucky asks, watching apprehensively as the image begins to zoom.

“God, I hope so.” Steve murmurs, his blue eyes shining with the reflection of the hologram, his heart pounding loudly, and his gut twisting with nerves. Even his hands are shaking. He really does hope so, because despite all the legwork he’s been doing, they are no-where near prepared enough for it to be anything else.
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

Happy Sunday, lovely readers!

Okay. With this damn movie being moved up a week so it can ruin my life even sooner than expected, I have been busy busy busy working on this to try and complete it before then. But with my outline constantly expanding as it is, I might have to move the chapter count up again, and if that's the case, there's no way I'm gonna make it. I'm just having way too much fun writing this.

So I'd like to take some space to talk about comments. Please, please don't hesitate to comment. I know I'm shakey as hell keeping up communication with you guys, and you all leave me such nice words, so I'm sorry, I really am. I appreciate every comment I get, the truth is, I just don't know what to say back sometimes. I'm a huge agoraphobe, and I'm weird as fuck, and I say stupid shit I wish I could take back and I would absolutely die if I alienated one of my readers over some dumb shit I said.

I especially appreciate my bilingual readers, with English as a second language taking the time to stop by and write wonderful and carefully considered comments for me. Honestly guys, I can't even tell most times until you inform me, they're usually so well written. I can't imagine what it would be like reading fic in a foreign language, as I am a heathen and only know one =P, but I imagine it can be fairly difficult.

And those of you who comment on every single chapter, thank you. You know who you are, and I smile when I see your names pop up, because I love reading about your gradual spiral into this madhouse I've built. You guys are the force that has kept me going, because at times I've wanted to quit again. But even when comment numbers are piss poor on a chapter, you all are always there. Thank you.

Oh, and the long, deep analytical ones I get, god I love those.

So that all being said, I'm sorry about what a lousy communicator I am. But this chapter I will try my best to leave words for everyone. Let me know what you all think.

Oh, and I'm doing much better now :)

Like it's one of his bullies in a crowd of strangers, Peter recognizes depression immediately.

It's heavy and bold, exists in everything, taints every word and action with something dark. It slumps his shoulders, droops his eyelids, so, so, familiar, because Ben’s deployments and absences for training, always left him feeling the same; hollow. Hopeless. They would carve a Ben-shaped hole in him that could be filled by bad things in his stead. When little kid Peter would lay awake at night, wondering what Ben was doing, whether he was safe, or in fear for his life, that’s when he would feel it most poignantly. Like a void lived beneath him, one that drew strength from his loneliness, and wanted so desperately to suck him in. Sometimes he wanted to let it.

Then, Ben was murdered, and the entire thing was Peter’s fault. And he’s never told anyone about it
After the tragedy, he took a week off school to get his head straight, and even that ended up being a huge mistake. His work piled up on him, and met him as a nearly full thumb drive when he returned, keeping the stress alive and kicking. So, he buckled down and actively forgot the event. Pushed it aside. Worked hard and went swimming in dumpsters, built things from garbage and beat up badguys. And later, trained with Tony as a future Avenger, which gave him new purpose. When his head hit the pillow at night, he was too exhausted to dwell on anything dark from his past, or even dream. May would cry, and he would hold her, but a humming numbness is all he would feel. It was a defense mechanism.

Peter Parker has been numb for a long time. The only reason he recognizes this is because of how much it hurts not to be.

Tony watches him like a hawk over the next few days, and Peter can sense in his elevated heart rate how much he’s fretting. Even as the man is absolutely busting his ass upgrading his armor and working with Rocket to ensure their anti-virus is beefy enough before attempting contact with Earth. Even though he’s suffering in his own way, Tony pours entire oceans of time into making sure Peter is okay, that he’s eaten and slept recently, and he talks a lot to Peter, more than he ever has.

Maybe keeping track of Peter is helping Tony stay atop the wagon instead of falling beneath it, because Peter aggressively expects his mentor to partake in these pain in the ass activities Tony demands of him. Peter doesn’t care. He will cross his arms and scowl with legendary petulance until Tony haughtily agrees to eat or sleep or take a break, growling and talking shit.

Overall, the worst part for Peter is how often he feels like crying. It’s damn embarrassing, and he hides himself away when the thoughts start to pile up, the anxiety, the paranoia about losing Tony. The nervous energy he can’t expel within the tight confines of the jet. It’s not rare for Tony or Quill to catch him just crawling around on the ceiling.

All the stress he deals with… it’s just too much at times. He doesn’t want to go home and face May, he doesn’t want to have to watch the jet fly away without him on it. A desire to be useful to this mission that will inevitably go unfulfilled, infuriates him. He’s grown so close to Tony that saying goodbye is going to be exactly the fucking same as amputating a limb. And there’s no way of knowing whether Peter will get to see him again. Tony could die in this war.

How does Peter even say goodbye while knowing it could be forever?

If Peter has to lose another father figure, he’ll… what? What does he do? Engage his defense mechanisms and go back to being numb? Restrict his relationships again, knowing that the less people who care about him, the better due to their impeccable habit of dying on him? Shit, Peter goes through guardians faster than he does underwear.

He hasn’t even begun to process Ben’s death yet. How does he deal without Tony?

At times, he just stares at Tony, watches him work, asks questions of him as a guise while covertly appreciating his movements and inflections, the eloquent way he speaks. That flashy smile of his has been spotted on his face an encouraging amount of times. Peter commits everything he can about Tony to memory so he has to it look back on. Just in case. It’s something he didn’t do enough of regarding Ben.

Exhaustion grips him. Worry gives him heartburn. Sudden, unexplainable bouts of terror render him useless and gasping, like a punch from a ghost. He suffers, but boy does he try valiantly to hide it.
“Talk to me,” Tony demands once after turning down his music, which consists of various forms of rock, with a surprising dash of hip-hop and rap thrown in. Rhodey’s influence. “You’re dwelling. Talk to me. What do you miss most about home?”

It doesn’t take much thought on Peter’s part. “May.” He says, and sighs. “I hope she’s not too angry.”

“She’s not angry with you, Peter,” Tony reminds him. He’s writing code, Peter knows, code that will integrate energy from the Reality Stone into his armor. With eyes that shine blue and flicker with busy intent, he sips coffee and stares into nothing. Tony’s so busy, Peter barely catches a glimpse of his brown eyes anymore.

“I know that.” Peter pauses. “I’m joining the Avengers for real when I turn eighteen. She can’t stop me.”

Tony smiles, a little sad, a little proud. “You’re a good kid, Peter.” Is all he says.

Their silences are always comfortable now. “What do you miss?” Peter asks after a moment. “About Earth, I mean, what do you miss most?”

Tony shrugs. “I don’t know,” he says, “I’d say you, but you’re here.”

Then the music volume is increasing again before Peter can say anything at all.

It warms him, though. Maybe Tony set up that conversation so he could deliver that line. Wanted to let Peter know is a subtle way how much he means to him. And Peter must admit, he’s had his doubts, wondered if maybe Tony wanted to get rid of him simply because it makes things easier on his saddled mind. Now, there’s no argument, and Peter realizes how silly that was to think. Tony wants to get him home because Tony loves Peter and wants him to be safe. That’s all. Tony legitimately cares about him.

Peter cries over it later in the floor of the latrine as he holds Leia close and she purrs and purrs and nuzzles her nose beneath his chin. The little AI has become a source of great comfort to him.

One day from Titan and two from Earth, Tony is showing Peter some Wing Chun moves with brown eyes and a genuine smile on his face.

“Relax. Move like water, flow like it,” Tony tells him. Peter finds he doesn’t have to hold back as much as he did in the past. Extremis has made Tony so strong, and his scales ensure that most of Peter’s blows can only slightly wind him, at most. It’s so much fun, so soothing and therapeutic, Peter almost forgets his worries. “No, now you’re moving like syrup. I said water, Peter. Not Waffle. You’re not pouring syrup on a waffle.”

Peter rolls his eyes and tries again.

“Good,” Tony says, backing away from a long, violent dance they just completed, “repeat.”

Peter goes at him, and Tony blocks strikes that come from his left, his right, his left, and then down and to the left, and Peter keeps his hands open and flat as he deflects Tony’s counter-assault, one that is graceful, fluid, experienced. “Stay outside me, don’t let me use both of my hands. Remember, thirty degrees. Exist at thirty degrees. Avoid getting hit.” Peter’s feet dance as he delivers lukewarm blows against the second skin. Everything Tony teaches him sticks to his brain like it’s crazy glued in there. He rarely ever has to ask questions.

“Psh, Bruce Lee, who?” Peter says, completing another exercise. It comes so naturally for him that
it’s easy to get cocky. Develop an ego, even.

“Bruce Lee is a legend, Scooter McGee,” Tony says, wiping sweat from his face with a towel, “that man literally fought for the right to train non-Asian people in martial arts. And I mean ‘literally’ in the most literal sense, not the over-excited teenage girl sense. He fought a man over it and won in a badass way. You rescue kittens from trees in your underwear.”

“Wait, really?” Peter asks, curious. He knows Bruce Lee was a master of Wing Chun, but that’s about it.

“Yes, you do rescue kittens in your underwear—”

“No, the other thing.”

“Oh,” Tony smirks. He wasn’t confused. “Sure, back in the sixties, he owned a studio in Oakland where he taught anyone who wanted to learn. The Chinese community there resented his open-mindedness, because apparently, martial arts were reserved for Asian people only.” The second skin melts away and Tony takes a long swig from a water bottle gasping his relief when he’s done. “So, all the Chinese people came together and gave Lee an ultimatum, right? Stop teaching white people martial arts. When he wouldn’t, another martial arts master challenged him to a fight, and if he won, Lee would have to shut down his studio. Lee trounced the guy in under three minutes, held his ass down, and made him surrender. Badass.”

Peter huffs a chuckle, impressed. “I didn’t know that. He sounds like a hero.”

“Well, that makes sense given heroes are motivated by righteous causes,” Tony says, “yes, I guess one would say he was a hero. He stood up against a specific type of bigotry. And he starred in some damn entertaining movies.”

In the next moment, the Guardians are showing up, all of them. It’s a welcome flurry of a surprise.

First, Star-Lord appears through the airlock, bearing the weight of a significant amount of uncooked food. He’d vanished earlier, citing a row between Rocket and Drax, but it quickly becomes apparent that’s not what happened.

“What, you thought you wouldn’t get a decent going away party? After the disaster that was your birthday?” Quill scoffs at Peter’s shy expression as he moves toward the kitchen. Leia has appeared from whatever nook she likes to hide in, drawn by the activity, and lays right in Quill’s path, rolling on to her back, eager to display how cute she is. God help you if you attempt to pat her belly, however. “Right in the way, as usual.” Quill scoffs, stepping over her.

“You have anything to do with this?” Peter whispers to Tony, who is smiling.

“No,” he admits, and a hand lands on Peter’s shoulder. “But it’s cool that they think you’re worth it, huh?”

This is so bittersweet, Peter doesn’t know whether to pucker or melt.

Groot and Rocket appear next, and Leia has bounded away to hide in anticipation, has been waiting specifically for those two to show, Peter knows. Rocket is the closest thing to a peer she has, so his presence ignites a primal fire in her, puts a spark to her butt. And Groot is a tree, climbable, tall, and the only thing she can sink her claws into that appreciates her for doing so. Instincts, directed by code, yet just as compelling as the natural counterpart, drive the little being. She lies in wait.

“Where is she?” Rocket asks, ducking around Groot’s head like it’s a shield, eyes darting over
shadowy corners. He’s too proud to admit how much he likes Leia. Maybe she brings something animalistic out in him as well. “The little shit, where is she, huh?”

“I am Groot,” Groot teases.

“No, Groot, that’s ridiculous, I’m not scared, I-“ Rocket scoffs indignantly when his words fail him. “She has really sharp claws, okay?”

Leia has chosen a hiding spot worthy of an Oscar. With admirable patience, she has waited in a shadowy corner right next to the airlock, her lights dimmed to near invisibility. After a shake of her titanium ass, she’s making her move, rushing up Groot, and her playful attack is met with a chittering hiss from Rocket. They run all over the sentient tree, Rocket trying desperately to outmaneuver the AI, and Groot chuckling because it tickles so much.

Peter is dying with laughter.

“Perhaps you were wondering where the drinks were?” Drax declares, smiling and holding up four bottles. “Well they are here! They are here, the drinks have arrived, all is well-“

“We heard you the first time, you’re useful, we get it,” Rocket declares, dodging swipes from Leia beneath Groot’s armpit. “I would find your insecurity sad, if it wasn’t so annoying-“

“What exactly makes you think I’m insecure?” Drax demands. The bottles he carries have hard liquor in them. Extremely hard liquor. Tony hasn’t informed the Guardians about his old habit, so perhaps they labor under the assumption that he will partake with them one day. Sadly, Tony’s sobriety is young enough that Peter does worry about a relapse. Despite Extremis and Tony’s impressive cyborg qualities, he remains undeniably human and susceptible to fault.

“Oh, I don’t know, maybe it’s your desperate and obvious need to validate your existence in any situation you find yourself a part of-“

“It’s called being useful, animal,” Drax counters irately, “something you would know very little about-“

“Oh, that’s rich, let me tell ya a thing or two about- wait, did you just call me ‘animal’-?” Rocket snarls, but he’s unable to pull his weapon, given his state as Leia’s temporary prisoner. He’s at the complete mercy of her unsympathetic paws.

“Enough.” Gamora shows next, and shockingly, Nebula isn’t far behind her. Gamora’s gaze is fiery as her eyes dart between the offenders. “Are you serious? You two have been here for less than a minute, and already you’re fighting like brainless idiots.”

“I was bringing liquid joy and verbal cheer!” Drax defends himself with flourishing gestures. “It is Rocket who spews toxic animosity-“

“I’ll spew you, ya putz,” Rocket snarls.


Gamora shakes her head at them, her lips set in a tight line. “Deplorable. Control yourselves, for Peter’s sake.”

The request seems to work.

The party is unlike any Peter has attended, and it’s not due to it’s grandiosity or the amount of people
present, or even the inclusion of alcohol, which Peter avoids anyway. Besides, Tony once snatched his drink away from him and sniffed it with a suspicious, dangerous look, an effective warning, which is funny, because Peter has been keeping track of Tony over the same thing. No, this particular party is unique due to how warm it feels, how comfortable and loose it is, being around all these people, these interstellar castaways who have no qualms against considering Peter one of their own.

Usually, big social situations make Peter uncomfortable. His senses are fine-tuned, and he hears every whisper, catches a nasty whiff of every shit-talker in the room, the words stinging him from behind hands that do laughingly little to suppress them. Scents culminate into a bubbling stew of cologne and perfume and spiked punch and pizza and body odor—ugh. Every singular heart beat hammers away at his eardrums, just beneath the shrieks of terrible music that’s way too loud without his sensing being dialed up. So naturally, fuck parties.

This one, however… it lacks that tension. For once, Peter’s cheeks ache from laughter instead of sorrow as he watches Quill show off dance moves to some Michael Jackson Tony’s dug up for him, old songs he hasn’t heard in years, apparently.

“Oh god, you haven’t lived until you’ve seen my main man Michael dance like a zombie,” Quill says, his hands twisting into ‘zombie’ claws, and demonstrating for the room the most iconic part of the dance. “Blearrrrghhhhh!”

“Ask, and you shall receive,” Tony declares, and screens pop up. Michael moonwalks across them like he’s not dead, once again proving that Extremis is one of the most versatile applications ever. Critical for combat, flight, research and now parties. “I am a benevolent god, but don’t try me.” Peter would want his own version of it had he not directly witnessed the process Tony underwent to acquire it.

“Oh, ho, ho, ho, this is awesome!” Green eyes as big as saucers absorb the images, and Quill sounds like he’s laugh-crying with joy, if that’s a thing. Peter watches Quill become giddy over something Peter himself has never actually given much thought, and he wonders how the guy feels about returning to Earth. It was his home at one point. His mother died there. But if he’s anxious about it, he doesn’t show it.

At one point, Peter eaves drops on an exchange between Tony and Nebula. Tony has approached her with a muted, friendly smile, his hand extended, and she pauses, glaring warily at it for a moment before reluctantly accepting the handshake.

“We’ve never properly met,” Tony admits, “my name is Tony. You helped save Peter’s life, and mine too, by chance. Thank you.”

Something tells Peter that Nebula doesn’t hear stuff like this too often. She shifts nervously and avoids Tony’s eyes. “No one should be left to the devices of the Kree.”

“I don’t want to make you uncomfortable,” Tony says, “I just… I apologize for what happened on Knowhere.”

“Why?” She asks darkly, scanning him, possibly literally. After all, she is just as much of a cyborg as Tony. “I was going to kill you both.”

Tony smiles, but Peter knows it’s his fake one. That comment put him off.

Quill cooks, and Tony reveals that the common area table can be expanded, so they all sit and eat together. The only person who appears out of place is Nebula. She doesn’t speak much, and seems
to be there out of obligation. Leia has to be pushed off the table twice, and following a third time, Tony removes her with Extremis, shutting her away in their room.

“Drink!” Drax commands of Tony with a grin, offering a cup to him. “So much alcohol around, and yet, no drink. Drink.”

Tony looks at it for a little too long, and Peter, who’s sat by him, elbows him under the table when he notices. It snaps him back.

“Oh, no,” Tony catches himself smoothly and flashes a convincing smile at Drax, “thanks, but I have work to do later, you know, preparing for this little issue, and it involves something slightly more complex than simply sharpening a couple of knives.”

“Nerd,” Rocket snorts, his fork totally missing his mouth, and when does nail the landing the second time, he scoffs when he realizes there’s not even food on it. He’s had a lot to drink.

“You just look so graceful and put together over there, Rocket,” Tony comments.

“I may look like a shit took another shit,” Rocket burps, points drunkenly at Tony, “but at least I’m not a nerd.”

That’s okay. Peter understands that this was a pretty decent victory. Tony smiles and slings insults back, and Peter knows he’d rather be known as a nerd than discovered as an alcoholic any day.

Later on, Peter is staring at Gamora’s back due to reasons that have nothing to do with how she’d just removed her jacket and exposed more skin than she ever has in Peter’s presence. Gamora is modest and prideful, elegant, always remaining uniform, so to see her in one of Quill’s tank tops is something Peter hadn’t prepared himself for.

Then he notices it. On her right shoulder-blade, peeking out from beneath the fabric of her shirt, Peter can see the beginnings of a large, raised scar.

“He has noticed your mark, sister,” Nebula says coldly, and Peter realizes too late that she’s been watching him, her eyes dark.

Gamora turns in her chair to look at him, so beautiful, so fierce and exotic and Peter can feel his face turn as red as the devil as she catches him staring at her like a damn creep, but she smiles warmly. “It’s okay. Want to see?” she asks, and pulls her shirt aside so he can see the rest.

His embarrassment dissipates. It’s a large brand. Thick, raised flesh mars otherwise flawless green skin, woven into an intricate pattern and set inside an almond shaped border. Like an eye. It would be beautiful, if not for its disturbing origins. It covers so much of her back.

“Thanos’ first gift to me,” she says, her fingers brushing it as she releases her shirt. “And that is how he views it, as a gift. A reminder that he’s always with us. It was bestowed upon me, Nebula, and all his… children.” Bitterness twist her lip. “When he takes a new apprentice, he burns this mark into them, to remind them that he will forever make himself a part of them.”

Peter looks to Nebula, who sneers at him, but appears to regret it almost immediately. In repentance, she shows him her mark as well. It’s identical to her sister’s.

The room is quiet now. Peter exchanges a fleeting, wary glance with Tony.

“Thanos is the most evil, unforgiving, psychopathic being in existence,” Nebula tells them. Rapt attention from everyone in the room greets her words. “And yet he is so desperate for love, that he
refers to his closest slaves as his children in hopes that they will believe it themselves one day.”

“This is what Nebula and I have been working on,” Gamora reveals, and smiles at them. “A nuanced evaluation of Thanos’ abilities, personality and motivations. It’s been therapeutic.”

“Have you been keeping records?” Tony’s voice shatters the silence.

“Yes,” Gamora says. “They’re not finished, but we think it’s important.”

Tony nods. “I’d love to review them.”

So would Peter. How interesting would it be to dive head first into the cesspool that is a psychopath’s mind? Gamora and Nebula’s experiences at Thanos’ hand would make quite the captivating read. But then it hits him, and he’s suddenly so angry; what’s the point? He’s being dropped off at his Aunt’s house like the kid he is. Soon, none of this will matter. Any knowledge he absorbs regarding Thanos from this point out is useless to him, because he won’t be a part of this mission any longer.

Tony may love Peter enough to want to keep him safe above all else, but that doesn’t keep Peter from resenting him for it.

The party is over, the Guardians sans Quill have returned to the Milano, and Peter is laying in bed, glaring with unreasonable antipathy at the bunk above him which contains a very much awake Tony Stark. Peter can’t sleep either. Not while Thanos is out there capturing children and tormenting them, transforming them into mechanisms of death. He can’t stop thinking about it. Thanos has hurt so many people, and Peter is in a position to do something about it. And the only thing standing in his way is Tony. Because Tony can’t stand his own guilt.

“I wish you’d let me help,” he says to the darkness.

“Go to sleep, Peter.”

“You need me,” he says, feeling bold. “You’re going to need all the help you can get.”

“I’ve never disputed that,” Tony says, “and I hope May will let you. Now please, go to sleep.”

“No, you don’t,” Peter says. “You want her to say no, I know you do. You’d rather the whole universe be destroyed, as long as you don’t ever have to feel guilty about something happening to me. Anything to keep from having to feel guilty, huh?”

Tony releases a laughing scoff. “Wow. That’s… that’s a pretty insulting, shitty thing to say to me.”

“Well, that’s how I feel,” Peter grumbles.

“I’m just trying to do the right thing.” The voice from above him is unusually soft and fragile. “Hate me for it if you want. You won’t be the first.”

“Fuck,” Peter says, dragging his fingers down his face, hating himself instead for saying such an awful thing. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t sweat it,” Tony says, but he’s hurt, conflicted. Peter can feel it.

“No, seriously,” he says, “I didn’t mean it, I really didn’t. I’m just so… so-“

“You did, and it’s okay,” Tony says, “I get it, you want to help, you know you have the ability to, and you feel trapped and powerless, because you’re right at the cusp of independence, and yet you
still lack freedom. You’re still unable to decide your own fate, and as someone so intelligent, that frustrates the hell out of you. Right?”

Peter sighs. “Right.”

“What happened tonight really bothered you, huh?” Tony, seeing through him as usual.

“Yeah.”

“Good,” Tony says. “It should. It was upsetting. But most importantly, it was motivating. You want to help stop Thanos because you’re driven by empathy for his victims. You don’t want anyone else to suffer like Gamora and Nebula have, and you’re willing to move planets over it. That’s good. I’m proud of you.”

Peter feels himself choking up. “I’m going to miss you.” He blurs.

“I’m going to miss you too, Peter.”

Peter has a dream that night about all his teeth just falling out into his hands, and there’s so much blood.

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Tony has been trying to call May for twenty minutes.

“I don’t get it,” he says, flustered and rubbing his temples, blinking blue away in favor of brown for what seems like the thousandth time, “I can’t get in at all. I can’t even see it, there’s nothing there.”

They’re mere hours from Titan, and Tony is planning to branch from the Guardians to play escort for Peter. After that, twelve hours more, and Peter will be home. The tension in Peter’s body was already debilitating, now this.

“What do you mean?” He demands.

“Christ do you need me to sign it for you, Beethoven?” Tony snaps harshly. “Earth is gone, Peter.”

Peter scoffs and wring his hands helplessly. “Well, sorry, it’s not like I can see what you’re doing—”

“Shh,” Tony hisses. Peter snaps his mouth shut, watching with bated anticipation as Tony tries again.

“Fuck,” he curses, and blood drips from his nose. “Rocket, any luck?”

“Nada,” Rocket says through the comms.

Tony chews his lip.

“Is it the virus?” Peter asks, needing answers right now. He’s worried. After everything he’s seen, Earth being erased from existence isn’t so far out of the realm of possibility. And he kind of likes that planet, has people he cares about who live there.

“I don’t know,” Tony admits, holding a towel to his face, “there’s the slight, and I mean slight, possibility my many warnings were heeded and my cloaking satellites were actually activated and permitted to do their job, but I’m not going to hold my breath over it. If my satellites are in use, I would still be able to infiltrate their systems, but I can’t see them. I can’t see anything.”
Peter feels sick. “We have to go there,” he says frantically, “now. Right now. I need to see it. Tony, it has to be there.”

“I’m sure it is,” Tony says, but it’s hollow and lacks conviction. “Just- just relax. I’ll bet my entire fortune that it’s there.”

Titan is strikingly orange, violent, and raging storms tear across its surface. Peter sees it through a darkened filter of anxiety.

Quill insists he go with them. There are no objections. Peter says his goodbyes to Gamora, Drax, Groot, Rocket, Nebula, and does so in a haze. He should be devoting more attention to this, but he’s too nervous to think about anything other than the fate of his home.

The ride to Earth is tense, silent. Unable to expend any more energy on futile attempts to ping the invisible planet, Tony has activated a passive scanner, leaving screens up in case a connection is achieved. Peter should be watching them. Instead, he stares out one of the jets windows at the death rainbow and holds Leia close to his chest. As much as he’s dreaded returning to Earth, he now wants to see it more than ever.

But not like this.

Six hours in to a twelve-hour ride, the screens are flickering to life, and Peter’s attention is drawn to one of them. A scrolling camera depicts a scene of devastation. Buildings lay destroyed atop a blistered land, buildings Peter has used to anchor himself as he swings though his beloved city.

A caption reads “Alien devestates NYC.”

It’s difficult for Peter to describe how he feels in that moment. A tempest of emotion freezes him in place, and everything that occurs around him seems to happen within ice water. Peter stares at the screen as footage of New York’s destruction dances emotionlessly across it. A great purple wave Peter has seen before consumes everything in its path. Buildings topple over, dust billows and writhes, human bodies vanish with nothing more than a puff of ashes.

Someone has hauled him up from where he’s collapsed to his knees. Someone is holding him. Maybe it’s Tony. Most likely, it’s Tony, but it’s impossible to tell for sure. Everything is so incomprehensibly slow and Peter can’t tear his eyes from the screen.

He’s totally paralyzed.

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“No…”

Tony sees it before anyone else.

Obligation dictates that he ensures Peter is okay first and foremost. At the sight of New York’s decrepit remains, his thoughts immediately gravitate to Peter, his pain, his loss, his wellbeing. Tony knows that every person Peter has ever cared about resided in the good old NYC which now lies in ruins.

When Tony comes out of his workshop, he finds the kid on his knees in front of the sofa, staring
almost blankly, and instinct takes over.

No words are spoken. Tony’s not positive he’s capable of uttering anything substantial either way, will probably just laugh hysterically like a damn moron if he opens his mouth. He snatches Peter up and holds him, not at all surprised by the slackness he encounters. Peter is in complete shock. Peter has just lost everyone.

“Oh, no,” Quill says from behind them.

Distraught news anchors verbalize what everyone is feeling.

“I… I can’t even begin to describe the scale of the devastation… how do we quantify the loss of life? Joan, are there, are there any numbers available yet? I don’t want to speculate-”

“Casualty numbers are estimated at… Jesus. Four million,” a female anchor says atop an aerial shot of Park Avenue. Avengers Tower leans heavily on the decimated remains of its neighbors. Tony feels cryptically proud of how much of it remains intact. “Four million lives taken in seconds.”

Peter sobs against his chest.

Tony was numb at first, then upset. Now he’s angry. Furious. He nearly gave his life for that city a billion years ago. Certainly, he sacrificed his sanity and peace of mind in the process. And for what?

“Where are the Avengers?”

Where are they, indeed.

“Fuck!” he shouts, his chest heaving, his teeth bared, his eyes narrowed and full of promised death and he wants to break something, wants to lose his shit completely and trash the entire jet out of pure rage. But Peter is in his arms, and he needs Tony to maintain at least a sliver of self-composure. He shakes with it. Anger-fueled adrenaline leaves him trembling. All he can do is snarl. “Son of a bitch!”

Then the broadcast shifts, the breaking news jingle rings heavily, and Tony is greeted by a bird’s-eye-view of a fully packed stadium at night. The Rose Bowl. He recognizes it instantly.

“Breaking news at the top of the hour, Thanos, the self-proclaimed intergalactic terrorist responsible for the events in New York just an hour ago has appeared at the Rose Bowl, interrupting a long-anticipated Taylor Swift concert-”

It’s a shock, Tony must admit. One right after the other, as per usual. He lives in the meat grinder of shocks.

The camera drone zooms close to the center stage. Against a background of young Taylor Swift fans, young and old, a sight that is so adorably human, Thanos appears as a demon intent on shattering the illusion.

“Chaos is erupting, and- god, it’s an actual stampede as the thousands in attendance make for the exits-“

Tony doesn’t hear anything else. This pitiful news outlet can’t provide the type of details he requires, but Extremis can, and if they’ve finally reconnected with Earth, that means he should have no issues leaping five hundred million miles into the comparatively primordial soup of tech awaiting him. The Rose Bowl’s security systems are dreadfully outdated, but Tony weaves himself into them nevertheless.
More has happened than what they’re showing on the news, as he expected. Thanos has been busy. Three individuals accompany him, two of which Tony recognizes immediately as Corvus Glaive and Proxima Midnight. The civilians are being herded back into the stadium by snarling, heavily equipped aliens, and where did they come from-?

Tony curses. A quick swap of his perspective has revealed a portal gasping menacingly miles above the stadium. Shit. Shit on a shingle.

Back inside the stadium, Thanos is observing the madness he’s created with apathy. Boredom, even. There’s a sense of urgency about him, like he wants to get this over with. He’s wearing armor, and Tony is so glad he added that dash of hot-rod red to his own back in the day, because god, that gilded look is tacky as hell.

Tacky? Tony actually meant terrifying.

Something draws Thanos’ attention to his own lion-sized forearm, where it appears he keeps an all-purpose computing device. Then the monster smiles and looks directly into the camera Tony is currently looking at him from. Pure ice surges through his veins. Thanos has detected him. Thanos knows he’s watching.

“I see you.”

Tony has never heard Thanos’ voice before, so when it booms through his head, the fear almost buckles his knees, and he immediately begins layering up Extremis, engaging firewalls and powerful anti-virus. Mocking laughter is all it brings.

“No, do not run from me.” Tony’s vaguely aware of his knees actually buckling this time. “It is pointless. You know why I’ve come. You know what you must do.” That smile mutates into a crazed grin. He retrieves something from within his armor, a singed piece of paper, and appraises it before showing it to Tony. It’s the goddamn picture from the Kree ship. “You have something of mine. Do me a favor, and bring it with you when you come to face me. It will benefit you and this planet greatly.”

A screaming, sobbing woman is brought to him, dragged mercilessly by Proxima Midnight via her long brown hair. Thanos doesn’t wait two seconds before he snaps the woman’s neck. Her pleading ends alarmingly swiftly.

Tony shouts out of pure horror.

“Bring me my Infinity Stone, Tony Stark.” He demands. “These people’s lives depend on it.”

He’s given one final shot of another screaming, begging person being brought to him for summary execution before Tony is booted from the system. Gasping, sweaty. Tony looks around. Surprisingly he’s not on the floor. Peter has been holding him so tightly this whole time.

“What happened?” Peter croaks against his chest.

Tony swallows. He’s shaking all over. “He saw me. In, in the uh, the cameras down there, he found Extremis. We had a chat.” Tony swallows again, clears his throat. “He’s called me out.” He doesn’t mention the picture. Peter doesn’t need to feel guilty over this.

“We’ll make a plan,” Quill says.

Tony shakes his head. “We don’t have time.”
Peter looks up at him. “You’re not actually going down there, are you?” he asks with those big Bambi eyes, and maybe Tony should call him ‘Bambi’ from now on, that would really piss the kid off in a humorous way- and he’s doing it again. Thinking of something funny to avoid the pain of looking into the eyes of a child who has already lost so much. Crap. Even Bambi was tragically orphaned and thoroughly traumatized. Fucking Bambi.

Tony has no idea how to deal with this part. Dealing with Thanos is easier. His silence and broken eye contact are both louder than any words could ever be.

“You are, aren’t you?” Peter pushes away from him, from the soaked spot he left on Tony’s shirt. Tony sighs at the devastated expression on Peter’s face. “You’re actually going to- no. No, dammit. This is stupid, Tony, he’s just going to kill you!”

Quill is much calmer. “Do you have a plan?” He asks, open to whatever idea Tony may have. And Tony knows he won’t be for long once he hears it.

Tony looks at him. As scared as he is, anger still sets his face, wrinkles his countenance into something dangerous and determined. “I am the plan.” he says, his words coated in steel.
As Tony reveals the true potential of Extremis in devastating clarity, Peter grows out of his numbness, his terror, his agony and becomes pissed off instead.

“-I’m a hyper-conductive, rapidly firing, thermonuclear, vibranium-based isotopic detonation package containing non-radioactive elements and a relative effectiveness of-“

“You’re a bomb?!” Peter exclaims, and puzzle pieces begin connecting in his head.

Tony nods, his expression emotionless. “I am a very, very big bomb.”

“You were right, I hate it,” Quill says, staring at Tony’s feet, his hands on his hips. “This is an awful plan.”

Tony scoffs. “I haven’t even gone over it all yet.”

“I know, that’s how bad it is,” Quill tells him, agitated. “You’re not even all the way through it and already it’s the worst plan ever in the history of bad plans.”

“I will gladly consider literally any other course of action you have in mind,” Tony says, his stern voice leaking subtle hints of desperation. “But it must be quick, and it must be efficient. People are dying. Thanos has two Stones and I want to get him before he gets three, or god forbid, six, you know?”

Quill bites his lip, shakes his head and ponders the floor intensely. “Let me call the others,” he says, excusing himself with a gesture and heading toward the back of the jet, “maybe Rocket can throw something together. This isn’t written in stone, you hear me?”

“Right,” Tony says, but he sounds like he’s given in to resignation already, “I’ll write it in clay, then.”

“Don’t go anywhere,” Quill makes the ‘watching you’ sign with his fingers.

Peter can only gape at Tony. A deep, squirming sense of betrayal is making him sick. Tony wouldn’t… Tony would never…
Right. Tony would do anything it takes.

“You hid this from me,” he says as soon as Quill is gone, shocked and cold and feeling more alone than ever. Tony doesn’t dispute it. “You— you lied to me.”

For a moment, a flicker of emotion across a granite face. Then it vanishes just as quickly as it appeared. “Peter, you have to listen to me—“

Peter interrupts him with astonished, mirthless laughter. “Holy shit, that’s why Vision wouldn’t help you with Extremis, isn’t it? He knew about this. And- and then, when you asked me, you decided to omit that, because you knew- wait, you told me Extremis doesn’t explode anymore! You told me you fixed it.”

“It doesn’t unless it’s told to.” Tony says. “It’s dormant programing I included in case we ran out of time. The language isn’t even written for it yet, but there’s a slot ready to receive code, and all the critical physical variables are in me. This must be a weird way for you to find out that vibranium is delightfully fissile, huh? And it destroys at the atomic level. The explosion will dissolve Thanos like an Alka Selzter, but at the speed of light.” His tone is maddeningly proud.

“Oh my god.” Peter runs his hands through his hair fretfully. “Oh my god. I can’t believe you would do that you… you used me to help turn you into a weapon!”

“I’m not sure why that’s such an enormous revelation for you. Extremis was, and always will be a weapon—“

“No! No, you know what I mean, dammit, I thought I was helping save your life!” he shouts from behind angry tears. “Not turn you into a fucking suicide bomb!”

Tony might as well be a goddamn statue. The second skin comes out in a graceful, shining black wave, and the disk containing his primary set of armor flies in from his workshop and hits him in the shoulder blade from where it begins to expand, gold and black plates sliding across him seamlessly. Soon Tony is gone, and Iron Man is standing in his place. And although he hasn’t activated his helmet, Tony’s severe expression matches that of his alter-ego. “I’m sorry, Peter.”

“Wait, that’s it?” Peter scoffs, sneers. “That’s all I get is a measly ‘sorry, Peter’?”

“What, you want a prize or something? How’s an interstellar jet sound?” Tony asks, conducting surface checks, weapons systems and stabilization flaps rising and falling all over him, emitting soft hisses, clicks and barely audible whirs. The power sources that cover him and align with the second skin’s plugs glow brightly, then dim to almost nothing, a deep pulse that hums ominously throughout the close space. Insane to think that Tony’s doing it all with his mind. “It’s yours now.”

“W-wait, what? No!” Peter shouts, sputters, put off by Tony’s callous response. “I- I don’t want the jet, I want you to stay alive!”

“I’ll need your help,” Tony continues on, apparently having transformed into an actual machine before Peter’s eyes. And, goddammit, Peter recalls those words, those exact words, being spoken to him atop a cliff almost a month ago. Those words were used to trick him into doing something without his knowledge.

“No,” Peter says, furious and trying desperately to figure out how to deal with all this loss and stress. “You know what? Fuck you, Tony. Seriously, fuck you. I won’t be a part of it. Think of a plan B, you’re supposed to be a genius, and in that case, the genius bar must be set pretty damn low—”

“Sweet Joseph and Mary Poppins, you really think this is plan A, web-head?” Tony snorts, and his
helmet appears momentarily, just a quick check, before it slides away once more. “No, plan A was a little more drawn out than this. Plan A involved getting the Guardians and the Avengers together, locating Strange, Banner and Thor, combining our collective knowledge and resources and formulating a defense strategy. That was plan A. This is very much plan B already. More like plan C.”

“Well- well, come up with something that doesn’t involve me helping you kill yourself!” Peter demands.

“Like what? I’m not trying to be an asshole here, but I don’t suppose you have a better plan?” Tony asks of him, and Peter growls, frustrated as a bee trapped in a window pane, because deep down, he knows Tony is right. “We are facing the largest hostage situation in the history of ever, and we have very little to work with. For every second you take to think or argue with me, another person dies. And these are young, young people, Peter, a lot of them around your age. Tick tock.”

Peter shakes his head as his mouth works to form perceptible words. “Okay, but if you blow yourself up down there, you’ll kill all of them anyway, so-”

“Oh, no, no, even better, without proper contingencies, I’ll crack the entire planet right in half,” Tony says, removing his current armor and sending its disk whizzing back into his workshop. Another appears, one of the less adept ones, and he begins diagnostics on that one too. “Luckily for every single being currently drawing breath on that rock, I am an actual fucking genius and a pioneer in explosion catching technology. Of course, this boom will be a little larger than your average hand grenade or claymore, so I’ll need you and Quill to deploy a seal around the main event and direct energy from the jets warp core into the stadiums electrical system in order to contain it. To contain the blast, I mean. It’ll be like a giant energy cradle. I’ll also need someone to initiate the detonation sequence. I’m not permitted to do it.”

“Wow, this just keeps getting better and better, doesn’t it?” Peter groans, rubbing his face and the thick sleep from his eyes. “Dare I ask why?”

“Because I figured that if I could convince someone else to blow me up, then the circumstances at hand are dire enough to warrant doing so.”

That’s too disturbing for Peter to even think about.

“Ugh, dear god, this sounds like a fucking horror show.” Peter’s gut flips around as he imagines it, having that kind of responsibility, essentially aiming Tony Stark like a missile. There’s no way he could ever do it. “Nope. Absolutely fucking not. I’m not doing it. And I’m really pissed off at you, Tony, you lied to me.”

“I did,” Tony says, but it lacks any semblance of emotion. He’s inside his armor, maybe correcting a flaw he’s found. It’s evidenced by the shine of his cold, dismissive blue eyes. “I hid something from you knowing you would object to it. It was wrong of me. I’m sorry.”

Peter watches him, disturbed, upset, sick to his stomach over everything, and wondering what it’s going to feel like when all this finally sinks in. How much more must Peter lose today? Maybe his sanity will be the next casualty.

And whatever internal switch Tony felt was necessary to flip in order to get through this has totally transformed him into someone Peter doesn’t recognize. Determined and angry, but detached from much else, Tony is preparing for battle in an unfeeling state. And there’s nothing Peter can do to stop him.
But this isn’t the Tony he feels that he needs at the moment.

“What the hell is your problem?” Peter demands, looking this stranger up and down. Where is the supportive, sensitive person Peter slowly chiseled out of harsh stone? “What the fuck is this weird Terminator bullshit you’re pulling on me right now?” When there’s no response, Peter growls and grabs Tony’s arm. “Hey? Tony, come on, I’ve already lost everyone today, please don’t do this—“

Then, Tony is taking his shoulders and shoving him up against the nearest wall. Peter’s too shaken to react with much more than a yelp. “A lot of people lost everyone today,” he all but hisses furiously between gritted teeth. “Listen, Avenger, I know you’re hurting, I know this is the most painful moment of your life, but I need you to man up. This is my job. This is our job. I’m not an Avenger part time, or on the weekends, or whenever the fuck I feel like it. This isn’t some Uber gig with an app I can select the most convenient bad guys from. And if you need perspective, what I’m about to go do is no different from playing piggy back to a nuclear missile, only this time I had a lot longer than a minute to plan for it. Dammit, I don’t get to choose when to be Iron Man. Do you understand?”

Peter has been shocked into silence. He’s never seen this side of Tony before, and he’s so on edge, that the tiny shake Tony gives him makes him jolt visibly.

“Parker, this guy has killed enough people in his little homicidal career to fill Earth twenty times over.” Tony goes on, his gaze fiery and he stabs his index finger at the image of Earth through the windshield. “He kidnaps children and tortures them into either compliance or death. He exterminates entire planets like they’re goddamn ant hills! I’m tired of this mother fucker already, and I haven’t even met him yet. And I can’t wait to kill him. Now, are you an Avenger, Peter Parker. Huh? Are you? Or are you some scared, little kid? I need to know, because I’ve been accused of making that assumption many times, but now you have to decide what you are for yourself. Are you Spider-Man, or not? Are you strong enough to avenge New York?”

Peter’s eyes dart between Tony’s, which are brown now- and then he’s running, twisting furiously out of Tony’s grasp, tears spilling down reddened cheeks. He doesn’t know what he is, what he’s strong enough to be.

There’s no objection to his leaving, almost like it’s expected. The door to their room can’t be slammed, but he hits the button so hard he almost busts it. Damaged, the door jerks closed, but who gives a fuck if he broke it? Apparently, the whole jet is Peter’s now, anyway.

Leia is in there, laying on his bunk, and he scoops her up, holds her close, folds himself up atop the covers and cries. His life is such a mess.

“He gonna be alright?” he hears Quill ask minutes later, whisper even, but Peter still picks it up as though it’s screamed through a loudspeaker.

“Of course,” Tony says, not even attempting to lower his voice. He’s fully aware that Peter can hear him. “That kid in there is the strongest person I know. He’ll do what’s right, he always does.”

Leia purrs, kneads Peter’s chest with careful paws, and Peter holds her close, his tears soaking the bedspread beneath his face, because he knows Tony is right.

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Over the next hour, Tony weathers an onslaught of questions posited across hundreds of millions of miles of emptiness.

“How does he even know who you are?” Gamora asks through video comms. They’re setting up on Titan, having located an old robotics lab that survived Thanos’ wrath, and Tony is repentant at the sight of super advanced tech he will never get to play with. What an absolute bummer.

“He knows I was aboard the Kree ship, he has the damn picture,” Tony says, and cocks his head with a wince. “There’s also a chance Loki had stories to tell about me. He threw me out a window once, and then I blew up his army. We’re not friends.”

“Do you think he knows that we have the Reality Stone?” Quill inquires angrily from the couch. His foot is bouncing a mile a minute atop his knee. He’s surprisingly upset, and Tony expected some resistance, but not such obvious anger and dismay.

“No, I don’t think so,” Tony responds. “He only requested I bring one with me, and he undoubtedly recognized the Mind Stone in that picture. Which is good, I’d like to keep him ignorant. I think we really lucked out in that regard. And, I have a feeling that if he knew you guys were involved at all, he would have asked about Gamora for sure.”

“It’s true,” Gamora confirms at everyone’s expectant glances. “I was his favorite. My betrayal probably struck him harder than any physical blow ever has.”

This is important. Tony knows he should be paying attention, but there’s so much going on that he can barely spare any consideration to their questions or his answers. Earth seems to be trapped in some kind of negative zone, perhaps Thanos’ influence, because he can’t access anything except the Rose Bowl at the moment. Extremis is daunted, and he’s fighting with it, bickering with it, forcing it to keep going. A Kree warship was one thing, an entire planet is a haystack containing a particularly tiny needle.

Now more than ever, he needs to speak to Steve. And how ironic, he could have reached the guy with a damn fossil phone, but with Extremis, the most advanced technology Earth has ever seen, Tony can’t find him, or anyone else for that matter. He’ll need someone to stabilize the area after it’s over. Fury, Steve, Rhodey, somebody. He can’t put everything on Quill and Peter, and the rest of the Guardians need to guard the Reality Stone.

Overall, Tony just wishes the Guardians would make this easier on him. They really aren’t happy. Drax has already stormed off, unwilling to accept Tony’s decision, and the rest of them are prepared to argue him into the ground. As exasperating as it is, it makes him feel wanted, important beyond the sacrifices he’s willing to undertake. With the Avengers, he always felt as though his worth was defined by his usefulness to the team, the quality of their equipment, and the amenities he provided completely free of charge. The Guardians make him feel wanted beyond all that, like he’s valuable as a friend, and not just an asset. And now he has to give them up to save the world. Typical.

“Rocket!” Quill barks at the sight of him as he passes across the screen with Groot in tow. “Hey, tell this idiot he doesn’t have to blow himself up, would you?”

Rocket’s sullen face says everything without need for speech. “I can’t.” He admits sadly, his fingers scrolling through data on his tablet. Tony sent him numbers detailing his body’s potential destructive force, and he’s already aware that it dwarfs anything Rocket is capable of throwing together on the fly. “He’s right, I can’t match it. Not without more time.”

“Even if you could, how would you deploy it?” Tony asks the tough questions, he always has.

“What would you send to deliver the package? This fucking lavender-scented candle has two Infinity
Stones, so we risk the chance of him either teleporting away, or increasing his density so tremendously that no explosion could touch him. What then? And civilians are dying, so we face a restrictive time limit as well, so… what, do we wait twelve hours for you guys to show up while people die? This is the best way to minimize casualties and take out a galactic threat at the same time. And all that at the expense of one person, so I think it’s a win.” He’s so fucking exhausted.

Thirteen more have perished at Thanos’ hand since Tony was called out. Thirteen more young people slaughtered, added on to the horrifying four million estimated dead already, each and every lost soul weighing heavily on Tony’s conscious. He’s been keeping track of it, but only because Thanos is allowing him to, he knows. The firewalls restricting him from accessing the rest of Earth’s networks are some of the thickest he’s ever encountered.

The performing artist was whisked away to safety as soon as news of New York’s destruction hit the beleaguered media, but enough people remain in the stadium to provide Thanos and his crew with a steady supply of victims. It’s devastating to watch, and Tony’s been assured it will continue until he shows his face. He just hopes Peter will understand one day, why he can’t let this go on.

Anger motivates him more than sadness or despair ever could. He cannot wait to kill this fast-food mascot looking asshole.

“This is ridiculous, we have an Infinity Stone!” Quill insists. “You’re telling me between you two idiot geniuses, you can’t figure out how to use it?”

“You mean the two idiot geniuses who only just began to unlock how to safely utilize an artifact older than time itself, a process that is long and grueling and usually requires decades of research?” Tony scoffs at Quill. “Gosh, what a couple of absolute dummies we are.”

“Couldn’t have said it better myself,” Rocket compliments with a sneer at Quill, who sneers back and crosses his arms.

“What exactly do you plan on doing when you meet him?” Gamora asks, her chin resting atop a clenched fist. She seems to be as resigned as Tony is. Perhaps she understands intimately the stakes at hand and considers Tony’s future actions reasonable.

“I plan on getting him to let his guard down,” Tony says, meeting her dark eyes. “It may require a great deal of acting, but I’m prepared to channel my college drama classes.” He never took drama in college, but his anxiety demands that he joke.

“What if he just kills you?” Quill demands, and Nebula is the next one to add her opinion.

“He won’t,” she assures them all, her expression as aggressive as ever. “Valuable targets are always left alive as long as possible to maximize potential intelligence gain. If Thanos is requesting your presence by name, then he is far too invested in your value to simply kill you. Your plan could work.”

“Dammit, Nebula,” Quill grumbles, groaning and running his hands down his face.

“I am Groot.”

It’s the last straw. They all burst into a heated, shouting argument. Even Drax offers a curse from out of sight.

This is hard. Tony is finding it tough to compartmentalize the devastated expressions on all of the Guardians’ faces as they fight over him. Obligation demands he cut himself off from most emotion, because it’s the only way he’ll be able to complete the mission. But between this unexpected display
of affection and Peter’s totally reasonable reaction, it’s clear this is going to be far more trying than he anticipated it being.

And in no conceivable way did he ever expect Peter to be a factor in this when he was tweaking Extremis. It’s awful, all of it. Tony has no choice but to lock up.

The Guardians argue while Tony finally makes it over a firewall, and he bounds silently through the dense forest that is the Earth’s Oracle grid. If he can just locate the others, maybe he won’t have to travel this thorny road of self-sacrifice. But then again, Tony is already attuned to patterns of terrible luck. Though he searches desperately, he has no doubt that he won’t be able to locate Steve in time. Tony is only one person, and Extremis has limits. And just a few hours remain before he must depart to meet his fate.

“Look guys, I wish there was another way, I really do,” Tony says to them, and they all cease bickering to pay him their utmost attention, “but it’s only a matter of time before Thanos gets bored enough to level another city, and I…” Tony takes a deep breath and sets his face against the pain. “I can’t let that happen, I can’t. He’s here early because of me, because I fucked up. I have enough to feel guilty over already, and if I can end this without any of you having to risk your lives, then it’s worth it. You guys gotta let me have this. Please.”

It seems no one knows what to say.

“What about the kid?” Rocket asks quietly, his ears low and pressed to his head. They’re aware of all Peter’s lost.

“He’s always welcome with us,” Quill says immediately. “In fact, I want him to stay with us. If this is how shit has to go down, and he has no one else… I mean, am I right, guys?”

Everyone back on Titan agrees wholeheartedly.

“Thank you,” Tony says, blown away by their acceptance of his little stowaway. He’s been stoic this entire time, but the Guardians being so fiercely protective of both him and Peter has created a deepening fissure in his defensive walls.

“This ain’t over,” Rocket assures him aggressively, but his voice is thick with restrained emotion. The orb containing the Reality Stone is clutched tightly in his paw. “Me and the Spider-Kid, we’ll crack this egg and fix this, you watch, Stark. You’ll see.”

Tony smiles. In his peripheral, he sees Thanos kills another person.

“Looking forward to it.”

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Peter cries for a while, but it’s not long before the tears are drying up and his frenzied thoughts are untangling themselves. Soon, he realizes that being told to ‘man up’ is the best advice he could have ever been given. The more he thinks about it, the more transformative it is for him.

He’s angry at Tony for lying to him, angrier than he’s ever been, but at the same time, he wonders whether he wouldn’t have done the same exact thing considering the circumstances Tony was facing. After all, there’s been no evidence to suggest Tony is in any way suicidal, considering how
he fought with tooth and nail to live through cancer and heart disease and alcoholism, so it’s not like he’s just giving up and taking the easy way out. The only way Tony would ever resort to such extreme measures is if he absolutely feels there is no other choice. And the decision to involve Peter was made under the influence of a brain tumor, and Peter can’t even begin to understand what that’s like.

Or maybe he can, a little at least. He does have experience caring for Tony at his absolute lowest point, health-wise.

Dammit, he’s not really angry at Tony at all. He’s just scared and young and facing decisions no one his age should have to make. And he very selfishly wants to keep Tony all to himself forever. But he should have known, as soon as Peter met him, he should have known that one day he would have to give him up and say goodbye. This is Iron Man he’s talking about, here. The man would rather die than see one person killed in his stead.

Eventually, Peter feels bad for acting the way he did, realizes that he loves Tony too much to stay away for long. Tony is a hero, about to do something incredibly brave, and is probably a barely contained wreck as it is. He doesn’t need Peter breaking down on top of it. After everything they’ve been through together, Tony has been this admirably unshakable force, enduring many storms like a floodgate, and paying mind to all of Peter’s anguishes, even at the expense of his own. Peter does need to man up. It’s past time. Tony needs him to. The world needs him to. It’s so important to who Peter desires to be one day; someone capable of acting as courageously and honorably as Iron Man.

And the tragedies in his life demand he thickens up. If he doesn’t cushion himself now, all of this will break him apart, crumble him like stale bread. Everyone he once cared about is gone. Now, what does he do with it? Does he cower, or does he avenge? The answer is suddenly so obvious.

With a dry face and a new resolve, Peter locates Tony alone in the cockpit, looking out upon Earth as they approach, his arms crossed atop a thick breastplate. Warp is too much at this distance, they’ll crash right into the planet if they engage it, so they approach at a steady cruising speed, providing them with a stunning view. The smoke from New York is visible, even from here, a somber reminder.

Peter goes to stand beside the best mentor he could have ever asked for, slowly and obviously so not to startle him, in case he’s too far inside Extremis to notice Peter’s presence. Though he expects to find a stony expression on Tony’s face, he’s relieved to discover graceful tears instead. Peter’s caught him at a vulnerable moment.

“You know,” he starts, and Peter braces himself, respectful and quiet, as Tony sighs. “when I announced myself to the world as Iron Man, I realized something. I realized then that I had just offered myself up as… well, I guess as a sort of sacrifice, for all the melodrama that entails.” He chuckles, rolls his eyes, wipes at them with the back of his gauntlet. “I knew that if something terrible ever happened, then people would expect me to respond because I’m powerful enough to do so. It’s my duty, Peter. It’s my responsibility.”

Tony turns to smile gloomily at him. “This is what it’s about. This is what it means to be a hero. It means putting yourself between innocent people and the force that intends to harm them, and hoping desperately that you possess the skills to save their lives. And you can’t be discriminatory about when you do it, either. Do you want to see what he showed me?”

Peter doesn’t, but he knows he must bear some of this. It’s time to man up. He’s done crying, he’s done being scared, and he coats his stomach and heart in a suit of armor as thick and indominable as Tony’s is. The nod he gives Tony is curt, determined.
Tony reaches out and grabs his shoulder, squeezing lightly, steadying him with a loving touch. The jets windshield becomes a monitor at the command of Extremis, and Peter realizes quickly that Tony is showing him memories. Thanos is there in the stadium, in the middle of the chaos, and the Titan sees Tony squatting inside the security system, and his voice is booming, terrifying. Then he snaps the neck of a helpless woman, and Peter can’t help it, he feels ill, no matter how many layers he’s recently added to his resolve. Understanding floods him.

Tony ends the video. “Makes you sick, huh?” he asks. Peter nods silently. “So, you understand why I can’t just let it continue?” Peter nods again, stares at the floor. He’s failing at this. He’s so weak, and this is far too big for him. “Hey. Hey, Peter, look at me.” Tony takes both his shoulders in a much gentler grip than before, and Peter clutches Tony’s biceps as he looks into eyes that are blessedly natural now. “I’m sorry I lied to you. I am, I regret it.”

“It’s okay, Tony, I understand,” Peter assures him, swallowing a lump the size of a golf ball, “I was thinking about it, and I would probably do the same thing.”

Tony smiles warmly. “No, no, no, see, that’s why I’m doing this, so you never have to. You don’t have to make the same mistakes, because I’ve already made them for you. Don’t you get it? You’re the future, Peter. I’m old and busted, and you’re the new hotness. I’m so content with doing this because you’re going to figure out how to keep it from happening again, I know it.” Tears are escaping the strict tethers Peter’s imposed on them. What enormous shoes he has to fill and he’s always had small feet.

Tony wipes some away with his thumb. “Hey. Stop that.” He says softly. “Stop doubting yourself. I know that’s what you’re doing.”

But Peter’s internal doubt isn’t the only reason he’s having issues controlling his emotions. “There’s no other way?” he asks brokenly.

Tony averts his gaze, a microscopic flicker. “No.” It’s cryptic and final.

Peter nods resolutely, working hard to bury his fear and sorrow in a deep, repressive grave, only to be exhumed much later when all of existence isn’t at stake. “You must be scared.”

Tony sighs and nods back with a smile that gradually fades just as his fortitude begins to crack. Peter can feel it slowly eroding away, as he always does when Tony’s anxiety starts to overwhelm him. “I don’t want to do this,” he admits breathlessly to Peter with fear in his eyes, and immediately appears ashamed for doing so. He hasn’t let go of Peter, and Peter won’t let go of Tony either. Instead, he pulls his mentor into a hug, something that’s become comfortable between them.

And although Peter wants so desperately to attempt to talk Tony out of it, he knows that it’s futile. Tony is indeed a stubborn son of a bitch. “I’m here for you,” he says into Tony’s shoulder, “whatever you need me to do, I’ll do it.”

Tony scoffs. He’s shaking subtly in Peter’s arms. “I love Peter Parker like a son, but you know what I need? I need Spider-Man right now.”

Peter clears his throat as he holds Tony close. “Do you, uh… love Spider-Man like a son?”

“Don’t push your luck.”
The smoke billowing from the ruins of New York City is visible from space.

Tony reenters Earth’s atmosphere directly above his former home, his birthplace, to survey it, to remind himself of why he needs to do this. The fallen carcasses of once proud skyscrapers jut out from a thick, tumultuous layer of swirling brown dust. The entirety of Earth will be in similar shape if Tony doesn’t put a stop to it right now. He hovers over it and reflects.

A quick scan of the city reveals no life forms. Not one person, not even a single fucking squirrel or blade of grass survived the wave of devastating energy Thanos unleashed on it. Over four million people lost their lives at the cruel touch of a single index finger. And Tony isn’t delusional, he knows all these dead people don’t get a second chance. There’s no afterlife to supplement this one. There’s no Jesus or virgins or cloudy fairy-tail waiting after this. Consciousness is so precious, because everyone only gets one shot at it.

So many people, so many unique stories and walks of life, wiped out in less than a blink of a glowing eye…

“I love you, Tony,” Peter had said into his chest during their final goodbye. “You’re inspiring, and the best mentor I could have ever asked for. Thank you for everything.”

Tony had held on to the kid for a long time. Now, he’s troubled by the things he’ll never get to say to him. He should have said more.

Avenger’s Tower is a protruding, ramshackle skeleton resting at a precarious angle atop a shorter building. It’s the only structure maintaining power, and it glows hopefully amongst the desecrated corpses of inferior structures. Tony’s impeccable engineering at work.

The whole city is deathly silent, a howling reminder of the stunning loss of life. Tony pins this completely on himself. And it’s okay for once. An odd relief has settled over him; this is it. This is the end for him. No more sleepless nights, no more desperate gasps for air, or squeezing, clutching guilt that roils him with nausea. No more struggling, no more agony. Nothing but sweet release, the blackest night, not cold or hot or painful, or anything at all. Nothing but nothing.

Nothing sounds pretty damn good right now.

“Here’s the sequence,” Tony had looked to Quill and Peter with supreme trust as he uploaded the detonation sequence into their equipment. “Accessing the folder will initiate a series of prompts. It’s easy, just follow the instructions, and the language will be added remotely. I’m giving it to both of you in case one of you is disposed.”

Peter had looked uncomfortable as he reviewed the sequence. “There’s no count down?”

Tony had shrugged. “It’s critical Thanos never sees this coming,” was all he said.

Engaging his thrusters, Tony charts a course for Pasadena. And at seventy-seven miles per minute, thanks to Rocket’s upgrades to his repulsors, he should be there in less than an hour.

“A manhunt for the artificial being known as ‘Vision’, has gripped the world,” a British news network claims in his peripheral. “Rewards of up to five million- did I read that correctly? It appears I did, five million Euros are being offered for any information regarding his whereabouts-“

“Christ,” Tony mutters.
“-and where are the Avengers? Why haven’t they responded?” An anchor on CNBC posits to a pair of shrugging co-hosts, who appear pale and worried. Tony can sympathize. Nausea has become a persistent ache in his stomach, and he’s slowly coming to terms with the fact that the only physical comfort he can hope for now is the soothing release of death.

That part, he is worried about, having to stall so Peter and Quill can get set up to catch the explosion. Right now, they’re waiting in orbit aboard the jet, undetectable, and they won’t descend into Earth’s atmosphere until given the go ahead. Tony wants to be the first in the arena so he can make sure Thanos is completely focused on him, needs at least a half hour to be positive that Peter and Quill won’t be noticed, and he’s cut all communications with them, just in case. Thirty minutes is a lot of time.

Tony may be prepared to spar with some of the lowbies, but against Thanos? Any ‘fight’ will occur simply because Thanos is toying with him. Because he allows it or it amuses him. Tony is as much a match for Thanos as a Four is to an Ace.

And where are the Avengers? It doesn’t matter. Tony will take care of this before anyone else has to lose their life.

“The intergalactic warlord calling himself ‘Thanos’ has just executed another civilian, bringing the known concert death toll up to thirty six-“

He’s got to hurry.

“If his demands aren’t met, there’s no telling how many he will kill-“

As a blur, Tony shoots over the rolling hills of Ohio, the flattened, agriculture-speckled landscape of Indiana, thick forests in Missouri that seem to last forever, more farmland over Kansas, Oklahoma, and then the desert begins in New Mexico. He diverts his course north a bit and takes just a second to gaze down into the Grand Canyon. He deserves this, right?

“Yet another victim has been claimed-“

Shit, Tony shouldn’t have done that. There’s no time to dawdle. He has fate to meet with.

Pasadena comes into view ten minutes later.

“Reports are coming in, and - yes- it seems Tony Stark has been spotted within miles of the Rose Bowl- oh my god, what a development-“

Did they honestly expect anything different?

Fear is a vicious beast he must leash as the Rose Bowl appears over the horizon. Seconds. He has seconds of bodily integrity left, only moments to appreciate the splendidly lightweight feeling of flight. So, he circles the arena, accesses surveillance, and is frightened to find Thanos smirking up at him. Watching him again. Ten feet tall, covered in golden armor and flanked by members of his black order, the intergalactic warlord waits for him, exudes vicious intent.

Thanos must have imposed some strict boundaries. The National Guard has responded, but their vehicles remain at a respectful distance around the arena. It’s fine, they will be slaughtered like cattle if they attempt anything. This is an Avengers-level threat.

Tony lands on the stage with a fist in the ground and a cloud of fractured concrete billows up around him at the impact. A chorus of cheers rings out and he stands slowly and retracts his helmet so there’s no doubts. Yes, Tony Stark is alive, and he’s back to kick ass.
“Alright Thanos, party’s over. Put down the murder mitten,” Tony says it like he’s speaking to a small child or maybe a dog, tapping into already scarce reserves of bravery to do so. “Leave it right there, pack your shit and get out of my house. Clearly, I’ve got cleaning to do.”

Thanos’ face is covered in scars. They twist when he smiles at Tony. A massive hand gestures at the crowd, which is absolutely losing its mind, and aliens clamor to get it back under control. “Do you hear that? What spirit your planet possesses. It will be a shame to watch it break,” the titan rumbles. The Power and Space stones gleam and sparkle inside the gauntlet he bears, which is enormous.

Tony grows very cold. “I don’t suppose there’s some kind of deal we can work out, here?” he asks, looking to the stands. There are so many people around, too many to avoid collateral damage.

“Well that depends,” Thanos says, raising an eyebrow. “Did you bring my stone?”

Tony shrugs one shoulder. “I’m afraid not,” he says.

Thanos sighs in annoyance. “Then why have you come?”

A smirk highlights Tony’s face, even if it’s a lie. “Oh, I’m here to kill you,” he assures this terrifying being, and hopes he’s right.
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

Please go and check out this wonderful Peter + Leia fanart! It's so damn cute, and the artist deserves recognition. Here's the link!
http://i349.photobucket.com/albums/q382/lovgucci/artflow_201803180114_zps2lulasu9.png

Expect the next chapter to be uploaded in 1-2 days. Please let me know what you think.

There’s no way to tell how much time Tony Stark has left alive, but Peter’s furious he has to spend a good portion of it locked out of Extremis.

Though Peter understands why, the necessity of it is unyieldingly cruel. Now his only connection to the man who has established a place in his heart as firm as Ben’s and May’s is from within one of the jets screens. Like he’s watching Tony act in a movie. And maybe it's appropriate; Peter’s life has felt like a movie since he met Tony.

Then again, even if he could speak to Tony, what would he say? What does one say to a doomed man? “Everything’s gonna be okay,” just sounds dumb and shortsighted. “Be strong,” sounds condescending. Peter can’t even begin to comprehend such fear, so who is he to comment on Tony’s? It’s different, going to meet death, instead of it randomly showing up uninvited. Or, he must imagine it is. It has to be. The bravery required to actively seek it…

He watches Tony apprehend Thanos inside the stadium all by himself, and Peter can still feel his anxiety, even from so far away. Even through the damn screen and miles of empty space. His foot bounces; he’s full to the brim with unease, and it’s quite loud as the Iron-Spider’s boot taps the floor, but Peter pays it no mind. He’s wearing Tony’s most important gift to him, he can’t think about it too much or he’ll break down, and this isn’t the time. He has chores. For now, they’re waiting for Extremis to enact security protocols around the stadium so they can enter the vicinity of it undetected. All they need is the word from Tony. Before he left, he estimated it would take a half-hour, tops. A lot can happen in thirty minutes.

“What’s on your mind?” Quill asks from over where he’s tightening straps and checking his weapons. His part in this is much bigger than Peter’s, as Tony attempted to keep his involvement as small as possible, something Peter couldn’t even bring himself to argue about at the time.

Quill’s job is to deploy the explosion containment vessels inside the stadium itself, hundred of tiny invisible drones that will launch an energy seal around Tony and Thanos. They’ll draw power from the arenas electrical grid, which Peter will give a much-needed boost by hooking the jets warp core to it. The seal will neutralize the explosion before it can expand too much. It will also concentrate the overall payload into a smaller area. Thanos, and anything else within range, will disintegrate to something less than ash.

“Are we… are we doing the right thing?” Peter asks, his stomach in knots over Tony’s predicament, his hands clenched together between his knees in white-knuckled anticipation. This is awful, this can’t happen.

Star-Lord sighs. “I think sometimes you gotta wait and see the outcome to know.”
“Ends justify the means?” Peter scoffs. “That’s crap.” The regret is simmering, ready to burst to a boil. It’s like his first time on a roller coaster; he got to the top of the hill, looked down, and realized he wanted off, and there was absolutely nothing he could do to satisfy that need. He proceeded to have fun that day, though, and this nonsense is not fun at all. And there’s no Uncle Ben to talk him through it. Soon, there won’t even be a Tony Stark.

“Look man, I don’t know,” Quill says, and Peter finally tears his eyes away from Tony, finds the same stress lines on the guy’s strained face that Peter currently sports, “all I know is that in this job, as a Guardian or an Avenger or whatever, sometimes we have to make sacrifices. Thanos is the biggest, meanest dude in the universe. If Tony thinks he can take him out, then I think it’s worth a go, and we should help him make it as painless as possible. Because you know, you just know, without our help he would try to do it all by himself.”

Peter huffs a rueful, angry chuckle. “That’s so true. I just can’t help but feel like he’s rushing into this. We’ve overlooked something, we’ve… there’s got to be something else, maybe…” It’s stupid. Peter would have only an hour or two to come up with a plan, but he’s starting to feel desperate. Tony can’t die. He can’t just let Tony die!

“I’m sorry,” Quill says quietly, and Peter bites his lip, shakes his head. Quill comes towards him, a little reluctantly. “Hey, I’m sorry, I am. This isn’t fair.” Peter nods and allows Quill to squeeze his tense shoulder. “I may not have all the answers, I’m kind of an idiot, actually, but I’m here for you, alright? We all are. Whatever you need.”

Peter doesn’t say anything. It’s nice of Quill, but he just needs Tony.

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As the members of the Black Order cackle heartily at Tony’s unintentional joke, the silly one he told about being here to kill Thanos of all things, he begins his analytics.

Extremis fans out as a blue wave, visible only to him, and it washes over everything, feeding him numbers and important data regarding his surroundings. There are precisely 7,239 people inside the stadium, with 563 armed Chituari guards inhibiting their escape. The portal that once tore the sky apart has been closed, leading Tony to suspect that Thanos, despite having two Infinity Stones, is still wary of sudden defeat. No doubt, a precaution against what happened last time the Chituari attacked Earth.

Still, even without more pouring through, that’s 563 little alien issues Tony will have to eventually deal with. The Chituari block the exits and spill into the stands, taking pleasure in terrorizing these exhausted people. Tony feels so guilty over it, is totally powerless to stop it. They’ve been cooped up in this damn ant-lion trap for about twenty hours now. Many are in various stages of distress, his scanners tell him. Dehydration is rampant. It’s hot as hell in here, a smothering 93 degrees, and the humidity is unforgiving. July has not been kind to the locals, and the midday sun is positively brutal now. Random fights are breaking out over the shady spots up in the nosebleeds. Tony suspects many of them are regretting the excessive amounts of alcohol they downed the night before.

He’s half-tempted to play music for them over the sound system, but would that be appropriate? This isn’t a show, and that’s not who he is anymore, anyway, the showman. Tony Stark the entertainer. Besides, his mere presence has ignited a new fire in an otherwise placid, dispirited and brutalized crowd. They cheer him on, not yet realizing what he’s here to do. Tony makes no outward
acknowledgment of the fanfare, when eight years ago he would have thrown up peace signs and bathed copiously in the glory. It’s just not who he is anymore.

As for the black order, scans aren’t the only thing he has prepared. Since his experience with two of them on Knowhere, Gamora has been more than willing to offer her extensive knowledge for his diagnostic pleasure. These are her adoptive siblings, after all, she’s sort of an expert.

Proxima Midnight, Thanos’ only remaining daughter, stands to the left of her adoptive father, her spear hovering behind her, a menacing bodyguard. It’s coated in old and new blood, but otherwise has undergone zero upgrades or alterations since impaling Tony’s body at seven agonizing points. When Midnight employed it against him all those days ago during their spat over the Reality Stone, Tony managed to collect a significant amount of data on how it operates. And come to find out, it’s just as vulnerable as any other piece of signal-manipulated tech. Her lack of care for its functional integrity will be her downfall.

The wrinkled creature to Thanos’ left is Corvus Glaive, who bears a duel-bladed lance, but this is no Renaissance Fair replica. Crafted by Thanos himself, this weapon can destroy at a molecular level. One slice from it could irreparably damage not only Tony’s armor, but the second skin as well, leave scars on him for the first time since the procedure. Though every member of the Black Order is exceedingly dangerous, Tony will have to keep an eye on this character in particular. He’s a tad more cunning than the others, and invincible as long as his weapon remains intact.

The third of Thanos’ surrogate devil spawn is called Black Dwarf, which is a dangerously misleading moniker for those ignorant in the realm of astronomy, because he does not match his namesake unless referring to the cosmic event. The guy is an absolute elephant, and the only thing ‘dwarf’ about him is how he makes others feel in his presence. Taller than Thanos by at least a foot, muscular, and scaly like a crocodile, he wields a massive, two-fisted hammer, the smash factor of which, can rival the Hulk. His face is an unholy, reptilian manifestation of waking nightmares.

Tony feels tiny and insignificant in their presence.

Only three out of four have bothered to show up. He wonders where Ebony Maw is at the moment, but he will never protest or draw attention to the absence. Although he’s relatively magic proof, Tony anticipates the unique form of mind manipulation Maw is capable of to be a little outside of his established comfort zone. Of all her siblings, describing Maw was the only time Tony noticed that Gamora was visibly shaking.

“He’s manipulative, persuasive in ways that go beyond mere words,” she’d said, staring into the floor. “If you come into contact with him, do not allow him to speak to you.”

It was duly noted.

Data waterfalls down Tony’s HUD. Black Order physical dimensions, known fighting capability, current estimated fatigue levels, weapon specs, all on the left, stadium and hostage status on the right. All of it is processed in less than three seconds. There has never been a CPU faster than Tony’s brain.

But who is he kidding? Thanos’ capabilities may rival it. Just as he expected, Tony detects a signal identification and tracking algorithm in the device Thanos is wearing around his non-gauntleted forearm. It’s the source of all his cyber antics, and Tony experiences a moment of intense, terrifying inferiority, because even in this realm, Extremis’ realm, Tony’s realm, he’s not entirely safe. It’s like having a blanket ripped off his body in the middle of a good night’s sleep: shocking, a violating exposure. His exclusive little tech world is no longer so exclusive. Thanos has seen the wispy form of numbers and code he inhabits when he conducts his tech wizardry, which is a first.
And if Extremis is vulnerable here, then the jet will be noticed within seconds without the proper preparations, even while in stealth. Time is required in order to sanitize and firewall this area, make it friendly for Peter and Quill, thirty minutes at the very least. Thanos is a tough opponent in more ways than one, a goddamn multi-faceted problem. Brains met brawn and had a big, purple baby. And at any time, he could touch the planet and destroy it. Tony needs to make himself interesting, so as to prevent that. Gamora told him that Thanos gets bored easily. He needs a mouse to bat around sometimes. Tony plans to be that mouse.

Only a moment of hesitation is endured, before he’s pulling up a picture of Peter, and locking it into place within small, empty section of his HUD in the top right corner. It’s a solid reminder of why this is so important. Fuck it, he doesn’t have long to live anyway.

“Kill me?” Thanos’ chuckle is the low, dying grumble of thunder following the initial violent boom. Tony’s promise is a joke to him, and he repeats it with doubt and a disappointed shake of his head. Understandable. Tony feels like a disappointing joke right now. “Oh human, you are far too small. You may possess an impressively rare gift, but in the end, you are no match for me.”

It seems that Tony has already roused some level of respect from the Mad Titan. “Let’s throw down and find out for sure, then,” he says with a casual tilt of his head. The fierce expression he entered the stadium with is a gigantic effort to keep up. Doubt poisons his confidence. Suffocates it. Can he do this? There’s three high-powered individuals he might have to cut through before reaching Thanos, and he won’t be pleased with a detonation until he’s within inches of his target. “You and me, let’s go.”

Thanos smirks and appears intrigued, but Midnight scoffs loudly.

“Do not sully your hands wringing the life out of this dirty rag, my lord,” she says, smiling at Tony, which he meets with a forced smirk. “I recognize him now that I’ve heard his voice. This is the same tin man I left bleeding on the floor of the Collector’s studio. He is the one responsible for the disappearance of your stone.”

Of course. In the photo they have, Tony’s armor is a different color, the original red and gold, and he appears to be twenty years older. And Midnight never did get a look at his face while she was tormenting him, he had his helmet up the entire time. Now she’s putting the pieces together, and this could be so bad. Because she’s right; he does know where the Reality Stone is.

“Uh, excuse me,” Tony says cheekily, even as terror adds a noticeable chill to his veins, “I recall your arrogance, sadism, and hesitance to alert daddy of your failure as being primarily responsible for you dropping the ball so hard, but what do I know? Just don’t pin your inadequacy on me, I do take insult to it.”

Corvus’ lips twitch as he observes the proceedings in silent contemplation.

“That spacecraft was empty, my lord,” Midnight hisses slowly between gritted teeth, her glare tightening into a murderous expression. “A distraction. I believe this man may have knowledge of the artifacts whereabouts.”

“I comprehend the implications, Midnight,” Thanos says coolly, looking upon Tony with even further interest, which horrifies him. “And I understand that he managed to trick you, but that is where the default lies, isn’t it, my dear? You’ve been slipping.”

The glimmer of fear in Midnight’s eyes is telling of her treatment recently. It’s quickly replaced by determination and anger. “Allow me to retrieve it, then,” she requests, almost spitting her words, “the task is below you, father, your power exceeds it. This man is a spec of dirt.”
“Okay, first off, rude,” Tony objects indignantly while stretching his back with a wave-like shrug of his shoulders, a ready display of confidence. “Second, bring it. I’m so ready to kill you, it’s tingling in my spear holes.” They’re all healed, and not a single scar remains, but the sight of her weapon is stirring anxiety in him. Like it was yesterday, he recalls the suffering that spear is capable of dishing out with crystalline clarity. And it’s pissing him off. It took hours, hours of unforgiving agony to pick all the pieces of the ruined suit out of his flesh, a process so painful he had to recruit outside parties for the task. Ugh.

The only way he will be satisfied at the end of this is if he gets to beat the absolute shit out of this blue bitch first. Gender lines be damned, she scarified any restraint he may have shown her the day she poked seven little hell-holes through his body.

In response to Tony’s threat, Midnight smiles serenely at him. “You will make an excellent worm,” she says, so mysteriously calm, it puts him off.

He shrugs. “Whatever that means.”

“It means you should appreciate your ability to stand while you still have it,” she hisses.

“Silence,” Thanos commands, and he doesn’t even need to raise his voice in the slightest to produce the desired results. Usually, Tony would take such an order as an excuse to talk even more, but he doesn’t dare provoke Thanos too much. Not here, surrounded by so many innocent liabilities. The guy knew what he was doing when he selected the stadium to post up in. “Midnight, your proposal is acceptable. If you can acquire my Reality Stone, I will forgive you for losing it.”

Midnight is smiling as she bows deeply. “Thank you, my lord, it is an honor to be granted so many chances.”

Tony scoffs in disgust. “Ugh. Zealotry gives me heartburn. How gross.” He activates his helmet, readies himself. Midnight smirks as she arranges her spear to point over her shoulder, blue hands performing a delicate, precise ballet of movements. The confidence she displays almost makes Tony sympathetic towards her. Already, his victory is being orchestrated, and she has no damn clue.

“Do not mistake my love for zealotry, human,” she proclaims, sidestepping slowly, watching Tony’s every move, eyes pointed like a lioness on the prowl, and he matches her moves, just as aware, equally distrustful. “Lord Thanos is engaged in a righteous purpose your feeble mind can’t even begin to fathom. My admiration of him his well-deserved. And soon, he will have yours as well.”

“Eh, I wouldn’t be so pressed for it, I’ve been known to admire cheeseburgers and trashcans,” Tony says dully, preparing himself for combat. His HUD turns a deep red. No surprise portals with spears flying from them to catch him off guard this time. No extra source of intimidation from Corvus Glaive. Midnight is totally on her own in this. “For you, though, I think you’re mixing up admiration with fear.”

“You have yet to know fear,” Midnight snarls her resentment, and hurls her spear directly at Tony with a violent thrust of her hand.

He spares one precious second glance at Peter’s face. Show time.

The dreadful weapon will never miss its target, and it’s fast as lightning. Tony isn’t quite ready for it, so he propels himself backward, away from it, and launches one of his spare armors in front of him to confuse its trajectory. The new suit manifests from its disk in an instant, syncs immediately to Extremis, and Tony sends it into the air. The spear follows the empty suit mindlessly. It happens just as Midnight is launching herself at Tony with a vicious war cry.
And Tony cannot get complacent about this. Above all else, he must remember what is at stake for
Proxima Midnight. Thanos will have a punishment ready should she fail, there’s no doubt about it,
and Tony knows he must be prepared to fight someone who is possibly desperate for her life.

As she comes, Tony fires a pair of repulsor blasts, which are dodged to the left, the right, and the
impacts leave craters behind, kick up dirt from beneath the turf like land mines were placed there.
She approaches him, clearly content with engaging in hand-to-hand combat, and even though her
fighting style is totally unique, Tony finds he can comprehend it much quicker than he could in
similar situations before Extremis. Alien strikes are blocked and countered with ease that’s so
obvious it makes Midnight snarl in frustration.

It really is such a shame he has to die today. Tony’s breakthroughs with Extremis could have
changed the world. Maybe the universe.

“Looks like you might be all talk and cheap shots,” he says, smiling behind his faceplate, and Iron
Man continues to frown disapprovingly at his enemy.

“Insect, you have as much advantage as a fly against a swatter,” Midnight hisses, breaking off from
their momentary sparring and calling her spear back from where it’s been trailing Tony’s dummy
suit, a process requiring a decent amount of concentration on her part, he notices. So, as she drops
her guard, Tony aims a unibeam at her feet, which fractures the ground beneath her, shakes it
violently, and it throws her off balance. Her spear comes back at her without her full attention as
anticipated, and Tony thinks for a moment that maybe it’s over, but she’s able to consolidate herself
just in time to alter its course.

“Good try,” she says, smirking, and the spear completes a U-turn around her shoulders, flying back
towards Tony, who rockets away into the sky with a rush of adrenaline, trying desperately to put his
spare suit between himself and that damn spear.

Meanwhile, Midnight has figured out that Tony doesn’t want to hurt innocents, choosing to run
along the low wall separating the crowd from the field as she concentrates on sending the spear after
Tony and not the dummy suit it wants to mindlessly follow. She knows that if Tony attempts to aim
at her, his attack could miss and hit the civilians beyond. So, he joins her for a race she’s destined to
lose.

“Asshole,” she snarls, looking over her shoulder to find Tony trailing her easily, following her
desperate path along the wall. And just behind him is the spear.

Tony smirks. “It’s my specialty.”

She’s lost track of the dummy armor. It comes in front of her and collides with her in such a way that
she loses her footing and tumbles back onto the field with a furious shriek, skidding to a halt a good
distance away. Tony pulls up at the last minute, and the spear impales the spare armor instead, right
through the breastplate. The armor begins to morph around it, uses energy he harvested from the
Reality Stone to envelope it, just as the spear pins it to the ground. A thick layer of Infinity Stone-
infused gold-titanium coats it and hardens as an impenetrable lump of magical metal, trapping the
aggressive little weapon for the time being. It won’t hold for long, and being as untested as this
Infinity technology is, he can’t quite rely on it to protect his actual flesh quite yet. If he’d had more
time…

Tony takes the chance and goes for the disarmed Midnight. Since she’s on the field, he launches
low-yield rockets from his hips at her feet as he descends on her, and she’s forced to jump reactively
to avoid each explosion. And while she’s distracted, Tony attacks.
It’s not well known, but Tony is an actual kung-fu master and boxing expert. He engages Midnight in close-quarters combat just as his firewalls activate, indicated by a flashing alert to the right of his vision. Good, finally. Time to contact his jet. That didn’t take nearly as long as he anticipated. Unfortunately, he won’t be able to contact the Milano at all throughout this. Any signal heading toward Titan could clue Thanos into the Reality Stone’s location, and it’s not worth the risk.

‘Firewalls are up’, he announces to his waiting allies, even as he’s deflecting devastating blows from a near-invincible being, while at the same time, attempting desperately to match them, ‘you’re clear for approach.’

“Copy that, Tony,” Quill responds immediately, and Tony doesn’t miss the relief in his voice, “entering Earth’s atmosphere, ETA, six minutes. Hi, by the way. Looking good down there.”

‘Hey, thanks,’ Tony says, dodging a punch, an aggressive kick, and though he knows better, has very little attentiveness to spare as it is, he checks the jets video surveillance. Quill is the first one Tony finds, and he’s in the process of throwing himself into the pilot’s chair, but Tony isn’t concerned for Quill as much as he is for Peter. In the next room, Tony locates him watching the fight live, and sighs at the terrified expression the kid’s face is scrunched into. He seeks Peter’s earpiece, a quick little maneuver he’s become accustomed to.

‘You should be getting ready,’ he says, and Peter doesn’t jump, not any more.

He scoffs instead, looking up at the camera where he knows Tony is watching him from. “And you should be paying attention,” is his totally reasonable reply.

Sure enough, like he’s been caught in a woodchipper, Midnight smirks, takes Tony’s arm after his failed left hook and pulls him through an entire spin cycle of pain that involves his face, ribs and one of his kidneys. It’s about four long seconds before Tony can get his bearings enough to break from it, spurting flares as he rockets away from her. Ouch.

The crowd gasps.

No time to consider it. Tony has to switch over to infrared due to the swirling dust limiting his visuals, and he locates Midnight just in time to find her waving her damn hands around, and an alarm blares at him-

The spear explodes out of the ground right beneath him, raining dirt and debris, and Tony curses brilliantly, rocketing off just as it splits into six sections that intersect with gory intention where his body had been just milliseconds before. They meant to slice him up, and some quick math tells him they were positioned specifically to avoid injuring him lethally. Midnight must have burrowed it beneath the turf like a deadly mole to escape the confines of the melted suit. Tony supposes Thanos wouldn’t be the type to employ amateurs.

‘Ah, shit!’ he says to Peter. He needs to pay attention to the fight, but he’s been feeling so alone during this, even amongst all these people. ‘Did you see that? Nearly voodoo dolled, again.’ Is it so bad to not want to die alone, even if it’s in this very limited capacity?

Tony’s removed himself from the cameras to preserve energy and attentiveness, but he can still hear Peter’s tired sigh. “I saw it, Tony. Stop treating this like a video game.”

‘Sorry. Honestly, if I don’t I might crack up,’ he reveals, deploying another suit, one of only three left. The spear approaches, and just before it impales him, Tony ejects from his current digs completely, dives gracefully downward, only to be caught by his spare armor, and he jets immediately toward Midnight. Repulsors in his palms whine as he fires them at her, center-mass.
"I just don’t want to see you die in vain," Peter tells him.

'I won’t.'

It throws her off, and the spear falters. Just in time, too, as Tony’s virus has finally wormed its way into the weapons delicate and neglected digital infrastructure. Soon enough, it’s over, and Tony and his extra suit are floating side by side, the spear that once tortured him coming up to hover behind his own shoulder now, a slave to his whim. He doesn’t even need to move his hands around to control it. Extremis is a marvel of bioengineering.

“Midnight!” Thanos barks furiously, shedding his stoic conduct, “your spear! You have allowed him to gain control of your spear!”

From fifty feet below, Midnight regards Tony with absolute shock. “No,” she gasps, waving her hands, and Tony can feel the influence in the weapon, but it’s no match for his own. The spear holds steady, loyally floating above his right shoulder. His eyes are icy blue behind his faceplate, and Midnight’s shine with terror. “No! This is impossible!”

“Are you controlling her spear?” Peter asks. Tony’s left the line to Peter’s earpiece completely open on purpose, a private, two-way connection. The frequency is guarded by the most stringent firewalls Tony’s ever devised.

‘Sure am,’ he tells Peter proudly.

“Please,” Midnight begs. “Please, don’t-“

“How many times have you heard those exact words, huh?” Tony snarls, suddenly furious. “How many of your victims have begged you for mercy in the exact same way? And how many lives have you coldly ended regardless? Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t shishkabob you to the fucking ground right now-”

“I had no choice!” she screams and collapses to her knees. “I never had a choice! I- I am a slave, can’t you see?” A grave-like hush has descended the stadium. Tony looks down at her with uninhibited pity, and suddenly, he doesn’t feel so good about this. Gamora couldn’t divulge the full, uncensored backgrounds of her siblings, but it’s easy to assume that Proxima Midnight was once an orphaned child soldier as well, forced to call her conqueror ‘father’. Another victim of Thanos’ cruelty. And to think, under the correct circumstances, Midnight might have healed as her sisters have, but fate had a cruel twist in store for her instead. Fuck, this is awful.

“Stand down,” Tony demands, no longer in the mood for vengeance. At least not like this. “You’re done, stay down.”

Proxima Midnight is crying, and Tony has never been very adept at reigning in his empathy. He’s sure if he should look, he would find an eye-shaped brand marring her shoulder.

“No,” Midnight’s voice is light and shuddering, snarling even. She bares her teeth at him like an animal. “This is your fault. I’ll kill you!”

“Midnight, don’t,” Corvus Glaive begs, but it’s too late. Midnight roars her fury and flies up toward Tony, intends to attack him, and he has no choice but to defend himself.

“I’m sorry,” he says sincerely. With a heavy heart, Tony aims the spear and it impales Midnight through her lower abdomen. He has no intention of killing her, just wants to end her murderous rampage, though he’s conflicted over whether sparing her life is more merciful than ending it quickly. But Tony is not a willing executioner.
'No!' Corvus shouts.

Tony wastes no time in increasing the spears density, making it heavy enough to keep Midnight against the ground. She sputters blood as she grasps her own weapon, regards it with shock, betrayal even, her eyes wide and fearful. She is done.

"Holy shit..." Peter mutters in Tony’s head.

"Whoa, nice!" Quill shouts over their shared comms.

Tony doesn’t know what to say back to either of them.

Thanos is walking over. Dissatisfaction gleams in his eyes, and something else, something Tony didn’t expect at all; grief. “Such carelessness,” the Titan comments. “It’s a shame.”

“My- my lord-,” Midnight groans, cries out, and Tony pities her. He’s very aware that every move, every word, every inhale and exhale, creates sharp agony for her. Revenge isn’t a thing Tony derives pleasure from, at least not directly. Seeing people in pain, even his enemies, upsets him, it always has, and he prefers clean, quick kills, should he be forced to kill at all. He just can’t handle the suffering, it’s so loud at times, it’s one of the many things that keeps him up at night.

Thanos stands over his daughter, a looming mountain of muscle and sociopathy. “Midnight-“

“Father,” she gasps, reaching for him, “please...”

“My lord Thanos,” Corvus attempts timidly with slight notes of panic, coming up on Thanos’ right, “perhaps consideration can be given-“

“Consideration has already come and gone,” Thanos interrupts him coldly. “Failure is intolerable. You’ve humiliated me again, Midnight, my reputation is at stake. It is for the last time.”

Tony cringes as Thanos yanks Midnight’s spear from her belly and she gurgles a short cry. Without a word, he snaps it in two, tosses it aside. And Tony’s not sure what he expected Thanos to do after that. Or maybe he just didn’t want to think about it, too disturbed by having directly caused it to allow himself to dwell. But he couldn’t have predicted the steely glint that shines in Thanos’ eyes as he presses his gauntlet to Midnight’s chest and after a flash of purple, turns her entire being into nothing more than ash.

It’s impossible to discern why it bothers Tony so much to witness this. He came here to kill all these monsters either way, but... he supposes the inevitability of it doesn’t negate its tragic and sickening nature.

Corvus looks away, his face twisting with something resembling sadness. Black Dwarf’s eye twitches.

“That wasn’t necessary,” Tony says as passively as he can manage, reducing his thrusters to engage a slow descent to the ground, the minion suit matching every move precisely. They touch down together like a couple of twins. “There’s no way she could have seen that coming, the flaw I exploited was so miniscule-”

“I will not allow you to question my methods, human,” Thanos says, rising from his crouch and raising an eyebrow at Tony from over one gargantuan shoulder. “I have a goal, and it has only remained in sight due to strict discipline and a defining set of principles I’ve deemed most efficient. I do not employ invalids.”
“Right,” Tony says, swallowing, and so, so angry that it’s overwhelming his fear. “All this bullshit about having methods and principles, it’s nonsense, it really is. I think what you mean is that you have no qualms against being an absolute fucking psychopath, which I gotta say, does frighten people into a state of compliance like I’ve never seen before. And let’s discuss this goal of yours—”

Nothing really surprises Tony anymore, or so he thought. Before he can finish his sentence, a section of empty space near Thanos… well, it unfolds itself, for lack of a better term. It opens into a dark, sucking void, and from it steps a woman, pale as snow and wearing a long gown beneath a pile of robes, all of it black, a striking contrast to her complexion. Tony regards the event with unease.

‘Uh, Quill?’

‘Ten seconds until touchdown, be patient—‘

‘No, look.’ He knows Quill is busy landing outside the stadium, so he provides a live feed of what he’s witnessing within the jets windshield. ‘Who in the multi-dimensional fuck is this?’

There’s a pause, and then a slow, chilling, “I have no idea.”

‘She just popped out of thin air, my scanners can’t touch her.’

Thanos has ceased all activity, and Tony watches, mystified as this skinny woman all but floats across the field. And why does she seem so familiar? Just laying eyes on her has rekindled a deep sense of dread in Tony that he recognizes instantly as the unmistakable prelude to death. It’s notable, too, that the Mighty Titan himself seems… softer? Even as he stands unfeelingly over the ashes of his supposed ‘daughter’, his harsh countenance relaxes microscopically at the sight of this woman.

She glides around him, her fingertips brushing his bicep. When she spots the pile of ashes, she tsks disapprovingly. “My, my, you needn’t have killed her,” she says, “I quite enjoyed her work.”

Thanos’ jaw twitches. “My lady, I did not expect—”

“And who is this?” She gestures to Tony, who stiffens impossibly further. Whoever this woman is, she just had the unmitigated cojones to cut Thanos off mid-sentence, and that fucking scares him.

“Are you playing games, dear Thanos?”

“Terra possesses one, possibly two of my stones,” Thanos informs her, “and this man has knowledge of their whereabouts.”

But she flat out ignores him in favor of Tony. “Well hello,” she says, and Tony shifts nervously because he has no idea what to expect from her.

“Hi.” Now more than ever, he needs to speak with Gamora and Nebula, but it’s not worth the risk.

“For someone keeping a secret from my Thanos, you are in remarkably good condition,” she observes, looking him over.

“I don’t think we’ve met.” Tony retracts his helmet, intending to remain non-threatening, if this… entity is willing to do the same. “Who are you? What’s your part in this musical?”

‘I need data, stat. Any luck?’

Quill scoffs. “I’ve only got what’s stored in my mask, dude, I’m trying to do twelve things, I’m not a computer like you—just hold on.” Tensions are high. Peter is so quiet, and Tony wonders what all he’s not saying. It’s the only time Peter shuts up for a second, when he has too much to say.
The woman hums at him. “Oh, on the contrary, I believe we are already well acquainted.” Her smile is pointed and venomous like a viper’s kiss. Clear, white eyes disappear behind pale lids, and when she breathes heavily, the winds themselves whip up around her. “Death surrounds you, human,” she says, and her eyes open to reveal frightening intrigue. She glances over her shoulder at Thanos.

‘Ah, shit,’ Tony curses through Extremis as everything falls into place, ‘it’s his goddamn girlfriend. The Mad Titan has a fucking girlfriend, and she’s trying to make him jealous, which is absurd.’

But apparently, Thanos can get a little jealous. His face is calm as he stares at Tony. Too calm. As though all his brain function, even that guiding expression, is being spent on formulating what exactly he’s going to do about the situation.

Whelp, Tony’s toast, then.

The woman in black begins to slink towards Tony.

“Don’t come any closer, lady,” Tony demands, raising his palm, milliseconds away from deploying his helmet as well. He’s nervous. Thanos has hungry eyes for him, and his threatening silence is upsetting Tony’s stomach. “I wouldn’t want to scar that pretty face.”

“Oh,” she chuckles and clicks her tongue, “how humorous. No sweetheart, you see, no one can hurt me.”

Marvelous.

“Just got off the line with Gamora,” Quill says, and Tony curses.

‘Not cool, we had a long discussion about this-‘

“Tony, that’s Lady Death,” Quill informs him, and Tony allows a glimmer of annoyance to flash across his face.

‘That supposed to mean something to me?’

“She’s the physical manifestation of literal death, Tony,” Quill reveals, and all of Tony’s remaining saliva dries up in an instant. “She’s a god with limits. Please be careful.”

It hits him then; they’re dealing with some of the most powerful forces in the universe. Thanos is one thing, but death itself has a form, and it’s here right now. Why? She must have something to do with all this.

Tony licks his lips. ‘What happens if I kill Death?’

“I’m not sure you can,” Quill says, and Tony wonders if he’s made a very dire mistake. “Gamora was shocked she’s here at all, said she’s only seen Death like twice the whole time she was with Thanos.”

‘Excellent, keep me posted,’ Tony says back.

“I am curious,” Death continues, and though she doesn’t seem intimidated by Tony’s aggressive stance, she does stop advancing on him, “what do you expect to achieve here?”

“I’m going to kill your boyfriend,” Tony says, stern voice displaying his conviction.

Utter delight crosses Death’s face. “Now that,” she says, pointing an elegant, black-tipped finger at him, “would be quite the feat to behold.”
“Stick around,” Tony says, smiling, “the show just started.”

“Unfortunately, I cannot,” she tells him, and Tony has to suppress the sigh of relief he feels like breathing. Death is an issue that can be dealt with as soon as Thanos is defeated. “But I do wish you luck in your admirable, if not folly, quest.”

“Don’t need it,” he says dismissively. “Say your goodbyes now, honey, your man will be grape jelly by the time I’m done with him.”

“Did you hear that, my love?” Death inquires of Thanos, whose expression does not falter in the least. “Have you ever encountered such resistance?”

“I can’t say that I have,” Thanos replies, and he smiles at Death. “It will be entertaining to witness the gradual erosion of his confidence.”

“I suppose.” Death sounds bored as she summons a portal to exit through. “Don’t keep me waiting long, dear Thanos.” And then she is gone as quickly as she appeared.

Corvus Glaive steps forward. “Allow me to desecrate this cretin,” he says, twirling his weapon, but Thanos stops him with a raised hand.

“No.” Thanos’ gaze is incendiary and unalteringly focused on Tony. “He believes himself capable of challenging me, so I shall deliver his wake-up call.” Then he starts shedding his golden armor piece by piece. Apparently, he never needed it in the first place. His next words chill Tony to the bone. “And I’m about to remind him of his ultimate purpose. He is here to tell me where my Stones are, and nothing more. Do you hear me, human? Your destiny amounts to aiding me in my pursuits. You should feel accomplished, honored even.”

“I’ll feel accomplished when you’re dead,” Tony growls, engages his helmet, and propels himself at Thanos without another thought.
Okay, so I know, the 1-2 days thing was bullshit, I'm sorry. It's been kinda tough around here, I don't really want to talk about it, so I'm going to use this time to talk about Infinity War instead. Oh, and warnings. This chapter gets rough for Tony, guys, but I have faith in you. Honestly, if you got past chapter 20 with your psyche intact, you'll make it through this no problem.

*SPOILERS for IW*

Infinity War is the best movie I've ever seen, no lies. In fact, I consider it more of an experience than a movie. I had astronomically high expectations for it, and it delivered in almost every aspect, minus a Steve-Tony reunion, which I wanted to see so badly. Of course, my biggest thing for any marvel movie featuring Iron Man for even the smallest length of time, is how Tony's character is handled. And I can't gush enough about him in this movie. This isn't like back in 2015, when I walked out of Age of Ultron going 'wtf, Marvel'. No, this movie garnered a new level of respect for Iron Man that I haven't seen since 2012. My boy made Thanos bleed and gained his respect and got pats, and I never thought I'd see something so beautiful with these two eyes of mine.

I gotta say though, as soon as their plan failed, and Tony recovered from the moon throw, and went head to head with purple boi, I thought all those days of excessive red bull and adderall consumption was gonna catch up to me, and I was gonna have a heart attack right there in the theater. I have actually never been so scared watching a movie. That armor just starts breaking apart, and then he fucking stabs Tony, impales him straight through, and god, are you serious? I've written some fucked up shit, but I was vocally distraught watching that happen. My husband gasped right next to me, and some guy said 'fucking no!', and at that point, I think everyone realized how very not ready they were to watch Iron Man die. Even I had kinda come to terms with it. Until that moment. I really thought 'this is the end, this is it.' NOPE NOT MY BOY!

I was so shocked, I couldn't cry the first time I saw it. The second time, I started bawling as soon as Gamora came on screen. I love her, you guys. Of all the MCU ladies, she's my favorite. And to see her singing along and happy with her new family, and then she's ripped from them so brutally, I couldn't handle it. I now cry when I hear 'Rubberband Man' ffs.

And Rocket lost Groot again. And then his entire family. Not okay. I'm not okay.

And then Peter's death was like an actual punch to the face. It was so rough, I had trouble sleeping that night. I've seen it four times total, and that scene fucks me up good every single time. It is no less painful in large doses. Haunting, i think is the best way to describe it. The way he went was haunting, and I was not ready for it. And now my poor boy Tony is alone with Nebula, who he doesn't know, with Peter's ashes on his hands. Literally, that's where they left him. I couldn't believe it. Yet another MCU moment where I thought to myself 'are they really doing this right now? Wow, they are, they went there."

I'm sad Peter's gone, and might be fore a lot of A4. I wanted more wonderful Iron Dad content, but if this means with get last one hurrah focusing completely on the original
six, I'm game. Peter better get to see Tony one last time though. They can't end it like that for those two.

Favorite quote: "Dude, you're embarrassing me in front of the wizards."

Peter gets the distinct impression that these people, the unfortunate onlookers unwillingly caught up in this nightmare, think that Tony will be the one snowball to survive hell.

When Tony attacks Thanos first, they cheer and applaud like idiots, rock the entire stadium with percussive influence as though they’re watching a fucking football game, and Peter, who is descending a dark stairwell via the ramped ceiling, must stop to catch his breath for a moment. A pungent, unescapable mixture of fear, grief and desperation is sending his already rushing heart into fourth gear. Against his better judgment, Peter’s been keeping a live feed of the fight up on his HUD and the stadiums many cameras are capturing it from shocking angles. As soon as Thanos teleports out of Tony’s path, appears behind him, and deals a swift blow to his spine, Peter realizes this isn’t even a fight anymore. It’s a beating.

Honestly, he expected Tony to confront Thanos a little later than this.

Peter has to lower himself to the ground, slowly and as silent as a real spider on a wall, because there are a pair of chituari in this stairwell. He can feel them hanging around at the bottom, guarding the door he needs, which leads to the sublevels.

“Dammit,” he whispers to himself, squatting by the wall, resting his head back against it. His heart rate is too high, and his HUD is scolding him for his uneven respiration. “I can’t do this. I can’t do it.”

He can just feel it. Something isn’t right.

Tony has taught Peter how to keep the anxiety from controlling him, but practice makes perfect, and he hasn’t had much of a break from the stress to get his bearings. He needs a normal fucking environment to process this in. His bedroom, Aunt May’s kitchen, Tony’s compound, school, something familiar, anything from his past. And basically, all of it is ash, now. Every aspect of his life has been trounced into sour wine since he agreed to help with Extremis, but then again, if he hadn’t, he would have shared the fate of millions of other New Yorkers. It’s goddamn overwhelming, thinking back on the things he’s seen and heard and experienced. To consider fate and how it plays like a child with a toy. It all collects in a little dam which breaks at the worst of times. Like right now.

Gloom descends on him, a tatty, black curtain. “Mute microphone,” he says breathlessly to his suit, just before the hyperventilation begins.

‘Pete?’

But he’s forgotten about his earpiece. Sometimes, he thinks maybe Tony is constantly attached to it. If that’s the case, Peter doesn’t mind.

“Tony?” Peter gasps, and that strange, warm sense of protection overcomes him, the same relief he felt the day Aunt May stormed the bastions of his elementary school to give them a piece of her mind about the continuous bullying. Almost like Tony is the one force left that can correct all the bad in his life. Tony has trained him, dug a bullet out of his shoulder, kept him from bleeding to death, saved
him from Kree imprisonment, and then later, from torture. Tony can fix anything. “Oh, god… I can’t
do this, Tony, I can’t kill you like this.”

‘Don’t see it that way,’ Tony says. ‘You’re not killing me, you’re ending Thanos. Why is your
heartrate so high?’

“I’m a little bit fucking scared, alright?” He gasps and gasps, a raw, sobbing, desperate noise and
clutches his chest. Certainly, he will die right here in this stairwell, silent to everyone but himself and
Tony. “I’m telling you, Tony, I can’t do this-!”

‘It’s okay, kid. Deep breaths, right? We worked on this. You’re okay.,’ Tony lies. Clearly, it’s a lie,
nothing will ever be okay again. ‘Guess what? I’m scared too. But I’m still here.’ How can that be?
His deep Extremis voice sounds normal and as smooth as ever.

“How do you do it?” Peter asks, sweaty and panicked and perplexed, because judging by the fight
against Proxima Midnight, and the confidence shown while charging Thanos, Tony is a fearless
machine right now. “Because, I’m so… I- I can’t even move, I’m not brave like you-“ he’s cut off by
his own shallow, sharp panting. The live feed of the fight disappears from his HUD despite not
receiving a command from Peter. “Hey-!”

‘Look, I’ll tell you what; bravery is always misrepresented,’ Tony interrupts him, and Peter’s
frustrated to find he’s been locked out of his own surveillance systems. ‘Movies, television, they get it
wrong ninety percent of the time, because they depict the hero as having no fear. That’s not what
bravery is. That’s fake bravery. Real bravery is being terrified of something and still having the
strength to face it. Not being scared is unrealistic. It’s okay to be scared, Peter.’

“Put- put the video back up,” Peter demands, haughty even while he slowly suffocates beneath a
mountain of stress. Although he heard the words, even processed their importance, the most vital
thing to him right now is watching every single moment Tony has left alive.

‘That might be the very last thing you need,’ Tony tells him. ‘Now, did you hear me, or did I just
waste precious bandwidth on you?’

“I heard you, you jerk,” Peter says, but then he notes that his oxygen levels are rising inside the suit.
Tony has increased the O2 for him, and it’s such a cool relief that he moans aloud. Breathing isn’t
such a problem any more. “Wow, man, thanks. Why didn’t I think of that?”

‘It’s difficult to think clearly when the world is ending,’ Tony reminds him. ‘Listen; I have enough
suits left that I can accomplish your mission myself. If you want, you can head to the jet, wait it out
until Quill gets back, and I-‘

“Wait, what?” Peter scoffs with increduous disgust. Tony really needs to stop with that, telling him
to tuck tail constantly. “You’re kidding me, right?”

‘Not in the slightest. There’s no shame in it.’

“Oh my god, dude. I’m not doing that,” Peter says, taking deep, steady breaths. He’s almost got a lid
on it. That boost from the extra O2 really helped wonders, and hearing Tony’s voice is always a
comfort.

Already ashamed of the time he’s wasted, Peter feels for the chitauri at the bottom, his sixth sense
mapping their movements without need for technological aid. He can’t harm then in any way, as they
exist in a hivemind, governed by a dictator vessel, and a single injury to one of the aliens could set
off a chain reaction, bring others swarming into the area.
It’s what makes them so dangerous, and yet, so vulnerable at the same time. They haven’t been able to locate the dictator ship, however, and Tony postulated before he left the jet that Thanos is pulling some magical fuckery to hide it while still ensuring the army remains conscious. To get by them, Peter will have to create a distraction—

‘I need to know if you’re good,’ Tony says. ‘Right now. Thanos hits way, way harder than you do—’

“I’m good, I’m good,” Peter insists, exhaling slowly, then it dawns on him. “I have two chitauri guards obstructing my advancement. Is there any way I could get a hand from Extremis?”

‘Hmm. Maybe,’ Tony says, and within seconds, Peter can sense the chitauri hit the floor like a couple of severed marionettes. ‘That was far more difficult to pull off than it looked. Good news is, it gave me an opening to send worms out to look for the dictator vessel.’

“It won’t alert the hivemind?” Peter asks, heading further down into the stairwell, crawling silently along the wall, a creeping phantom. It almost feels more natural than walking upright, at this point.

‘No,’ Tony promises him. ‘I made sure of it. Unfortunately, I have to maintain an algorithm convincing it that its drones are still alive. The processing power required is immense. That was your freebie.’

“Well, thanks,” Peter says, descending the stairwell swiftly and with much more confidence now that he knows Tony is watching him like a ghostly, digital guardian angel.

‘Just do me a solid and hide those bodies.’

“I want my live-feed back,” Peter complains, still unable to access his surveillance and feeling petulant about it.

‘Deploy the device first,’ Tony demands to a loud groan from Peter. ‘Homework before T.V., kiddo.’

“Amazing,” Peter observes as he tosses the chitauri bodies up with no effort and webs them to the ceiling in a dark corner, making sure all their glowy parts are covered. “You’ve managed to be condescending and inspirational in the course of one five-minute conversation.”

‘From the look of you, it worked. You’re on your feet.’ Tony says, and Peter smiles. 'Good job, Spider-Man.’

“Thanks, Tony.”

As he’s entering through the door the chitauri were guarding, the one that leads to a massive, oval-shaped hallway which will take him straight to the stadium’s mechanical room, the entire structure rocks with an explosion that Peter has to brace himself against. The audience, the only metric he has left to judge the fight by, groans in unison.

“Tony?” No answer. Peter stops dead in his tracks. “Tony?!” There’s too much happening out on that field for Peter to sense the action accurately, so he can only pant and engage in wild, panicked speculation about everyone’s status. He takes his comms off mute. “Quill?!”

“I’m here,” Quill says back, and his dot blinks happily within a digital image of the stadium, all the way on the opposite side of the enormous oval. “But, I don’t have eyes on him I’m sorry. I’m still inside, avoiding grunts.”

“Shit!” Something’s happened. Did Thanos decide to end this before it even began? No, Peter is ten-thousand percent positive his sixth sense wouldn’t keep him in the dark about something as Earth-
shattering as Tony’s death. He would feel it, like before, when Tony actually did die right in front of him, and Peter brought the man back with his own two hands. He would feel it like a missile to the heart. “Goddammit Tony?!”

‘Relax,’ Tony finally answers, and air whooshes from Peter’s lungs. ‘I can’t always answer right away, Pete. Extremis might have mechanized me to a certain extent, but I’m still just a guy, alright?’

Peter rolls his eyes. “You’re speaking to me with your brain through a universal translator you designed using spare cell phone parts.”

‘Your point?’

“Just a guy, yeah, okay. What knocked you out of Extremis?”

There’s a pause. ‘I mean, what can I say? He’s kicking my ass.’

Peter feels like he’s fallen into a snowbank. “Can I have my surveillance back now, please?” he asks, voice highlighted by a begging edge. More silence rings his ears, until he sniffs with indignance. “Come on, you won’t always be here to protect me from this stuff. I can buy my own tickets to rated-R movies now.” Maybe it’s cruel, and his tone snarls a little bit, but it produces the desired effects. Control of the video feed is relinquished.

And Tony was right. Peter ends up wishing he never watched at all.

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There’s too many reasons not to just up and surrender to Thanos, but boy, doing so would spare Tony from so much grief, pain and terror. Maybe. Or maybe not. He’s in for pain either way, he knows, whether he fights or falls to his knees, so he might as well fight.

The Space Stone grants the user instant relocation abilities, transforming Thanos into a damn phantasm. He appears out of smoky portals that Tony’s scanners have difficulty tracking, and immediately disappears after delivering a tepid, teasing jab against the armor. Only twice has Thanos lingered long enough to trade blows with Tony, and each time, he found himself woefully bested, taking a hit to his ribs that sprouted a hairline fracture, and another to his helmet which knocked his targeting array a little funky.

Overall, Tony knows Thanos is playing. He has to be. At any moment, he could grab Tony and toss him into another section of the universe or send a band of purple light through him for a complete, instant cremation. Luckily, Thanos has a partiality for theatre and complexity. The boys aren’t done setting up yet, and Tony needs to buy them time.

Case in point, Tony finds Peter squatting in a stairwell, immobile with fear, which takes a damn large amount of concentration to reverse. The hits he neglects to dodge due to his lapsed attentiveness are worth it. Peter is worth everything.

It’s okay, too, because Extremis is adapting. Every time Thanos uses a portal to escape Tony’s munitions, or to take another crack at his quickly bruising spine, Extremis is able to predict- well, anticipate, really, based on a multitude of variables, where the next one will appear. And it’s doing so an entire millisecond faster each time.
But soon, he’s given a startling reminder that any advantage he thinks he has is nothing more than a terrified delusion. Sudden pain, a burst of white light, and Tony is plummeting two-hundred feet back into the stadium and straight through the event stage, having been smacked out of the air like a pesky moth. The ground fractures beneath his back, fractures like his eroding resolve, like his shout does as the wind is knocked from him. Debris from the decimated stage covers him in pulverized concrete and metal support beams trap him. He’s sure a massive plume of dust was dispersed by the velocity of his impact and is currently riding the winds above him.

His groan is light and shuddering as he gets an elbow beneath himself. That hurt.

When Extremis reboots, it informs him that he’s just received his first concussion from this little encounter, a minor one, but one of many to come, he’s sure. A damage report shows him a play-by-play of what happened. Thanos gifted a nasty hook to his left temple, catching him by surprise as he was helping Peter out.

And now, Peter is screaming his name, and it’s a reminder that he can’t stay here. He’s got to move, complacency will get him killed early.

‘He’s kicking my ass,’ he tells the kid at some point. What more can he honestly say?

The debris weighs tons, but it can’t contend with the sheer power of Tony’s armor, and he jets away diagonally, staying beneath the stage, while sending a spare suit behind him to injure the other side of the structure accordingly. Might as well take advantage of his current concealment.

He leaves his last two spare suits down there, fearing for their safety. There’s no way his armor stays on him through this. The disks risk being destroyed if he doesn’t hide them.

Between Tony bodily throwing himself into the lattice-like support structure, and the dummy suit doing the same, but in the opposite direction, it causes enough chaos and smoke cover for any rational person to be confused about which armor holds Tony. The entire stage collapses with a lasting rumble that growls throughout the stadium. The spare suits will be safe down there underneath all the wreckage.

He meets his drone armor fifty feet above the turf, puts it at his six, a watchful body guard, and immediately feels friendly with the damn thing. Almost like he has support out here. The two Peters are doing fantastic jobs, but this up here, this is knocking on mortality’s door, this is willfully meeting death itself- or her jealous boyfriend. Whatever. It’s typical, isn’t it? After so many times cheating death, it’s only natural he would finally go out in a way that’s too weird to process fully.

Still, despite the outrageousness, it’s a lonely thing. He can’t stop shaking.

Thanos is nowhere to be found.

“Shit,” he whispers, recalibrating his scanners. A fresh blue wave laps at his surroundings and finds nothing.

Dread freezes him in place, the anticipation of weathering another blow like that last one, almost as painful to endure as the punch itself. Tony has never been hit so hard in his life. Thanos is damn fast, everywhere all at once, and at the same time, nowhere at all. Not knowing where the guy will pop up next is beginning to wear Tony down psychologically, terrifying him in a way that must be familiar to the recently blinded.

It doesn’t matter. His fear is a non-issue. The mission is to buy time, that’s it, too easy. Take an ass-whooping and divert Thanos’ attention away from whatever might be happening inside the stands or
beneath them. Peace waits for him at the end of this as a reward. Everlasting and irreversible.

He exhales slowly and glances at Peter’s picture. You can do this, Stark. You have to do this.

A warning pings at him. Tony’s spine is bruised enough to lead him into thinking he’s about to receive another cheap shot to the back, and his HUD confirms a disturbance behind him. The suit he’s wearing has access to more power due to its direct connection with the conductive parts of Extremis, so he’s faster than the Dummy suit. And when a portal intending to suck them both into another corner of space opens and begins to pull them towards it, Tony is fast enough in his cursing panic to barely avoid it. The dummy suit, not so much. The portal sucks it in and closes around it without a second to spare.

“Whoa-!” he gasps when the connection is severed forcibly, a painful spark in his mind that leaves behind a shrill silence, a barren hole. Just like that, his help is gone, sucked away into the horrors of space, and he’s alone out here again.

Only two spare suits left, and he must keep them around until the end in case one, or, god forbid, both Peters, somehow fail their missions. It’s all up to Tony, now.

A systems check discovers lowered armor integrity. And Tony himself is getting tired. It’s been a long damn day.

Another warning ping, another attack from the rear, so he rockets away, leaving a burst of flares, intending to turn around and fire missiles- and instead collides directly into Thanos’ rigid, unyielding form.

Totally unfazed, the giant grabs Tony with a hand so massive there’s barely room for it around his throat. Tony growls, scratches at the hand, struggles within the grip, pulls at huge fingers, and it’s like trying to force his bare fist through Cap’s shield, just completely statue like, unmovable.

This really has been nothing more than a game for Thanos.

There’s a surprising lack of pressure. Thanos isn’t choking him or anything, choosing to just hold Tony there, floating one-hundred meters high, while he shakes a massive purple head, and looks almost disappointed. Meanwhile, Tony is beginning to finally register his immediate physical jeopardy and goes very still in a grip that could snap his head from his body like he’s a pathetic little dandelion should the fingers spasm a bit.

A collective gasp ripples through the crowd, followed by a gloomy hush. God, they didn’t think he was here to win, did they? What the hell do they expect from him? Tony gulps down bile and waits.

Thanos tilts his head. “You’re intelligent for a human,” he says, pulling Tony closer, “surely you understand by now how pointless all this struggling is. I’m beginning to wonder why you persist.”

Tony huffs a nervous, rueful chuckle and hopes Thanos isn’t on to him. “God, where do I even begin? Because I’m stubborn, prideful, mildly reckless and I possess a phenomenal lack of self-preservation skills, and those are just the appetizers. I’m a five-course meal of personality issues. Something tells me you can relate.”

“Is that what you’re doing right now?” Thanos asks softly with a knowing smile, “are you quivering with pride and stubbornness?”

“Adrenaline. General excitability,” Tony tries. “This has been thrilling, after all.”

“Taking me for a fool is a grave mistake,” Thanos comments. “Look around you. I am known by
name across entire galaxies. Do you truly believe that I can’t sense when a man is in fear for his life?"

Tony licks his lips and tastes blood. “I guess I’d be pretty damn stupid if I wasn’t terrified of you, huh?”

“And we both know you’re not stupid.” Cold eyes give Tony’s armor a glancing once-over. “I haven’t been forced to eliminate a member of my Black Order in over two decades.”

“I didn’t force you to do anything,” Tony reminds him. “That wasn’t a fatal wound, she could have lived."

“She was a liability,” Thanos interrupts irately. “I can tolerate very few failures before termination is the only appropriate penalty. Tell me you’ve never conducted business?”

“Not like that,” Tony says, gripping Thanos’ arm, taking readings regarding the density and electrical resistance of his skin. “And I happen to partially own one of the most successful businesses on this planet.”

“Perhaps, but your planet is so primitive, doing so can’t have required much strife to begin with,” Thanos says, and Tony feels a rush of irrational indignance cloud his mind for a moment. No one knows how difficult it was for him to take over Stark Industries after his parents’ death, and who the hell does this grape-flavored asshole think he is commenting on it? “This armor, however, and your biomechanics, that ridiculous technopathy; did you engineer all this yourself?”

“For the most part, yeah,” Tony says, recalling his experience with the Extremis procedure, and Peter’s absolutely unshakable fortitude during it. “My son helped me.” He doesn’t know why he tells this to Thanos of all people, but it feels good, saying it.

“You’re a father?” The raised brow and genuine surprise on Thanos’ face puts Tony off.

“I don’t know. Sort of.”

Thanos sighs. “That’s unfortunate.”

Tony smirks. “Unfortunate for you,” he says, and engages a blade from within his gauntlet which slices upward through Thanos’ massive forearm, a clean cut that protrudes right out the other side.

The Titan regards it with shock, initially, and it’s clear he’s in pain from it, the way he growls and glowers furiously at Tony, but it doesn’t produce the effect Tony anticipated. The hand and its immovable fingers don’t loosen from around his throat at all.

“Well, shit,” he says, and chuckles awkwardly as Thanos spears him with a death glare, his purple blood dripping down the blade and Tony’s arm, a gruesome cascade, “I really thought that would make you let go.”

“It will take much more than that,” Thanos growls, and grabs Tony’s arm with his gauntleted hand, pulling the blade out slowly as Tony grunts with effort. This guy is so, so strong. “Commendable, though. I must admit, you’re far more dangerous than I first assumed. Which is why I can no longer allow you to keep this armor.”

“Oh c’mon, already? I thought we- we were having fun,” Tony stutters a bit as his blade is completely removed from mutilated flesh that begins to mend itself following a flash of purple light. “Wow, okay, that needs a nerf.”
“I’m going to give you one chance, human,” Thanos informs him, “before the misery begins. Tell me where my stones are now, and I will leave this planet intact. Your pathetic race can wither to nothing all on its own for what I care.”

Tony is very quiet and still. Such an offer is tempting. Then again, he does have a concussion.

“No, Tony can’t do it. There’s no way he can sell out Gamora and Nebula, Vision, the wizard and his Time Stone, and all the rest of the goddamn universe, just to save his own planet. Countless people will die if Tony breaks. And that’s not acceptable.

“We’re in for a long night,” Tony tells him, and immediately sends sheets of Extremis to stabilize his elbow, pulling vibranium scales from his left leg to make it work.

Thanos appears almost distressed. “I didn’t want to have to do this.” He says as the sky slowly darkens, and huge, blazing lights kick on.

“Yeah, well, me neither,” Tony says sincerely. “I had plans to deliver my kid to his aunt today, but you went and murdered her. So, you’ll answer for that. Whether it’s now or later, you’ll fucking answer for it.”

His right arm is still free. A second wrist blade meant for Thanos’ armpit crumples against a burst of purple energy.

“No!” Tony bellows, and damn his useless arm, he shoots off, following the crackling ball, just barely managing to get in front of it before it kills hundreds of innocents. There’s no thought behind
it. Like a reflex, he just does it, gets between the blast and the people Thanos intended to harm, and he takes it full force.

“Tony!” Peter shouts at him before everything goes dark.

It positively fries his armor. But his intervention is effective nonetheless. Though his HUD disappears in a terrifying moment of uncertainty, and electrical pain consumes every nerve for a few seconds, a volcanic agony he didn’t expect, Tony does manage to successfully disperse the energy before it can hurt anyone. Unfortunately, he had to disperse it throughout his armor, and when that failed, his body.

And Iron Man falls.

When he hits the ground, Tony stays in the small crater, exhausted, stunned and twitching a bit, lightly singed and sizzling like a goddamn fajita. The badassium in him ensured his survival but absorbing the extra energy from both his unibeam and an Infinity Stone was a little too much for him. Honestly, he could be asleep in seconds if he shut his eyes, and the hole he’s laying in is beginning to feel comfortable.

Giving up, though? Not in Tony’s playbook. He pushes his mangled body up with his one good arm, his groan long, pained and frustrated. Retracting his helmet, he spits a wad of blood into the dirt and blinks to stop his world from spinning. Sweat drips from the end of his nose. Every part of him aches. That damn fractured rib of his is on its way to a full break. Dammit, Tony despises broken ribs.

People are screaming. Fuck, the crowd is getting rowdy with their alien guests, yelling at them, throwing beer bottles and cups full of piss at them. They’re furious, and they’re on Tony’s team right now. Iron Man’s smoking faceplate clanks shut and Extremis reboots. What he fears is delivered to him in a series of percentages. Everything on the armor is damaged beyond operability. At this point, he can’t save his own ass, let alone anyone else’s.

“Tony, please, answer me,” Peter is frantic, apparently having been trying to get through to him for a few minutes. Tony checks his progress and is pleased to find that the kid’s entered the mechanical room, but he still hasn’t deployed the device.

‘Get on it, Pete,’ he says, pushing himself to his knees. ‘This is it. The goddamn moment of truth.’ The device Peter is entrusted with is programmed to attach itself to the stadiums electrical system and launch a series of wires that will burrow underground and seek out the jets warp core. Once activated, it will syphon energy from the core through the stadium, and into the explosion-catching spheres an invisible Quill is currently scattering all over the field. It’s the only way to ensure containment of the blast.

“Are you okay?” Peter demands, and Tony scoffs through Extremis.

‘Do you want me to lie?’ It’s upsetting to think that Peter cares so much for his well-being right now, when at the end of this, he’ll be dead either way.

“Somehow, I knew you’d do that.” The very atmosphere shifts as Thanos teleports into the area. Tony can sense him standing over his broken body, and screw it, he flips around and attempts one more repulsor blast, because why not?

Thanos deflects it with little interest. “Your tenacity is admirable,” he observes, his voice unsettlingly soft, “foolish, but admirable. You did mention a lack of self-preservation instincts. It shows.” Then he reaches into the crater and grabs Tony by his ankle, dragging him out onto level ground. “As I
said before, I cannot allow you to keep this armor. My mission has already been jeopardized enough.” A crackle of electrical nerve pain shoots up his leg, the feeling of his boot being forcibly torn from the plug, and Tony shouts, cries out with shock and horror, because it only gets worse from there.

The Mad Titan is merciless and methodical in his forceful removal of Tony’s armor, enriching himself with purple energy and tearing through thick metal plates like they’re made of tissue. He rips it from Tony’s body piece by piece and ignores his desperate protests, pulls him back down when he scurries for escape, fucking laughs at him for even attempting it. Eventually, there’s nothing to do but give up and let it happen. Resisting is more painful, anyway, it always is.

He can’t help but scream as Thanos rips the metal from his dislocated arm. Once the helmet is removed, however, he bites back the vocal consequences of his agony best he can. There are children watching this.

Feeling naked and vulnerable in nothing more than the second skin, entire body alight with misery and fuzzy with crushing fatigue, Tony stays down this time. The dirt feels so nice and cool against his face.

“It’s okay. Go ahead. Scream,” Thanos coos, and Tony almost does as his fucked arm is taken in a firm grip and twisted up behind him. Instead, he digs his fingers into the dirt and bites his lip until he tastes blood, tensing up every muscle he has, because he knows what’s coming next. “No one will judge you for it. Pain is cleansing. It’s a necessary part of life, and Death? Well, Death loves pain.” Thick hands push, an incredible pressure, and then Tony is screaming as his left shoulder is dislocated with swift efficiency, the second skin, once again, doing absolutely nothing to stop it. He might as well have shown up to this fight wearing toilet paper. “But for now, relish the pain. Allow it to comfort you. It will remind you that you are still alive. And it will give your friends incentive.”

A reminder he doesn’t need at this point, that he’s still alive, oh he’s very much aware of that fact. Fiery agony shoots from his shoulder through his chest, his back, and an infuriating, painfully crackling numbness overtakes his entire arm. Each breath comes as a vocal gasp. He wants somebody to just cut the damn thing off, please, it would be less excruciating. Extremis moves like blue lightning to stabilize the new injury, manage the pain a bit, but it can’t relocate the joints, and it’s running thin already.

“I do hope your friends come.” Tony doesn’t acknowledge it. Existing in a dense haze, he just lays there and pants raggedly. “I’d like to see you spared. Maybe you could challenge me again someday. String him up.”

The command sounds like it’s issued under water, but Tony still has the wherewithal to comprehend its implications. String him up. Shit. He has a terrible hunch about what awaits him, and when he feels hands on his body, he emits one final shockwave, a one-hundred-thousand-volt punch that pulls a glorious shriek from Corvus Glaive.

“Fucking goblin. Eat it,” Tony grumbles, sighs, knows he’s in for it now, no matter how satisfying that was, he’s in for trouble over it.

His actions earn him three full-out kicks to his left flank, but Tony smiles as he grunts and shifts with it. Soon enough though, he’s gasping and crying out and regretting life, because Corvus has grabbed him by the wrist of his bum arm and is currently dragging him towards a goalpost.

“You’ll suffer for what you’ve done,” he hisses over his shoulder. Oh, so it’s personal. “You’ll pay for her death with your screams.”
Tony’s in too much pain to say anything back.

Thanos is addressing the media drones that are buzzing around. “Whoever possesses my Infinity Stones, you should know, this is happening because of you.” Every news station on Earth is broadcasting this bullshit live, and Tony has absolutely no desire to watch a single bit of it, or to hear what they’re saying. It wouldn’t be shocking at all if they were actually blaming Tony for this, and it’s just not something he needs right now. It’s bad enough as it is.

Once beneath the goal post, Black Dwarf makes use of one of his elephantine feet to keep Tony on the ground, pressing it into his chest, and the sound of a chain rattling somewhere out of his sight doesn’t bode well for him. And yet, all he can think about is how much he hopes Vision and Strange will both have the sense to stay the hell away from this mess. The fate of the universe rests on the choices of a cyborg and a wizard. Amazing. He couldn’t make this shit up if he tried.

“People of Earth, this man is suffering, and it’s all for you.”

Thanos isn’t wrong. Tony would suffer one thousand lives worth of torment to save this stupid planet.

The chain is wound around his wrist mercilessly, and he’s thankful for his scales, because without them, the raw links would pinch the shit out of his skin. But there’s very little to be thankful for here. Black Dwarf tosses the other end of it up and around the goal post, and then he starts pulling, and Tony doesn’t want to fucking do this.

“It’s reprehensible of you all, as a planet, as human beings, to allow this to continue.”

Groaning, Tony endures it, goes with it, getting to his knees, then reluctantly, shakily to his feet, until finally he’s crying out in anguish as all his weight is thrown onto his injured arm and he’s dangling from it, his toes barely grazing the turf. Like a broken puppet. Like a goddamn worm on a hook. Like bait.

“Have you no sense of mercy?”

‘FUCK!’ He’s not positive whether he screams it out loud or in Extremis.

“You will make an excellent worm,” Midnight had said to him. This must be typical Thanos shenanigans, then. All the more reason to complete this mission.

“Holy shit, Tony…” Peter says sadly into the comms.

“You will make an excellent worm,” Midnight had said to him. This must be typical Thanos shenanigans, then. All the more reason to complete this mission.

“Holy shit, Tony…” Peter says sadly into the comms.

“We expected this. It's nothing.’ Tony lies, clutching his contorted shoulder with his good arm and trying to remain as still as possible to avoid swinging on it. ‘You’ve activated the device; good. Move out. Get to the box. Go, and go fast.' Of course, Tony Stark owns private box seats at the Rose Bowl. And they don’t get rented out.

“But-“

‘Nope, not about to argue with you right now.’ He chances a glance up at the chain and regrets it so much. Any movement is agony. But it isn’t so far up. If he can throw his weight around a bit, maybe he can snatch it with his good arm, so he can hold himself up and take the strain off his bad one. ‘Get to the box and wait for Quill.’ Speaking of which; ‘Quill, sit-rep.’

“Halfway done, hang in there, Tony,” Quill responds almost immediately.

’Sweet Christ, could you kindly watch your phrasing?’
“Yikes, my bad,” Quill says with true regret in his voice. “Honestly, I don’t even know what to replace it with. This sucks.”

‘I know,’ Tony says, bracing himself for pain. ‘I’m sorry, I really am.’ He tries once, throws himself up to grab the chain, and fails, causing further suffering and allowing himself a loud yelp, trying real hard to ignore the groan of sympathy that rumbles out from the stands. Tony expected brutality from Thanos, but this is starting to feel like example making. Jealousy. Mess with Thanos and impress his girl? Suffer two dislocations, and enjoy the subsequent time spent as a miserable little Christmas ornament.

He waits a minute, literally immobile with pain, and once he’s confident enough, another attempt yields desirable results. With a strained grunt, he thrusts up with all he has and grabs the chain, pulling his weight off his fucked arm and groaning at the slight relief it brings. Hours. He’s strong enough to hold himself like this for hours if need be. Until the end.

Thanos is still talking shit, a whole smelly paragraph of it. “Please, prove to me that this planet is capable of offering more resistance than this pathetic display?” he’s over there saying crap like that, the absolute fuckhead that he is.

“Hey,” Tony gasps, glowers at Thanos, bares bloody teeth at him. The pain is waning, his nanobots at work. Finally, it took way too long for those to kick in. They won’t last forever, but for now, they’re doing a fantastic job. “That crosses a line. I put a blade through your arm, and from what I understand, that’s never happened to you before. I’d call that a win.”

Thanos turns to scoff at him. “Tell me, what is a win without success?”

“A learning opportunity.” Tony smirks. There’s blood leaking down his face, and he blinks it out of his eyes, wipes some of it off onto his good shoulder. “Oh, and I successfully made you kill your own daughter. I’d call that a major win.”

Thanos narrows his eyes, and Tony tries not to let his terror soak through the towel he’s thrown over it. Turning, he moves closer to Tony, abandoning the media in favor of him. “What if I told you that the universe isn’t as infinite as you may think?”

“Then I’d tell you that’s not the most surprising thing I’ve heard today,” Tony responds. “Let me guess; your thing is population control. Universal population control.” Tony already knows what motivates Thanos, but he must appear ignorant. Thanos can never find out how much Tony knows about him already.

“Balance,” Thanos corrects him, “I think the term ‘balance’ is more appropriate. I mean to bring the balance of life and death back into their intended parameters.”

“So as a solution, you went with genocide?” Tony shakes his head, spits blood on the ground. “Look, I understand and appreciate the concept of population control, but what you’re suggesting is no better than flat-out genocide. What you do to the planets you visit is called ‘extermination’. And it’s just so damn lazy, for a guy of your intellectual caliber, you know? Can’t you come up with a solution that involves something a little more gradual than fucking murder?”

“Perhaps, if it wasn’t so time sensitive.” Thanos informs him. “And this isn’t genocide, or murder, this is emotionless gleaning. It must be. No consideration is involved when selecting my… participants.”

Tony doesn’t like the sound of that. “How many, uh, participants are we talking about, here?”
Thanos smiles at him. It’s almost sad. “If I get my way, half of all life.”

Tony’s heart skips five beats. “That’s… that’s, uh, ambitious.” He stutters. Thirst is stealing his voice from him and he clears his dry throat, swallows a fear lump. “Are we talking half of… of intelligent life, or does this include animals and plants-“

“I did say half of all life, did I not?” Thanos reminds him, becoming mildly irate. “Tread carefully human, I despise repeating myself. The universe requires rest. The balance of life and death has become heavily disproportionate, favoring life, and it is unsustainable, because life consumes. I will return sustainability to it by rapidly reducing consumption.”

“How altruistic of you,” Tony comments. “I’m not buying your motives, though.”

“And you don’t have to,” Thanos says with a dismissive wave of his hand. “You are nothing. As impressed with you as I am, in the grand scheme of things, you might as well have never even existed.”

“Ouch,” Tony says, smiling with amused incredulity, “savage. Alright, let’s come clean here, let’s Doctor Phil this shit, because I gotta know; are you sure this is about ‘balance’, and not at all about impressing your undead girlfriend?”

Thanos’ expression narrows into laser-like intensity just as Corvus is walking up beside him. “My lord, he isn’t making enough noise,” he says, regarding Tony with pointed contempt. Between the painkillers, the internal vibranium cast, and the position he’s leveraged himself into, Corvus is right, Tony’s doing surprisingly well. “Not nearly enough to persuade his allies.”

“Hmm,” Thanos hums as Tony looks on apprehensively. “I suppose. Cut him. I’d like to see if your weapon is capable of penetrating his organic armor.”

Corvus smirks as he approaches Tony, his weapon gleaming in the light of the setting sun. “It would be my great pleasure,” he assures his master.

The under-armor doesn’t stand a chance.

Over the course of twenty minutes, Glaive leaves three long, seeping lacerations in the scales below Tony’s left armpit, an attempt to get him to let go of the chain. It’s agony, and the second skin malfunctions in that area, suffering damage that as far as Tony knows, is irreversible. Not that it matters anymore.

Glaive’s weapon destroys molecules, but it’s still not enough to kill Tony’s resolve. The chain remains in his grasp, even as blood drips freely from ten-inch long wounds along his ribs that Extremis will never heal.

“Let go, worm,” Corvus hisses, his blade now buried three inches inside Tony’s right thigh muscle.

Tony sneers at him. “Try-try harder, asshole,” he gasps, and chokes on his words as he’s held in place and the blade is pulled out at a cruelly glacial rate.

“Allow me,” Thanos taps Corvus out and takes the challenge on himself, grasping Tony’s entire torso in one big ass hand, his gigantic purple thumb hovering just above one of Tony’s ribs on his right side, the fractured one, in fact. “Are you ready?” he asks Tony stoically.

Tony doesn’t have an answer. But he does throw his head back and scream shamelessly when Thanos mercilessly snaps that rib in two without a second thought. Extremis reacts, rushing to perform damage control and prevent further injury to his lungs and stomach, and his under armor
grows even thinner, exposing both his calves now. Tony’s grip on the chain falters, but he doesn’t let go. Goddammit, he doesn’t let go.

Three more broken ribs later, Tony is nearly unconscious from it, and would be if not for Extremis. The entire world watches as he fails to hold the chain, collapses totally into the waiting claws of inescapable agony, and sheds legitimate tears. A fucked arm he’s forced to dangle from, four shattered ribs, countless burns, multiple abrasions and cuts from full-throttle torture- and now he’s having trouble breathing. Expanding his chest minutely for a quick, desperate puff of oxygen is swiftly becoming painstaking. Unbearable. His ribs are powder. Tony is a mess.

“That should prove persuasive,” Thanos tells him, turning away to observe the sky, and Tony watches his every move through squinted, watering eyes. “It’s sad. I expected an appearance from your friends before it got to this point.”

Whatever.

‘Sit-rep,’ Tony demands. Energy is a limited resource. He no longer possesses the ability to watch everything.

“Eighty-nine percent done,” Quill assures him. “Hey, man... have I ever mentioned how awesome you are? Because you’re awesome-“

‘Don’t tie up the comms,’ Tony instructs. He really doesn’t want to hear it right now. ‘Peter, status.’

“I’m almost there,” Peter says, but he’s not using the comms, is speaking over their private channel, the unconventional one that’s facilitated by his little spider-themed earpiece. “Hey. I just wanted to say that, well, I- I love you. I love you so much, Tony. And, you know, I’ve said it before, and it’s still true, I think now even more so; you’re like a father to me-“

‘I told him you’re my son.’ Tony is blurting it out before he can stop himself.

There’s a small pause. “Wait, what?”

‘I told Thanos... I told Thanos I have a kid, and- and he’s you. The kid I was talking about is you. I told him you’re my son.’ Tony holds his broken ribs and focuses on Peter’s photo. ‘Is that- is that stupid? I don’t know, it seemed right. It’s fucked up, but it seemed right. Maybe I’m going crazy, I... I have a concussion...’

A bunch of silence follows. And then static. Or so he thinks at first, until he hears an actual sniffle, and his heart breaks in two.

‘Oh, Pete, come on, don’t cry-‘

“Tony, you’re all I have left,” Peter says brokenly, “and... and you’re asking me to kill you, and this is so awful-“

‘It’s okay,’ Tony assures him, ‘don’t be sad for me. This is... I won’t feel pain anymore, after this, you know? I’ve been in pain for so long, and I’ll finally get to sleep. You’re helping me.’

“I’m...” Peter’s sigh is very wet. “Look, I’m sorry, I’m not trying to make this harder-“

‘Please don’t apologize-‘

“Nintey-eight percent,” Quill informs them. He isn’t privy to the conversation. “I’ll be heading to the box in two minutes.”
‘Excellent,’ Tony tells him, torn between wanting to be done with this, to rest eternally, and at the same time, feeling a desperate need to stay alive just to comfort Peter. ‘Finish up, get to the box, wait for my signal.’

“Copy that,” Quill replies. Everything is going swimmingly.

‘Thank you, Quill.’

“I hate this and everything about it,” Quill says.

‘Fair enough.’

Something huge is holding his chin, tilting his head up, and Tony’s dull eyes flutter open to find Thanos’ prune face, of course. “Stay awake. You don’t have much time left, you should relish awareness while you still have it.”

Tony doesn’t respond, knows it will hurt way too much. When Thanos lets him go, he glances down at the ground beneath him, where blood is collecting. It’s dripping from the ends of his toes and pooling in a growing puddle an inch below him, staining the blades of artificial grass a deep, unsettling red. Thanos is right, as he has been since he got here. There’s not much time left.

Totally without warning, the line is cut. Tony drops unceremoniously to the ground with a yelp, and then a long, sobbing groan as he realizes there’s no comfortable way to position his body. Broken ribs on his right side, dislocated arm on his left, agony surrounds him. Tony stays on his back, stunned by it.

"You'll stand and face me," Thanos demands, and Tony doesn’t react, wants nothing more than to sink into the ground- until a huge, booted foot is pressing into his side, and bright agony blinds and deafens him for a moment. He would have screamed had he been able to catch his breath for it. "Now. Or watch more innocents die because you chose not to stand.”

Thanos doesn't even sound annoyed, or angry, but simply bored. He’s been on this field for a long time now. The guy just wants his stones so he can peace out.

"Okay, okay. S-slow down..." Tony gasps, rolls over with tentative movements, manages to pull his knees beneath him, and stands using what very little strength he has left. It's a slumped stance, and his left arm is a useless thing he’s got pulled up and stabilized against his chest, and he's bloody from head to foot like a ghoul, but he’s standing, goddammit.

Thanos smiles at him. Tony pants and waits for more pain, flinches when Thanos raises his gauntlet, but the purple energy it emits doesn't seek Tony at all, shrouds the Titan instead. Extremis provides him with some incredibly interesting numbers. Thanos is purposefully making himself weaker.

Tony is confused at first, then it strikes him as hard as Thanos' open hand does. One hit from a fully powered Thanos would have pulverized him in his current condition. Now, Thanos’ strength is more on Tony's level.

Hell, even in this "weaker" state, that slap puts Tony back on the ground, and so many stars explode into his vision, he thinks he's back in space for a second.

"Fuck," he groans, pushing himself up out of the dirt. Thanos just fractured Tony's face in three places, and the injuries are receiving no help from his biomechanics. Extremis is busy with his arm, and even more importantly, his ribs, and will be for quite some time. Those splintered ribs require strict stabilization unless he wants a perforated lung and a closed pneumothorax as a side dish, not to
mention all the other squishy things that are in danger of being shredded by them. Tony hates, hates, 

hates broken ribs.

"Get up," Thanos demands, and right then, Tony understands everything. "I'm tired. You officially 
have a time limit, and so do your friends. Now, they can either rescue an injured man, or a dead one. 
Stand. Tell me where my stones are while you can face me with dignity."

Hah, dignity! Right. What in the world would be dignified about that? He glares into the dirt, 
stewing in his hatred for fuck-fuck games of this particular nature. Tony knows what happens if he 
does stand. But if he doesn't, more people die.

'I don't mean to be pushy but hurry the fuck up.'

"We're working on it," Quill says, breathless. “Climbing stairs right now, but I'm almost there, 
Tony. It's almost over."

Peter is noticeably quiet.

Thanos waits, expressionless as Tony rises like a geriatric patient. When he's fully on his feet, 
gasping, and clutching his arm, a second backhand knocks him right back down, as he fully 
expected. The entire stadium collectively cringes and groans, and it drowns out Tony's agony, at 
least. All he can hear is a shrill ringing. All he can see is white light. It fades slowly. Tony coughs 
and his ribs grind together, and blood comes. Dammit, exactly what he was trying to avoid.

"Get up."

Corvus Glaive has pulled a man from the crowd and forced the poor, quivering sap to his knees next 
to Thanos, his hands raised up submissively. That lance comes to rest threateningly at the base of a 
very vulnerable human skull, but it doesn't cut. The man clenches his eyes shut and whimpers. A 
little girl sobs and shrieks for her daddy while strangers hold her and watch in terror from outside the 
explosion perimeter.

"W-wait," Tony rasps, out of breath and energy and hope. He restarts the arduous process of hauling 
himself up, fights the pain as he's been doing for decades. His thigh is still bleeding profusely. 
"Please, don't... I'm-I'm working on it, please, just hold on."

Thanos is watching him, towering over him like a skyscraper, while wearing an expression similar to 
the one he wore when killing Midnight; saddened disappointment. "I'm beginning to suspect you 
ever had a plan. You simply wished to cease the killing. No one is coming for you, are they? And 
they're certainly not bringing my stone. Your friends have forsaken you, which is a shame, I feel 
they've allowed a decent man to die for nothing. I find myself pitying you."

"Disgusting," Tony says, smirking, which hurts so much to do, as he has more fractures in his face 
than he's ever had in any other part of his body. "I don't like it, take it back." He wonders what he 
looks like. It can't be pretty.

"I implore you, human," Thanos says, in a voice Tony is shocked to note is tinted with noticeable 
traces of sadness, "tell me where my stones are. Now. Avoid this pain. For your sake, for the sake of 
this planet."

"What-what's wrong?" Tony pants and smiles. His voice sounds like it's been run over by a semi-
truck full of cheese graters. He stands once more, a splintered shield, and grins like a fucking maniac,
showing off the blood in his teeth, and the sheer willpower he possesses. "Big, purple feet getting
cold? Torture a little too much for the Mad Titan?"

Thanos doesn't say anything. Swift, brutal pain, and Tony is struck back to the ground with a
strangled cry. Two more fractures, his cheek, his eye socket. Only a matter of time before his entire
damn skull shatters into dust. He has the headache to end all headaches.

"Get up," Thanos says coldly.

But the world is spinning so fast. He spits a tooth out and fucking chuckles about it as blood collects
in the dirt beneath his face. Seems about right. Losing nine teeth in two weeks has to break some
kind of record.

Maybe he's a little relieved that this is the end. Of all the things he'd like to avoid, pure hysterical
insanity is at the very tippy top of his list, and he can feel it coming on as potently as he could his
heart attack. Losing his mind would be worse than death for Tony.

An attempt to stand gets him all the way to his knees, but vertigo sweeps him up in its relentless tide,
and Tony is back on the ground without Thanos' assistance this time.

"Stand, human," Thanos demands.

"Were in position," Quill says at the same time.

"Wait," Tony grinds out to both of them. But, he begins to move a second too late. Thanos gives his
silent command, a child loses her father, and there's nothing Tony can do but watch.

One thing's for sure, any humor Tony may have experienced before, twisted or otherwise, is gone.

"Bastard," he whispers, exhausted, mentally and physically devastated. It didn't take very long at all.
Thanos is a professional world destroyer.

"Unfortunately, it is necessary," Thanos comments as the body is dumped unceremoniously atop a
stack of them he didn’t notice before. Tony thinks he might puke. "Death must happen to facilitate
life. Without death, how will worlds remain fertile? Without decay, what will feed the trees your
pathetic race relies so heavily on for air?"

"And you've anointed yourself death-bringer, huh?" Tony says rhetorically, his voice dead and
lacking inflection. He can't tear his eyes from the corpse pile. This is the most important thing he's
ever done. Even though he wasn’t told to, he drags himself to his feet one last time. “Or, did your
girlfriend do that? I've literally never met anyone so whipped before in my life.”

Thanos sighs. "Do you think I enjoy this task?"

"Yes," Tony says without hesitation, and he looks up at Thanos with a silent snarl. This will hurt,
and he doesn’t care, everything already hurts. "You love it, you believe yourself to be some martyr,
and you love that sort of glory. But I know what you really are. You're a sadist and a narcissist.
Maybe you have a goal, sure, but overall, you feed on the drug-like high it gives you to come into
my house and throw around my things, knowing I can't do anything to stop you. It makes you feel
better, doesn't it? Makes up for all those times the kids in school called you names like 'raisin face'
and made fun of your mile-long chin. I heard Mommy took one look at you and tried to spare the
universe right then and there-"
Thanos blinks with surprise, and then smiles serenely. And that's when Tony realizes he fucked up. "Is Gamora here?" He asks, glancing around the stands, as though he'd be able to recognize her even amongst so many people.

"Shit!"

"Who?" Tony asks as innocently as possible, but that was dumb too, because everyone knows who Gamora is. The blood loss is starting to get to him, and Extremis won't tell him how many concussions he’s suffered.

"Where is she?" Thanos demands. Tony can see the fury in his eyes, shining away, a pair of red traffic lights on a dark road. Before he can reply, he's snatched up in a grip like an anaconda's, and breathing ceases to be possible. "You'll tell me where my daughter is, human, or you'll die in minutes."

'Now,' Tony commands as the pressure around his throat tightens painfully, and Thanos seems on the verge of losing his mind. 'Right now. It doesn't get any better than this.'

Checkmate, asshole.

An ocean of red blood pounds in his ears. He hopes this won't hurt. He's tired of hurting. The fear in his eyes fades away as he closes them.

And then, he's not there anymore.

"I'm proud of you, sweetie," his mother kisses him on the cheek, and he wipes it away with a grimace. Tony is the youngest person to have graduated MIT that day, or ever.

"Eww, mom." Tony laughs. "I'm seventeen now, I'm a damn college graduate, and you're still giving me sloppy kisses. Intolerable. Embarrassing. It's already bad enough being younger than most freshmen here, I don't need this at all." He takes off his graduation cap and puts it on her head, moving the tassel so it's not dangling in her face. Soft eyes gaze up at him. Warmth and love and comfort radiates from her.

"I made you, I can do what I want," she says, but her lip is quivering just behind her smile. She sighs shakily. "You'll come home, now?"

"Eh," Tony says with a shrug, wrapping his arms around her shoulders, "thought I'd stop by Amsterdam on the way. Celebrate a little bit."

"That's extremely out of the way, Tony," she says. Her arms pull him close. She smells like everything good in the world. "I love you, dear. I miss you. Come home."

But home is where Dad is. Which is funny, because he always did seem to be where Tony wasn’t.

And though his father didn't attend Tony's actual graduation due to having more pressing prior engagements, he makes it to this one.

"Iron Man, huh?" Howard Stark says gruffly. Suddenly, Tony's in his armor. The crowd of reveling graduates is gone, and they're in the same study Tony took his very first drink in when he was eight. What a slippery slope he tumbled down after that.
Just the sight of the man sparks a deep-seated anger in him that no amount of B.A.R.F.ing could ever expel. Howard was such a damn bastard to Tony. And now he's eating up precious seconds Tony could have spent with his mom.

"Yeah," he says warily as Howard circles him, looking him over, judging his son's work with critical eyes as he always used to do. Tony already knows he won't be impressed, he never is. "You made a few messes I had to clean up for you. I inherited all your money, your damn murder company, and the enemies you accumulated. And don't even get me started on Stane. Thanks, Dad. And now you're here to witness my last fucking breath, and just go ahead and say it, do it, piss all over the one good thing I've managed to spawn out of your bloody legacy--"

"It's beautiful," Howard says quietly. When he comes into Tony's view, there are tears in his eyes. Tony has never seen this man cry before. Not even once. It stuns him in a way that dwarfs Thanos' blows, and Tony is silent as Howard traces the arc reactor embedded within the chest plate. "I'm so proud of you, I knew you could do it."

"Really?" Tony says skeptically, becoming even further enraged. Oh, this is rich. "Is that what you knew? Is that why you told me in a video? I- I needed that, I really did, I needed to hear it just once and I needed it when I was a kid, not thirty years later. God, the problems it could have prevented, hearing that you gave a shit about me just one time- I was smart, Dad, I knew what was going on! Do you have any idea how badly I longed for your goddamn approval?"

"Yes." It's said so sincerely that Tony's rage is halted right in its tracks. "Son, I didn't show it, but I always loved you. And if I could go back and do it all over again, I would. The right way. I'm sorry, Tony."

And even though Tony never allowed himself to cry in front of Howard following that time he was told to man up and take a swig of whiskey, and then another, and another, he lets it come freely now.

"Dad, I'm really scared," he admits, slumping, feeling eight-years-old again, and Howard nods and embraces him. "I don't want to die."

"It's not so bad," Howard says. "I'll be here."

It is, though. Tony's thrown out of the hallucination, and it's back to being slowly strangled by an alien monster. There are tears on his face, he can feel them even through the growing numbness. Dehydration, excess blood loss, oxygen deprivation, pounds and pounds of heavy agony, and it's a wonder delirium hasn't set in before now. He's going crazy. At least this is almost over.

Why hasn't he exploded yet?

'What are you waiting for?' But it is nothing more than a thought. Extremis is offline. Oh, no, no, no, how long has it been like that?

And Thanos isn't even looking at him anymore. The killer grip loosens like an afterthought, and Tony gasps in mouthfuls of beautiful air, struggles to take his weight off his throat with his only good arm, needs to see what Thanos is looking at-

"Bullies really do come in all shapes, sizes and colors, don't they?"

That voice... Tony blinks away tears, strains his neck despite how much it shifts his ribs around
because he must get a better look. There’s no way. There is no damn way.

"White, black, red, rainbow, whatever color, I don't like 'em."

A man is walking up to them, tall, familiar in stature, just a shadowy silhouette, until some more blinking reveals Steve Rogers, fearless and furious.

"And they usually don't last long around here."

He's buried in man fur. No longer clean shaven, his words are snarled from behind a thick beard, and he's allowed his hair to grow out quite a few inches. He has a blank, silver disk, and his black scale-mail consists of a Vibranium-cloth infusion, no doubt, gifts from his new financier. There's no jealousy, or anger at this moment, in fact, such feelings would simply be too taxing to maintain. Tony just feels pure relief. They listened to his warning. They took him seriously for once. He can only hope it will be enough.

Tony stares, eyes wide with disbelief. Crap, he truly is hallucinating now, he must be, this is so outside his usual relationship with luck. But he realizes with brutal swiftness how real this world is when Thanos drops him and pain envelopes him.

Extremis boots to the sounds of Quill panicking.

"Tony! Oh my god, I thought we'd lost you there-"

'Abort,' Tony demands as he gags and chokes. He will not blow up Captain America, he won't fucking do it. 'Abort detonation.'

"Yeah, no shit," Quill says, "way ahead of you, chief. Plans have changed."

'Are you in on this?'

"Sure, as of like five minutes ago. Just bear with it, we're getting you out."

Steve has eyes only for Thanos as he walks over, and though mere feet exists between Tony and the monster, Steve puts himself there. Steve makes himself into a shield. "Back off," he tells the Titan, who regards him with mirth. "Whatever disagreement you're having with him, I'm a part of it now. He's done."

"Rogers..." Tony gasps, cries out when his ribs give him hell for it. He reaches out one quivering hand and grasps Steve's ankle in a grip that's like a puff of smoke. "Moron..." he means it, but it's delivered with a long, weak exhale. This man hurt Tony in a way that reminds him too much of Stane, and yet he feels such comfort here in his presence. He’ll be furious about his thwarted plan later, especially if Steve fails at this new one. Steve came for him, maybe even still cares about him. Thanos was wrong, Tony’s friends haven’t forsaken him, and that alone feels good.

Steve doesn't move his foot away, either. Maybe it's not the ideal reunion, but then again, could any reunion between Steve and Tony ever be ideal?

Forget it. For a moment at least, Tony has his friend back.

Friend. Ah, damn, he truly is delirious.
Okay, so apparently, I have been working on this fic for over a year. Crazy, right? I've never worked on any single project for a whole year before in my life. I honestly thought I uploaded chapter 1 in June, but nope, early May 2017 is when I first started this fic. And I can't believe how far it's come. When I was planning it last year, I had a suspicion that this story could get big, but I never imagined it getting 3k kudos level of big. It's incredible. I'm honestly overwhelmed by the support I'm receiving from you guys. I can't thank you enough.

That being said, since this is the one-year-anniversary of this fic, I'd like to hear what everyone's favorite part has been. I don't care what it is, I want to hear about it. A piece of dialogue, a situation, a character appearance, whatever your favorite moment of this fic is, I'd love to know. It will mean the world to me.

Happy memorial day. And happy birthday, Mr. Stark.

“I knew he’d have some allies stashed up here,” a deep, familiar voice says from the doorway of Tony’s private box seats, and both the Peters jump out of their skins, turning quickly to find Steve Rogers standing there, his expression pointed, determined. Peter barely recognizes him underneath all the extra hair.

“Holy shit!” Peter exclaims, vindicated, then he rounds on Quill, who looks scared and discombobulated, because Peter had just been fighting with the guy over this. “I told you something wasn’t right! I swear, nobody listens to me. I have a super power for this, it’s like my thing, and everyone treats me like a friggin’ weather man!” As soon as Tony instructed them to boom him, Peter’s sixth sense disagreed. And he knew without any more doubts that he had to stall it. He turns back to Rogers. “Please, please tell me you brought the Avengers.”

“Wait, who the hell are you?” Quill doesn’t hesitate, promptly drawing his weapon on Rogers, and Peter is quick to get between them and wave his hands around. “Put your gun down, man, that’s Steve Rogers,” Peter insists, and when Quill just appears confused, he scoffs, “you know, Captain America?”

“Oh, OH!” Quill’s voice rises a few octaves. Then, he’s pissed and gesturing wildly behind him as he aggressively shoves his weapon back into its holster. “What the fuck are you doing? Go get him! He’s dying!”

“We’re working on it,” Rogers says, moving over to look out on the field. He doesn’t bother to rival Quill’s anger.

“Wait a second, how did you know we’d be up here?” Peter demands, and Rogers sighs.

“Educated guess. Tony took me to a game here once. I don’t like crowds, so he bought this box.” He adjusts a strap on the inside of his new shield, then intense blue eyes look them both over, study them. “He’s injured pretty badly, he’ll need medical attention. Can you two handle him?”
“Yes,” they both say immediately in unison.

Rogers appears skeptical. “You’re trained?”

“More than you know, pal,” Quill assures him with a sassy edge. Peter has to agree. He doubts anyone else on this field is more qualified to handle Tony’s injuries than they are, considering his extremely unique biology.

“Great.” Then he seems to address thin air. “We have first aid and a pilot in the box. Hawkeye, Falcon, congratulations, you’re now in play.”

“Hawkeye’s here?” Peter asks excitedly, feeling giddy. “And Falcon?”

“Everyone’s here,” Rogers says, and Peter grins from ear-to-ear as a million pounds of pressure eases itself off his heart. This is over, the Avengers will take care of it, and he gets to rescue Tony with his own two hands. Peter can’t remember ever feeling so relieved about anything. “There’s an escort drone waiting near where you’ve hidden his spacecraft. Get him to it, follow the drone, it will lead you to Wakanda. They can heal him in hours there.”

“Thanos can’t see me,” Quill says, “I’ve got a whole team on a planet that’s very close to here, and he’ll know they’re around if he sees me. I can’t risk that.”

“And I’m not going to ask you to,” Rogers says, looking down on the horror show currently being performed on the field below him. “You’ll clear a way to Tony’s spacecraft while Spider-Man and I enter the field, and Spider-Man, your absolute only priority is evacuating Tony as quickly as possible, do you understand?”

Peter searches for words only for a moment. “Y-yes. Yes, sir!” This is incredible. Tony gets to live!

“Once you have Tony aboard the spacecraft, render first aid and follow the drone. We’ll take care of the rest.” Rogers seems confident, and it’s contagious. Peter has a few gripes with Cap that he’d like to discuss, but for now, it’s go time. Nothing is more important than saving Tony from the misery he’s in.

“Oh, thank god,” Quill heaves a deep sigh and shakes his head. “For the record, we didn’t want to do this.-“

“His play was solid,” Rogers admits, and at their surprised looks, he smiles sadly. “It always has been. A suicide bomb, right? He used to talk about it, but the consequences were unacceptable. They still are.”

“Look, I would love to stay and chat and catch up, but Tony needs help, like now,” Peter reminds them, wringing his hands. Thanos has just grabbed Tony, and it looks like this might be the end.

“Right,” Quill nods vigorously before engaging his mask. “I’m out. I’ll transfer the route specifics to you once I’m clear. Keep in touch.” Then, he’s gone, and Peter is left alone with Captain America.

“You ready, kid?” Cap asks, and Peter nods only once because he’s never been so damn ready. His helmet clinks shut with a noise that appears to make Rogers smirk a bit. Maybe it’s familiar to him. Then, his newly rugged features become pinched, darkened. “Be careful, when you pick him up.”

It’s a gloomy request. “Duh,” Peter responds, because he’s always careful when he picks Tony up. What is this going to be, the third time now? Fourth? Peter’s lost count. He’ll have to consider it when his mind isn’t being spun around in a chaotic whirlpool of blood and screams.
Rogers raises an eyebrow at him, and Peter doesn’t know what to think of it.

He’s instructed to stay in the box until Rogers can get between Thanos and Tony, and he waits like a tightened, quivering little coil as Cap takes off, feeling painfully anxious again now that he’s alone. Attempting to call Tony and warn him of the new plan fails, and he’s distressed to discover that Extremis is offline. Thanos has wrung Tony unconscious, it seems. Peter hopes he’s not too angry when he comes around.

God, he hates waiting. Twenty seconds feels like eight years, and Peter is groaning with relief when he sees Rogers casually walk up the field and place himself between Thanos and Tony. The outrageous fanfare he’s greeted with is truly something to behold. “Respect,” he whispers, smiling, opening a window and sliding down a web.

The field is a mess. Thanos and Tony have managed to cause millions of dollars of property damage during their dispute, and Peter has to climb around ragged concrete and debris to get to the action. It makes him recall how Tony absolutely threw himself over the remains of the jet to save Peter from bleeding out after that terrifying crash landing on Xiaxu. Time to return the favor.

Up close, Tony looks horrific. Peter swallows what little saliva he has left and moves forward, noting sadly how Tony is holding onto Rogers’ ankle. Here, in this hell, Siberia never happened. These two were like brothers at one point, Peter knows, a truth made even more impactful by the fact that they are both creations of Howard Stark. They would bicker relentlessly, but they always held a deep respect for each other. Two sides of the same heroic, self-sacrificial coin. Peter sighs. This is miserable.

Rogers is talking to Thanos, but Peter doesn’t hear it. Tony has spotted him and is currently giving him a narrowed pair of death eyes that are foggy with agony. Peter retracts his helmet so he can grin at him.

“What are you doing?” he wants to know. His voice is almost totally gone, shredded by an hour of screaming, reduced to barely a whisper, but Peter can still pick it up. Super hearing is simultaneously a blessing and a curse.

“I’m gonna get you out—” he starts, a shrug in his voice, but Tony interrupts him with a weak growl.

“You should not be here.”

“Did Rogers put you up to this?”

Peter rolls his eyes as he squats next to him. “You look like shit, you know that?”

Tony groans. “You- ugh, god- you are what you eat.”

Peter lets out a quick laugh. He’s so glad Tony is alive. “You eat shit?”

“Constantly,” Tony says, coughs weakly and sputters blood. His smile is very red. “Haven’t you noticed?”

Actually, Peter has noticed. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Agreed,” Tony grinds out.

Though he expected Tony to be in immense pain, Peter’s not prepared for the tattered scream that’s
torn from his throat when he picks him up. It doesn’t matter how careful he’s trying to be, he can still feel Tony’s ribs shifting around, even beneath the under armor, and his bad shoulder is pressed into Peter’s breastplate, so that can’t be comfortable either. Tony’s got the arm folded across his chest, the slack hand resting near his right collar bone, and black scales have linked up, woven themselves together along it to keep it immobile against his body. His bloody face is the absolute representation of agony.

And Peter’s only ever heard Tony scream like that once before. Oh god, Tony truly is hurt. It scares Peter something awful and freezes him in place for a moment as he’s overcome by an empathy attack. He already can’t stand seeing people in pain, and this is Tony.

“Sorry,” he says, horrified. “I’m so sorry-“

“It’s- it’s fine,” Tony grunts out, and now he’s trembling in Peter’s arms, his breaths sharp and short. Thanos snapped four of his ribs, pressed his thumb into Tony’s chest and popped them apart like he was nothing more than a sheet of bubble wrap, transformed them into swords that could easily eviscerate him from the inside. Peter knows the danger he’s in, and he really hopes he didn’t just injure the man further. “Get- get it together, web-head. What’s next?”

“Shit, right. Okay.” Peter takes a deep breath. “Hold on, here we go-,” Next is get to the jet. Evacuate Tony and get to the jet. Quill’s sanitized path appears in his HUD just as he starts moving.

Behind him, Thanos and Rogers converse. Peter doesn’t really care about it, has tunnel vision so bad, he may not ever see properly again. He moves fast, exits the field and begins to navigate the stadiums innards, driven by his one and only task, the most important one in his opinion. For once, he really doesn’t care about helping with the fight. A fight awaits him in the jet nonetheless. Tony is getting weaker.

“I’m sorry,” Tony croaks up at him as Peter is turning a corner and entering a stairwell.

“Shut up.” What could Tony possibly have to apologize for?

“No, hey… I am…” He’s struggling with his words and Peter hates to hear it. “I’m sorry. I’m so bad at this… this… uh, dad thing… or whatever…” There’s a noticeable slur in his voice, now. He’s falling asleep, maybe passing out. Either one is undesirable.

“You’re not, though,” Peter insists, taking the stairs two at a time. “Stop it. Talking is literally dangerous for you right now.”

“-got a… second chance… gonna do better…” Tony mutters, and now he’s growing ghostly pale, and that terrifies Peter. No, dammit, he won’t let Tony die like this. No way is he going to allow this incredible twist of fate to slip through his fingers.

“Stay with me.” He picks up the pace a little, still wary of causing more harm. Tony’s eyes slip closed. “Can’t sleep yet, man, come on.” He’s lost so much blood, much more than he did on the Kree ship. Peter’s already covered in it. Those wounds Glaive sliced into him haven’t stopped bleeding yet, and that’s a huge problem. “Tony, seriously, stay awake.”

“-ca’ ya get tha’ light?” he mumbles and rests his bloody, dirt-caked face against Peter’s shoulder. His respiration plummets into frigid sluggishness. “…love ya, kid.”

“Drama queen,” Peter says, but tears are coming. “I love you too, Tony. Please, just stay with me.”

Bursting from the stadium as a red blur, Peter sprints the two-hundred yards remaining. His sixth sense is screaming at him.
He gets Tony onto the jet just as the loud, wet gasping begins, and Peter doesn’t need to ask what’s wrong. As he gently places Tony on the couch, breathing becomes a laborious chore for him, and it’s getting worse, quickly. He wheezes and fights desperately for air that simply won’t come.

“Pneumothorax.” Quill’s already inside, and he states the obvious with a wary look at Tony. “You got this?” he asks and tosses Peter a medic bag. Already, a ping indicating communication attempts by the Wakandan drone is trilling happily over the intercoms, and Quill understands he’s needed elsewhere.

“Yup.” Peter knows what to do, has been trained by the very best. “Alright, hey, you’re gonna be fine,” he promises, “I got you, Tony, hold on.” Tony’s chest cavity is filling with air that’s leaking from a punctured lung, and it must be relieved, so he has room to draw breath. If Peter doesn’t reverse it, Tony is going to drown right here on dry land.

He digs furiously for a decompression needle and is just as horrified by its size as he was the first time he saw one. This thing has the nerve to be fourteen-gauge and almost six inches long. It’s terrifying.

Tony can barely breathe at all now, and when Peter kneels next to him, he grabs Peter’s arm in a fearful grip that’s astoundingly firm and just holds on for dear life. Peter has no trouble working around it.

The jet takes off with a low hum of enormous engines. To Wakanda they go, then. Peter never thought he’d see the day.

“Don’t be gentle,” Tony had told him during practice on a dummy almost two years ago. It feels like an eternity has passed since then. “The chest wall takes some enthusiasm to penetrate, but the poor bastard will be thankful for it, I promise you.”

Now though, Peter faces the resistance of vibranium scales. The needle must be shoved in at a ninety-degree angle between ribs two and three on the affected side, and Peter hopes Tony will allow him to do it in the first place. “Scales,” he says, tapping Tony’s good arm to get his attention. Maybe he can’t hear him, or maybe he misunderstood, because there’s no response beyond panicked gasping. “Tony, scales, come on, you’ve got to let me do this.”

After a moment, it slithers away back into his skin, and Peter doesn’t have time to be shocked by what’s underneath it. Tony is covered in dark bruising and dried blood. Peter curses lightly as he rips Tony’s ragged shirt apart, the needle held between his teeth. Extremis is a raging blue storm completely concentrated around his ribs, meaning it’s too busy to aid the rest of him, and his arm is a twisted mess Peter has no idea how to correct. The second-skin was hiding the startling extent of the damage extremely well.

Despite the care taken to not hurt the guy, Tony flinches away from Peter’s fingers when he feels around his chest for the right area. “I know, I’m sorry.” Thanos snapped true ribs three, four, five and six on Tony’s right side, if Peter is remembering his anatomy correctly, slowly and one by one. All four shine brightly under his skin, and lightning runs through multiple obvious breaks like jagged little rivers. Extremis is holding them together with dubious biomechanical tethers.

Peter shoves the needle in and isn’t gentle about it. All-together, from start to finish, it probably took him no more than fifteen seconds to accomplish. It enters Tony’s chest, unobstructed and precise, thank god, even with Peter’s hands shaking as they are, and after removing a plastic cap, there’s an audible, satisfying hiss of air rapidly escaping through it. Tony’s gasps remain shallow for a minute, but soon, they start happening with a little more volume. Even so, just breathing appears to be murder for him. He hasn’t let go of Peter’s arm.
Finally, Tony’s distress becomes far less vocal, his color returns a bit and shuttered, exhausted eyes watch Peter while he removes the needle and tapes down the catheter that’s left behind. “You remembered,” he rasps.

Peter scoffs. “Why wouldn’t I?”

“I taught you that when you were fifteen,” Tony reminds him, grimacing. “And engaged in absolutely zero follow-up.”

Peter chuckles. “God, you did, didn’t you? Well, believe it or not, I actually listen when you teach me stuff.”

“Clearly. I’m alive,” he says, wincing as he lightly touches the valve. “Good job.”

“Told you, I got you,” Peter says, and feels immediately choked up at his next thought. “I… I can’t lose you again.”

Tony sighs, or at least tries to, and looks to regret it. Then he groans and his one good hand shoots down to hover above the wound in his thigh. Peter has been so focused on getting Tony breathing again, he’d completely spaced on the bleeding, the next most pressing issue. “I’ll need you to square me.”

“I know,” Peter says, finding a silver square in the bag. “What did he do to the under armor?”

“Destroyed it on a molecular level,” Tony reveals regretfully. “If my math is right, it will scar, and I’ll have weak points until I can get access to more vibranium and the proper equipment—” he’s cut off by his own growling whine; Peter has activated the silver square, and it will work much more efficiently on Tony than it did on Peter.

“You’re good, Iron Man,” Peter says, and holds his hand through it, as Tony did for him. Glinting silver wraps around Tony’s thigh, does its dirty little job with zero empathy, and Tony bites back screams Peter remembers giving into completely. “You’re the strongest person I know, you’ve got this.”

When it’s done, Tony allows himself one sob, and that’s it. “I’d kill for a drink.” He says, eyelids drooping seemingly existing in his agony, or at least a reluctant acceptance of it. Face slack, dirty and covered in blood, he chuckles, winces. “I miss it. Every single day.”

“I’ve never been drunk,” Peter says, and Tony scoffs incredulously. “No, really. I just… that was never me, going to parties and stuff, getting drunk. And after what I saw you go through? It would be disrespectful of me to ever start. I think I’ll stay away from all that.”

“I was eight when I started drinking,” Tony reveals in a numb voice, and Peter looks up from where he’s been retrieving dressings for the lacerations on Tony’s not-broken ribs, eyes wide with shock.

“What?”

“Yeah,” Tony says, chuckles again, and groans as he’s punished for it. “Oh, god, I’ve got to stop doing that…”

“How does one come to start drinking at eight-years-old?”

Tony’s expression grows instantly dark, and he just looks so uncharacteristically jaded and tired and old. “By having a father who likes to project all of his worst qualities onto you.”
Peter stares for a moment, but Tony hates staring, so he busies himself, locating gauze, some antimicrobial solution, and thankfully, one dose of painkilling nanomachines deep inside the bag. “What do you mean?” he asks, always willing to learn more about Iron Man. Peter used to think of him as this invincible god-like symbol, someone bulletproof who can’t be touched. He far prefers the very human alternative he discovered beneath the metal scowl.

Tony considers him with exhausted eyes, and after a brief instance of hesitation, seems to decide to just go with it. “During most of my childhood, my dad had one goal; find Captain America. It was his obsession. He would come home, stay a few days, stew in a drunken state of melancholy, and leave again for months without uttering any more than three sentences to me, maybe five or six to mom. One night, I dared to confront him about it, ended up crying, because I was eight, you know… and he basically told me to drink it off, because that’s what he did to cope.” He watches Peter inject the painkiller into his shoulder as he shakes his head. “I got trashed on ten-thousand-dollar single malt scotch that night at the behest of my adult father and I never stopped.”

It’s painful yet awe-inspiring. Tony has come so far. “Be proud. You’re sober now, you beat it.” Peter hesitates to pour the anti-microbial on Tony’s wounds, knows intimately how much it will burn. “That’s all that matters.”

“I guess,” Tony says dejectedly, then he sighs, a deeper breath than he’s been capable of up to this point, and it brings a quick flash of relief to his perpetually agonized countenance. Maybe the painkillers are working. He nods stiffly at Peter and groans through maneuvering himself into a position that allows Peter better access to those three long cuts. “Do it. I’ll be okay.”

This, Peter knows. He just doesn’t want to cause Tony any more suffering, because the guy has suffered enough already. With a heavy heart, he flushes the wounds one by one and tries to ignore the whimpers and the moans.

“I saw him,” Tony is gasping just as Peter’s finishing up applying gauze. “When I was out there, I saw my dad.”

Somehow, Peter already knows what he means. “What did he say?” he asks, helping Tony ease himself back down.

“He told me he was proud of me,” Tony says in that paper-thin, torn up voice. He’s staring languidly at the ceiling, as though he’s remembering it scene by scene. “He said he would do it all over again if he could, the right way this time.” Then he looks at Peter, tired, appreciative. “Thank you. I already feel better, you did great.”

Peter shrugs. “You too.”

“Are you okay?” There’s unneeded worry in Tony’s voice. It’s unneeded, because Peter is smiling.

“Are you kidding?” he says, chuckling and shaking his head at the absurdity of the question. “Tony, I spent all day preparing myself to have to watch you die. And now, you’re here, and you’re alive, and you’re telling me stories about your dad, and, I just, I… yeah, I’m okay.” Peter wipes at his eyes, because the stupid tears are coming. “Watching that happen to you was horrible, and I’m sure you’re in a ton of pain but, I’m just so damn glad you’re alive, Tony. I really am. I’d hug you right now, but you… you’re like a piece of chewed gum, man. You look like you fell off a cliff ten times.”

Tony’s small smile cracks the thick layer of dirt and blood that’s caked onto his face. “You’re not angry with me?” he asks, looking away.

“Huh? Why would I- Oh, you mean over the bomb thing?” Peter scoffs, shakes his head, and hands...
Tony a bottled water he retrieved from the fridge. “Nah. I can’t be. I just can’t be.”

Tony takes a quick sip that looks like it hurts, then closes the bottle and gingerly places it on his bad shoulder with a sigh. “I’ll need fluids. Intravenous. If not for Extremis, I would have bled out down there.”

“God, right,” Peter says, going to grab supplies, and when he comes back, Tony’s eyes are blue and flicking. Peter scowls disapprovingly. “What are you doing?”

“Checking,” he says.

“On what?”

“My idiots.” He allows Peter to take his arm so he can rig him up.

“Well, stop,” Peter demands, cleaning a spot off Tony’s arm for the line, “you need to rest. This isn’t your fight any more.”

“This will always be my fight,” Tony responds, and Peter knows better than to try and tell him otherwise.

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Steve Rogers is the man with the plan- or so he hopes.

Thanos is big. Much bigger than he anticipated, and he feels as small in this creature’s presence as he did every single day when he was a ninety-pound asthmatic. Still, his unshakable, sometimes imprudent courage is visible on his face, as always. Even as he stares down a being that’s almost four-feet taller than him. Then again, that’s nothing new either. Everyone used to be taller than him.

His troops are all in position. Bucky waits in another private box, the north one, his deadly sniper rifle containing massive vibranium rounds. Hawkeye is in the box on the opposite side, south, and Steve had tried to keep him out of harms way by designating him as a medic, not wanting to face Laura should anything happen to him. But Clint had insisted that if Tony did have medically savvy allies standing by, he be allowed to participate. Who is Steve to deny him that chance?

Falcon and Rhodey also wait at east and west, but higher up where the lights are, both of them sources of explosive firepower. T’Challa and Nakia stand by to deploy a vibranium-based energy barrier that will surround the field, and hopefully prevent Thanos from escaping or harming civilians. And Wanda, while Steve has had Thanos distracted, managed to sneak close enough to begin fiddling with the gauntlet undetected. She’s been studying Vision’s stone for a long time now. She should be ready to at least disable the two Thanos possesses. Hopefully. So much of this is riding on something intangible.

Steve entrusted the task of disabling the Chituari to Natasha. She has a device capable of bringing down the entire army should she locate a single soldier to attach it to. And she’s done that. Using skills Steve still envies, Natasha waits by a pair of chituari undetected and prepared to avenge her friend. She loves Tony, as they all do. They always have.

And Pepper Potts is here. Having donned a minimally weaponized suit of armor she found in a bunker beneath the dilapidated remains of Tony’s Malibu mansion, she insisted she oversee civilian
removal. Wakandan ships wait outside the stadium in stealth mode and are prepared to trigger evacuation protocols at Pepper’s command. Steve had no problem promising such an important task to her. Pepper runs Stark Industries, a mammoth endeavor that requires impeccable multi-tasking skills. She deserves a place on the team. Her designation is ‘Rescue’.

“I’m glad you came for him,” Thanos says, nodding over towards where Spider-Man is leaving with a nearly dead Tony. “It’s been quite a few years since I faced someone of his caliber. He deserves to live.”

“He’s none of your concern anymore,” Steve says fiercely. “I don’t even want you to look at him.” They’re still mere feet apart, neither of them willing to step back, though Steve knows he’s toast if he takes even a swat from this guy. He’s placing a ton of trust in his allies

“Fine, I’ll look at you then,” Thanos smirks, and his gaze is death. “But in doing so, I hope you are capable of putting up half as much of a fight as he did.”

Steve sets his jaw. He wishes Thanos would stop talking about Tony. “Count on it.”

“I’ll allot you a chance to challenge me, because I do enjoy a show,” Thanos says to him, frowning deeply. “But listen well human; if you lose, I’ll bring him right back here, and I’ll slowly tear him apart until someone tells me where my stones are.”

Steve’s expression narrows. That statement was delivered with promise. “Well, I can’t allow that.”

“Then you won’t lose,” Thanos rumbles.

Maybe. “You’re right. I won’t lose.”

The vibranium round from Bucky’s rifle approaches in slow motion, it seems. It’s meant for Thanos’ head, a quick solution that Steve hopes will be sufficient. Instead, a last-minute intermission from the goblin-like being Thanos brought with him proves successful. The guy darts in front of Thanos and uses his weapon to deflect the bullet. It penetrates the ground and leaves behind a glowing blue trail that slowly fades.

“He has tricks!” The goblin snarls.

“Oh, this should be interesting,” Thanos says, smiling devilishly at Steve, and then things get a little crazy, as he predicted they would.

T’Challa and Nakia activate the barrier, which shoots around the field at the speed of light, completely closing it off from the stands. Pepper begins evacuation, and if people cooperate, it should take no more than ten minutes to get everyone out.

Perhaps most importantly, the entire chitauri army drops like many sacks of potatoes. “That was easy,” Natasha says slyly into the comms. “Too easy. Disappointing, even.”

“Easy is always best.” Steve says back, and hopes this will, in fact, be easy after all.

He tosses a couple vibranium tether grenades to restrain the threats, rolls out of the way and takes cover beneath his shield as fire and brimstone rain down on them, a controlled assault from Sam and Rhodey that’s contained inside the barrier. Wanda is on the field, but she will be fine, and Steve even caught a glimpse of red sparks dancing over Thanos’ gauntlet just before the blasts began. She’s improved drastically.

“Watch it, Cap!” Clint warns, and Steve glances beyond his shield just in time to catch the goblin
thrusting himself from the flames with a furious snarl. Plan A didn’t work, at least on this guy, which probably means it didn’t work on Thanos either. That’s okay, there’s always a plan B.

Steve knows better than to use his shield to block that weapon after having seen what it did to Tony, so he adopts an avoidant style, choosing to holster his shield on his back and dodge the attacks completely. Using a pair of vibranium knuckles, Steve swerves and ducks around a spinning death weapon while he pokes at the guy to wear him down. One wrong move could mean the end. His feet dance a desperate little dance.

“We’ve lost visuals on Thanos,” Bucky informs him as the dust settles a bit.

“Wanda?” Steve inquires.

“I need more time!” she responds, sounding fearful. “I barely had a chance to start.”

“Stay hidden,” Steve tells her. “Don’t be seen. We’ve got the minions. Thanos is your only target.”

“He can’t have gone far,” Sam says. “He’s big and purple and ugly, you don’t walk around looking like that unnoticed.”

“Rhodey, Sam, surveillance,” Steve instructs. “Find this guy.”

“On it,” they both say, and he can hear them take off from their positions.

Meanwhile, T’Challa and Nakia, both in Panther suits, are taking on Black Dwarf, and Clint is peppering him with arrows from his elevated location. They’re tipped with charged vibranium and they produce a devastating little burst of blue energy when they hit. The first few find their mark with impressive accuracy, knocking Black Dwarf off balance enough to confuse him, which gives Nakia and T’Challa a chance to move in and restrain him with energy tethers.

Steve glimpses this happen just as he’s avoiding another swing, so he’s not sure of the outcome. One, two, three fist shots to where he hopes this alien keeps on of his kidneys, and vibranium bursts beneath Steve’s fists. The goblin shrieks, and steps back enough to give Bucky an opening and his round strikes center mass, penetrates armor and grey flesh, and Steve thinks for a second that it’s over for this one, because the impact stumbles him drastically. Steve stops, watches with wary anticipation as the thing runs its fingers through flowing black blood and regards the wound with shock. But then he smiles, bares fanged teeth. The hole is large, and he’s able to fit his thumb and forefinger in there, and after a moment of apparently painless digging, the glowing bullet is fished out in a gruesome display of absolute grit. The flesh begins to mend.

“As long as his weapon remains intact, he’s immortal,” a familiar, filtered voice says from his left, and Steve doesn’t turn to look, doesn’t need to look, wouldn’t dare take his eyes off his enemy anyway. Iron Man is standing there next to him. “Weird, I know.”

“You’re supposed to be on your way to Wakanda,” Steve pants out, breathless from his fight.

“I have four broken ribs and one arm, you really think I could physically come back here?” Tony scoffs, and Steve thinks he sounds pretty good for someone with four broken ribs.

“After what I saw today, I don’t know what you’re capable of anymore.” Tony has done something remarkable to himself, that much is obvious. It became more and more apparent once the armor was off, and the man started taking hits full-on that would have knocked Steve right out. As disturbing as it was, it was damn impressive. Steve is extremely curious about it.

“I mean, that’s fair.” A small pause. “It’s good to see you, Cap.”
“You too, Tony.” It’s not a lie. That feathery grip on Steve’s ankle was heartbreaking for him. After everything he did to Tony, he still reached for him, and even though he called Steve a moron, Steve could sense how relieved he was to see him. An apology is due. Not now, but soon.

“I’m still pissed off at you.”

Steve sighs. He’s stressed and tired. “Can we do this some other time?”

“I hope there’ll be an ‘other time’,” Tony remarks, and Steve has to agree. “I’ve got two suits, where do you want them?”

“Well, I could use a hand,” Steve admits as the immortal Goblin strides toward them.

“You got Vision stashed somewhere?”

“Safest place on Earth.”

But Steve quickly realizes that no place on Earth is safe when Thanos teleports back into play, having apparently done his studying from afar, and begins to sweep the floor with them.

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Something’s wrong. Peter can feel it, something terrible is about to happen. His entire body is tingly, his biological warning system racing into overdrive. “Hey, Quill?”

“Shit,” Tony spits viciously from the couch, and Peter notices that his eyes are brown now. “Both my suits just bit the dust.”

Okay, but that’s not what’s wrong-

The whole craft rocks savagely. That shouldn’t happen.

“Quill?!” Peter shouts, needing answers right now.

“Ah, fuck.” Quill is shouting from the pilot’s chair. “Oh, this is so bad. This is so, so bad.”

Panic ripples all the way through the spacecraft, affecting everyone like a plague.

“What? WHAT?!” Peter yells, terrified already, and watching Quill with wide eyes as he moves to the back of the jet near the entrance ramp. His weapons are drawn, and his mask is deployed.

“We’re back in the stadium,” Quill reveals in a grim tone, and Peter’s stomach drops out. “We’ve been teleported right back to it, goddammit, and he’s not going to let us leave this time, I promise you. Get ready for company.”

“No…” Peter murmurs with wide eyes, terror coursing through him as a tempest, an unceasing blizzard. “Dammit, no!” This can’t happen. He needs his second chance! Tony needs his second chance!

“Peter, hide,” Tony’s saying immediately, but Peter is done hiding, and he’ll be damned if some over-ripe eggplant is going to take his father figure away from him without a fight to the death. He ignores Tony’s protests and attaches himself to the ceiling. Extremis attempts to override his
processes, but he prepared for this, and he uses his own programming to defy it.

“Not this time,” he tells Tony. “Sorry.”

“You little shit,” Tony snarls, attempting to rise, a slow process even in the face of imminent death. He’s almost completely helpless. And that’s what Peter does, protect those who can’t protect themselves, and Tony is very much laid up right now.

“You’ll be proud later,” he promises his mentor.

Soon after, milliseconds in fact, Thanos tears through the hatch, just grabs it with one hand and rips the entire ramp off the ship, smirking at the sound of squealing metal and the pitiful resistance he finds inside. Quill fires his weapon, but one swat from Thanos sends him flying and renders him unconscious against the wall of the craft. The Mad Titan’s murderous eyes are only for Tony, and once they locate him, he smiles.

“I regret to inform you that your friends have failed.”

“Back for round two, huh?” Tony looks beyond angry, a front to conceal his terror. He’s trying to get an arm beneath himself, his eyes shifting from blue to brown sporadically, the second skin creeping out slower than usual. Peter knows he’s going through everything he has left. That brain of his is calculating, planning, strategizing. If there’s anything that he can do at all, he’ll need more time to figure it out.

Peter is ready to buy that time. He doesn’t care if this kills him. “Hey, Tinky Winky,” he shouts, and Thanos looks up at him, surprised. “Yeah, that’s right, I just called you a Teletubby.” Jet boosters engage and aid him in delivering one of the most devastating double-footed kicks he’s ever pulled off. “Surprise attack!” It strikes Thanos square in the nose, throws him totally off balance, and Peter’s elated to see purple blood. “Honestly, I’m surprised I remembered the thing’s name. I’ve tried repressing it.” A pair of webs to Thanos’ face while he’s distracted, and Thanos growls and tries to tear at it with desperate fingers. “It was such a creepy show, honestly.” More webbing at Thanos’ feet, his grasping fists, and Peter yanks them down toward the floor, and now Thanos is blind and handicapped. “There was a baby face in the sun. A baby face. Too weird for me.” Excitement is pulsing as thick adrenaline in his veins. He goes for the gauntlet while Thanos is tied down, wondering if he’s really this lucky, or if fate is just winding up for the kicker. He even manages to touch it. “I’ll take this off your hands for you! Get it? Off your hands? Because it’s a glove—”

But Thanos is stronger than anything else in the universe. He tears a fist out of Peter’s webbing and snatches him up by the back of his head, which draws a yelp out of him. The Titan then yanks his other arm free, relieves his face of webbing, and rips Peter’s helmet off.

“You’ve made a mistake, boy,” Thanos says, and Peter wriggles, reaches back and scratches at Thanos’ hand, but it’s useless. The thing engulfs the entirety of the back of his head and neck. He feels like a helpless, scruffed kitten.

“No!” he hears Tony shout. “Dammit, Thanos, stop, please—”

“Look at your fear. This must be the son you spoke of,” Thanos says, and Peter struggles as Thanos catches sight of the ships warp core, which had been exposed during his violent entrance. With a considerate little hum, he punches the protective quartz layering just once and exposes the very dangerous coil that powers interstellar travel. “This just became too easy.”

And then, Peter finds his face within an unfavorable distance of an extremely hot piece of equipment.
Though useless, it’s instinctive of him to place his hands on the jet’s floor and try with all his might to push away from a situation that is quickly becoming extremely painful. The core hums mere inches below him, and it’s so bright and hot. Sweat drips off him and immediately evaporates against it with a series of tiny hisses. That hand pushes, and he growls as he pushes back. He knows what happens if he gets even within an inch of the core.

“Don’t, please! Christ, he’s just a kid!” Peter opens one eye to a slit, the one not so close to the heat, and is dismayed to see Tony on his knees, his one good arm supporting his weight. Fighting through the pain of four broken ribs and countless other injuries, Tony has gotten up to try to do something, anything, to help Peter, even if it means begging, which he would never do to save his own life. There’s tears in his eyes as he pleads. “You gotta stop this—”

“Only one thing can,” Thanos says, pushing Peter’s face closer, and Peter can hear a sizzle, smells something nasty. “Tell me.”

“Tony, don’t—” he gets out, before the real pain finally hits, and he’s screaming. The left side of his face feels like it will melt right off.

“Fuck! STOP!” Tony sobs out, roars furiously, and Peter can hear him punch the floor. “Son of a bitch!”

“Tell me,” Thanos commands, his words slow and icy. Peter strains against the hand as it pushes him down, and it’s like trying to lift the whole globe off his shoulders. “No amount of cursing or screaming or begging will stop this. But you know what will.”

Peter’s sobbing loudly now. He just can’t help it, this is a pain unlike he’s ever felt before. He truly fears for the integrity of his face, and all he wants to do is call out for Tony, but that would further compromise him, and that’s not fair. Tony already faces a terrible decision. But Peter should have known it wouldn’t matter either way. Tony loves him too much. It takes seconds.

“Fine, fuck.” Tony’s voice is a shuddering, defeated thing. Peter’s face is pulled away only slightly, so he can still feel the burn of the core. It leaves him crying openly, but at least he’s no longer screaming. “Let him go and I’ll tell you. Let him go, now.”

There’s panic in the man’s breathless words. This is the most scared Peter’s ever seen Tony.

“I think you better tell me first,” Thanos says, but he ends up not adhering to the suggestion himself. An instant later, his gauntlet is infested by flashing red energy, and he’s screaming in pain, letting go of Peter and stumbling back. Peter catches himself before he lands face-first in the core, having been slumped in Thanos’ grip. It hurts so much already, he doesn’t need to make it worse.

Thanos is experiencing enough suffering to become preoccupied with whatever is causing it, and he exits the jet, injured, furious, and on a warpath.

Once he’s gone, Peter curls into himself and moans miserably.

When Tony gets to him, he hides beneath his arm. “I’m sorry,” he says, “I’m so sorry, Tony.”

“Let me see,” Tony insists, ignoring the apologies, but Peter shakes his head, resists Tony’s weak attempt to move his arm. “Come on, Peter, I’m not mad, alright? It’s okay—”

“It’s not!” Peter sobs. “He’s gonna come back, he’s gonna kill us!”

“You don’t know that,” Tony says. “There’s Avengers still standing, don’t give up, yet, kiddo. Let me see—”
“Is Quill okay?”

“He’s fine, he’s taking a nap,” Tony assures him. “Can I please see your face? It’s okay, Peter.”

Reluctantly, Peter shows him, dreading his reaction. It’s only on the left side; his cheek, his ear, some of his scalp and a chunk of hair, or that’s how it feels at least, he can’t know for sure. Tony’s expression doesn’t change at all at the sight of him, remains completely neutral, and Peter doesn’t know if he should be encouraged or scared. “It’s not so bad.”

“Liar,” Peter accuses. The pain says otherwise.

Tony sighs. “If it scars, I can fix it.”

“Oh god, I look like Freddy Kruger, don’t I?”

“No,” Tony says sincerely. “I told you, it’s not as bad as it probably feels. You want to see?”

“No really,” Peter groans, rolls to his back and gingerly prods at his face. It’s wet and his skin is peeling off in some places. “Oh, god, it hurts.”

“I know,” Tony says, grunting as he lays down next to Peter. Nothing else to do, really. This fight is beyond them now. With the warp core damaged, they can’t take off, and Thanos would just drag them right back anyway. “You gave him a nosebleed. You kicked his ass.”

Peter doesn’t know what the hell Tony’s talking about at first, until he recalls kicking Thanos in the face and the blood he managed to draw. “I had him.”

“You did.” Tony elbows him. “You were right, by the way.”

“About what?” Peter is so tired. He’s injured and exhausted, as is tradition.

“I am proud of you.”

Peter smiles. But it’s quickly wiped off his face when Tony curses.

“Vision is here,” he says. “He’s… he’s losing.”

Suddenly, a burst of orange light overtakes that being emitted by the exposed warp core, and Peter shouts as he falls through eternity- for about three seconds before landing roughly on a beautifully patterned tiled floor. “What the-“

Before Peter can finish with the appropriate curse, a swirling orange circle appears in the air just feet away, and Tony falls from it, hitting the ground with an agonized yelp.

“What the fuck?” he propositions to Tony, who is curled up around what must be explosive pain.

“Strange,” Tony gasps. “Ah, shit.”

“Yeah it is, what the hell-” Peter starts, but Tony makes a noise that may have been a scoff at some point, back in time before his insides were decimated.

“No, g-genius,” Tony grinds out, “Doctor- doctor Stephen Strange. Wizard-neurosurgeon. Has to be.”

Three seconds pass, and Steve Rogers appears there the same way Tony and Peter did, followed closely by Black Widow. A moment of panic engulfs Peter- until he sees Quill drop from a portal as
well, still unconscious.

Groans ring through the room. Peter looks around, registering a large staircase, a few unidentifiable, yet powerful artifacts, and a sudden shift in the atmosphere. A man has appeared on the staircase, a powerful man, if Peter’s sixth sense is correct.

“Welcome to the ruins of New York City,” the man says, floating into the light and revealing sharp features, ice-blue eyes, and a flowing red cape that whips about his ankles. “You’ve managed to lose an Infinity Stone, and three Avengers to Thanos. Congratulations. I think it’s time we spoke.”
Okay. Good lord. This story is entering uncharted territory. The plot is thickening, and keeping it devoid of plot-holes and inconsistencies has become as taxing as an actual job. At any point, with just a single sentence, I could screw up an increasingly delicate story-line, which is why updates are taking so long. I'm sorry, but I hope these huge chapters, and the lack of replies to comments, are worth waiting for.

I got curious the other day and googled the word count of the Harry Potter books, some of the longest and most recognizable books that I know of. So far, my story contains more words than 'The Goblet of Fire', just to provide some perspective. I love writing this story, but it never gets easier, only harder. Bear with me, please. I will finish it. I'm proud of this, and I will finish it.

Oh, and I'm addicted to Fallout: New Vegas all over again. I've been roll-playing Tony in the wasteland, and it's been a blast, but it's also taking up a ton of writing time. Ugh. Sorry. We all have our vices. Mine is video games.

Anyway, enjoy ten-thousand damn words of people taking care of Tony, because the man deserves it. Leave a comment, please, it's the only way I get 'paid' for doing this. Your comments are like currency to me. They keep me going. Feel free to ask any questions you have, I would love to answer them.

Life is good.

Peter looks around, and he knows his utter shock is apparent on his burned face. Teleported from battle with an intergalactic warlord by a wizard. What in the hell, man? Is he in World of Warcraft? Could this day possibly get any crazier?

The room is alight with misery, and Peter thinks he’s witnessed this exact scene in a war movie once. Black Widow nurses silent, angry tears as she stands over Steve and offers him a hand. But Rogers refuses it, a quick, curt shake of his head. He stays sitting, his elbows on his bent knees, beaten, defeated, and visibly upset. The sight is disturbing.

Quill groans loudly as he comes around, and wipes groggily at a stripe of blood running from beneath his hairline, showing it to himself, grimacing at it. Peter goes to him immediately, squatting next to him and helping him sit up. He looks so confused. “Where-?”

“Hey, you're good, we’re safe,” Peter says to Quill, who looks at him, and his reaction to his appearance isn’t as conservative as Tony’s was.

“Howa, man,” he says quietly, sympathetic. “What happened to you?”

“I haven’t seen it yet, don’t spoil it for me,” Peter says. The smile he gives him is fake and painful. He’s learned from the best.

“Wait.” Green eyes go wide, and he whips around, looking over both shoulders. “Hold on, where’s
“Thanos?”

“I don’t know,” Peter says. “Not here, though, I know that.”

“Gotta count those blessings,” Quill sighs. Peter smiles and pats him on the back.

“Three-,” Tony starts from where he’s laying curled up a few feet away, before descending into a loud, bloody coughing fit. Peter gets up and heads to his other, much more injured teammate, thinking maybe his work on Tony’s wellbeing will never be complete. “Cap-“

Rogers slowly looks up from where he’s been staring at the floor, and Peter can see the utter devastation displayed so readily on his face. He swallows visibly, opens his mouth to speak, but can’t seem to find the right words, and just appears ashamed for it.

“Fucking… answers. Now.” Tony demands, furious and dangerous, yet he’s coughing so violently, Peter doubts he’d be able to hear Rogers even if the man could speak. Currently, Captain America seems to have gone mute in his shock. Peter looks between these two hurting people, lost for what to do. “Who? You goddamn coward, tell me!”

Rogers just stares at him, appearing horrified. It’s clear this isn’t how he imagined things would go.

“Mr. Parker, should Mr. Stark not require immediate life-saving care, please escort him through this,” Strange says matter-of-factly, swirling a gloved hand around, and another portal appears, upright this time, so Peter can just step through it. Within, he can see a dimly-lit room containing antique furniture, the biggest bed ever, a nightstand, a dresser with a large mirror attached, enormous curtains snuffing a tall, arched window, and who knows what they’ll see through it. It looks cozy. Finally, some rest. “Do what you can to make yourselves comfortable, I will attend to you both in a moment. I need to have a quick word with Captain Rogers.”

Peter already has a good feeling about this person, and he tends to trust his gut nowadays. “Okay, sure,” he says, and moves quickly, knowing that things could get nasty if Steve and Tony aren’t separated immediately, and Strange is probably on the same page. “Sorry, Tony.” His face hurts, and he wants to hide in that comfy looking room, so honestly, really not that sorry.

“Wait, don’t- don’t you dare… twerp-“ Tony protests, but it’s cut off by a bitten yelp, and then more coughing as Peter lifts him. But he gets it together enough to snarl out one final “fuck you, Rogers,” before Peter’s stepping through the portal and it collapses behind them, closing from top to bottom with a flash of light.

“Goddammit,” Tony snarls, coughs some more, wheezes and gasps. When he pulls his hand away from his mouth, Peter spots crimson in his palm. “Why’d you do that… you little asshole?” It’s forced out. Tony needs to be stabilized before anyone tells him anything.

“It wasn’t the right time,” Peter says, taking him over to the bed. “Please, trust me.”

The man glares absolute fire up at him, and though he’s immeasurably pissed off, Peter knows Tony trusts him, probably more than anyone nowadays.

“Three-“ he growls through the pain of being placed down and situated so he’s tilted a little on his left side, propped with a big, fluffy pillow beneath his back to avoid putting too much pressure on his injuries. The comforter looks like it’s worth more than Tony’s car, but Peter doubts the blood and grime they’re getting all over it will be an issue. This is wizard world now. This is Hogwarts, there’s a cleaning spell, or whatever, right? “He lost three.”

Then again, even at Hogwarts, people don’t come back from the dead.
His coughing having died down significantly due to his stable position, Tony appears stuck between gasping horror and pointed fury, not sure which emotion should gain dominance. Peter’s distraught over the recent events as well, but he can only imagine what it’s like for Tony, because he knows these people much better than Peter ever will. Understanding that he should be grieving, but not knowing for who, must be agonizing for him.

“I had him,” Tony says, shaking his head, his expression rueful. “I could have prevented all this. They should’ve let me do it.”

Peter doesn’t know what to say. Everything is horrible. Tony got to live today, and everything is still horrible.

After pouring water into a cup from an elegant silver pitcher atop the dresser, and helping Tony sit up a little so he can drink, Peter collapses into a chair near the bed and leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees. He suddenly feels so sick, dizzy, hot yet cold too. His legs shake and weakness swallows him whole. There’s a trashcan by him, and he pulls it over, knowing what comes next. His burn protests with loud pain as sweat rolls off his face in rivers.

Images of Thanos hurting his mentor tear through his mind, an unceasing stampede consisting of hooved demons. This is a nightmare. He’s living a nightmare.

“Whoa, steady, kiddo.” He can sense Tony moving to get up, something Peter is sure is nearly impossible, so he throws a hand out to stop him.

“Fine, jus’ sick,” he slurs, coughs, heaves into the can, and his injury murders him for it. “Got this.”

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“Your call, boss,” Tony says softly. He’s always been very skilled at tempering his emotions when Peter needs help. “It’s normal. Happens to the best of us, don’t be embarrassed.”

He’s not. Maybe if this was happening in front of someone else, he would be a little irked by their presence, but not Tony. They’ve already seen so much of each other’s suffering, it would be stupid to be embarrassed at this point. In fact, Peter prefers that Tony is here, and hopes Tony feels the same.

When he’s done, he sits back with a groan and kicks the can away from him. “So- so this is Avenging, huh?”

“I did warn you that it wouldn’t be kind to you,” Tony replies, his light voice digging its way up through eight layers of exhaustion.

“I think you understated that a bit.” Peter moans and prods just at the edges of his injury which is fucking pulsing with agony so intense it’s making his left eye water. He wishes Strange would show up, so they can get this miserable show on the road. There’s a ton of work to do. Tony’s arm must be manually reset, and he’s suffered a few unique wounds Strange may be able to do something about, being a magical doctor and all. Peter’s burn needs tended to, and he’s so damn tired, if not for the pain, he’d already be passed out in the space next to Tony. They really are beyond formalities. This is war, where necessity takes precedence over awkwardness. “This hurts.”

“Burns are notoriously painful and slow-healing,” Tony says. “Spider powers or not, you’re going to be in a lot of pain.”

“Quill looked at me funny,” Peter says, and Tony sighs. “It’s bad, isn’t it?”

“If by bad, you mean ‘badass’, then sure,” Tony says, and Peter sends him a sour look. “No, I’m serious. You’re an Avenger with a potential battle scar, now. Girls love Avengers, and they love
scars, trust me, and it didn’t muss up any of your good looks.”

It doesn’t feel that way. It feels like the entire left side of his face is cooking in a deep fryer and his good looks have sizzled to an ugly crisp. Suddenly, he’s overcome by a pressing need to see it. Though fear has stopped him from looking up to this point, he’s beginning to realize that he must accept the reality of things. His face is burned. Avoidance of the fact is doing him no favors.

“One thing at a time,” Tony had advised just before being tortured on the Kree ship. Sound advice. Things have piled up to towering proportions since discovering New York was destroyed. If he thinks about all of it at once, his brain might explode. Or, more realistically, he’ll have a total emotional meltdown.

One thing at a time.

“I’m gonna look,” he tells him, hoping that maybe letting Tony know will motivate him. If he fails now, he could potentially disappoint Tony, and that’s not okay.

“Go for it,” Tony urges. Just what he needed.

Peter nods at him resolutely. If Tony can put aside his grief to concentrate on Peter’s injury, then Peter can at least give it a look. The large mirror above the dresser has so far been subject to his studious avoidance, but he approaches it with confidence now, determined to steel himself against any reaction that doesn’t equal Tony’s tactful, neutral acceptance.

And he manages. The warp core coil is about as thick as Peter’s hand is wide, and it left behind a slightly curved stripe of mutilated flesh starting from the middle of his jawline, running up through his cheek, about half of his ear, and extending all the way into his scalp. One clean path of peeling, raw, blistered, and in some places blackened skin. A third-degree burn. Never has he been burned this badly before, and he has no idea if his regenerative power will heal it completely by itself. But if it doesn’t… oh well, it’s part of the job. Tony was right, it didn’t screw his face up, or melt any of his features off or expose his teeth. He still has his eyelids, his nose, his ears, most of his hair. It’s bad, but it could have been so much worse than this, he knows. He’s seen pictures in health class.

“It smells,” he comments in a hollow voice. His knees feel a little weak. “It smells like death.”

“Burnt human flesh isn’t known to smell pretty,” Tony comments. “I’m sorry, Peter.”

“Don’t be,” Peter assures him, practically drunk-stumbling over to the other side of the bed, removing the mangled remains of his armor, and climbing in next to his mentor. He has to lay on his right side or his back, as his left is out of commission, so he curls up facing Tony. “I’d do it all over again. I couldn’t just let him get to you.”

“I can’t believe you actually had the nerve to say you aren’t ‘brave like me’,” Tony says, closing his eyes and smiling at the ceiling. Then he inhales as deeply as he can, releasing it slowly, and blue light has begun spreading beneath his skin to his other injuries as visible sparks, a searching, glowing flood. Cuts, burns, abrasions, bruises, all of it begins to light up a dull blue. Maybe Extremis has been liberated from the constant task of keeping Tony’s ribs from shifting around during transport and can now add focus to his skin-deep wounds as well. “You went toe-to-toe with a god and broke his nose. You’re amazing, Peter.”

Peter stares as Extremis highlights the shapes of huge fingers around Tony’s throat. “You really did tell him that I’m your son.”

Tony’s mood immediately sours further. “I very stupidly put you in danger for a fleeting moment of
“Okay, please don’t do that,” Peter begs, too exhausted for Tony’s guilt complex right now, “I don’t blame you for anything—“

“He used you against me,” Tony mutters, and Peter can sense the wretched, corrupting influence of Tony’s self-hatred kicking into overdrive. “And I almost gave him everything.”

“I do not blame you, Tony,” Peter reiterates intensely. He can’t judge Tony at all. There were multiple instances when Tony was being tortured by the Kree Accuser that Peter seriously considered giving in and just telling them himself. And if it had gone on any longer than it did, he’s sure he would have. It was torture for Peter, too. “Anyway, you see me as a son, and not in some offhanded way or anything, and that’s the best thing to come out of this whole nightmare, so I’m going to focus on that. Fuck the rest of today.”

Tony opens his eyes and glances at Peter before looking away quickly. “That field… being out there, alone, was…” he swallows shakily, and deep brown eyes are seeing it all again, Peter knows. “I don’t know. It just felt right, saying that,” he admits after a moment. “I felt like I would never get to tell anyone. If Thanos was the last person to know it, then… I guess I could accept death a little easier. It felt right.”

“Yeah,” Peter agrees, counting Tony’s injuries. There are twenty-two fractures just in his face, and Peter can see blue light shoot through them. The man would be a damn balloon animal if not for Extremis’ anti-swelling properties. “How long will it take you to heal?” he asks, dreading the answer.

“Cuts, bruises, burns, the dislocations once reset: six hours. Concussions, fractures, minor breaks: two days. Ribs… seven days,” Tony lists it all off in a quiet, rueful voice.

“Jesus,” Peter breathes, and winces when it pulls at his burn. That side of his face is beginning to stiffen as it heals. “That’s a long time.” It’s really not. Peter doesn’t know how long broken ribs take to heal normally, but it’s got to be a lot longer than seven days.

“I’m aware.” Tony’s chewing his lip as he processes mounds of data behind cerulean eyes. “Bonus round; I’m receiving unknowns regarding the stab wound in my leg, and these lacerations, here.” He pokes at the bandages, which are already beginning to soak through with blood. “Not even an estimated recovery time. And they haven’t stopped bleeding yet. It’s like those parts of me are normal now, Extremis won’t touch them at all.”

“Maybe Strange can consult Professor Snape and whip up a magic potion or something,” Peter suggests, and Tony grins a red grin. One of his teeth is missing.

“Peter, today we met Galactic Hitler and Young Dumbledore. How do you feel?”

“Like sleeping,” Peter admits. He can only smile with the right side of his face. “Where is Young Dumbledore, anyway?”

“No idea, but if Star-Spangled Shit Show doesn’t deliver an A.A.R. and three names to me soon, I’m going to lose my very thin patience and burn this entire building to the ground.” The threat is uttered in one long, dull note. The intensity of Tony’s dread thickens the very air around them. “I don’t want to sit here and start speculating, and my painkillers are wearing off, shit’s about to get real miserable real fast—“

“Let me go find them,” Peter says, promising himself that this is it, after this he’s laying down for at
least six hours.

“You don’t have to do that,” Tony says, but Peter’s getting to his feet anyway. “I’m sure someone will show up any time now.”

“I won’t take long,” he insists, already referring to his sixth sense for Rogers’ and Strange’s whereabouts. They’re not far. Through a hallway, to the right, down a staircase, then another, god, he’s getting good at this-

“Wait,” Tony says, a bit desperately, and Peter stops to look at him with concern, finds an injured, fearful man he almost doesn’t recognize. And maybe he never gave thought to how vulnerable Tony must feel right now. New place, new people, mobility limiting injuries, no suit of armor. Aside from deadly biological electricity and his protective scales, Peter is Tony’s last line of defense, and he’s about to just walk out like it’s nothing. “What if my lung collapses again?”

“Then I’ll have no supplies to reverse it, and you’ll die anyway,” Peter says, knowing this has nothing to do with his lung collapsing. “Look, we’re safe here. I know it. I can feel it.” Tony swallows with difficulty and shifts his gaze to the window. “Trust me. Sixth sense, remember?”

“Yeah, Bruce Willis was dead the whole time,” Tony says, and though it’s funny, his trust issues are on full display.

Peter sighs. “I’ll be fine. You’ll be fine. Just stay connected to my earpiece-“

“I can’t,” Tony admits, and Peter’s never heard anything so ridiculous.

“Huh?”

“I won’t be able to reach it once you leave this room,” he reveals with a misplaced smile, and Peter understands right then why Tony is so deeply nervous despite their apparent safety. Not only is he injured and vulnerable, but without Extremis, he’s essentially blind as well. And Thanos is out there, searching. Hunting, probably. “Something more powerful than Extremis is stopping me from projecting beyond these walls.”

“Strange is an actual wizard,” Peter points out, and Tony nods his head to the side in concurrence. “It’s probably a spell.”

“It’s making me nervous,” Tony says, and Peter nods.

“I know.” He walks over to Tony’s side of the bed and angles himself in a way that ensures Tony can only see his good side. His un-maimed side. Great. He feels like Two-Face. “Tony, if there was anything dangerous around here, I’d feel it.” He sits next to him and squeezes his good shoulder. Tony grabs him under his bicep and exhales sharply, meets his gaze with intense, fearful brown eyes.

“Be careful,” he says, then releases Peter’s arm after a fast squeeze, signifying his acceptance of the task. “Don’t touch anything. You might get sucked into an alternate dimension or something.”

“I won’t.” Peter exits the room, and he can sense Tony’s nerves race into overdrive. He’s got to hurry.

Wherever Peter is, it’s beautiful and weird. He remembers Strange mentioning something about the ruins of New York, but in all his travels across the city, Peter cannot for the life of him recall seeing this building before. Inside, it’s old and intricate, like a bizarre art museum, so he assumes the outside of the building must catch the eye as well. Yet, he’s never seen it. It’s strange.
Following heartbeats, Peter navigates his way through long, decorated hallways, and between
display cases containing artifacts that tickle his senses when he passes by them. Soon enough, he
reaches the staircase room, where everyone is congregated.

“Please tell me we aren’t the only ones who made it,” Rogers is begging the floor he’s staring at as
Peter hits the top of the staircase. He’s still sitting. Widow has turned away from the rest of them, her
arms crossed. Quill is looking between everyone forlornly, and Strange has descended the stairs and
gone to stand amongst them, tall as an oak. They’re all in this together now.

“There is a residence similar to this one in Hong Kong,” Strange says, “the rest of your team, both
alive and… well, otherwise, were transported there. It would have been foolish to keep you all in one
place as Thanos searches. My very trustworthy colleague will ensure they’re comfortable until it’s
safe to meet up.”

“Shit. You didn’t just leave Tony’s spacecraft there, did you?” Quill demands suddenly. “I have an
extremely important intergalactic call to make, and there’s stuff on that ship no one should be getting
their hands on.”

“Is that really something to worry about right now?” Widow hisses over her shoulder, and Quill
scoffs at her.

“Look, lady,” he starts in his unabashedly informal way, “I’m sorry for your loss and all that, but I
got family squatting on Thanos’ home-world, and they’re in a lot of danger. You lost people, I get it,
but now, because of y’all’s fuck ups, I gotta worry about losing people too.”

“You’d rather he died?” Rogers posits, and he’s angry now. Peter feels the man’s blood pressure
soar, a quickening thrum.

“No, but-but yes, you know?” Quill says back, his voice rising. Tension is building, Peter can sense
it, but he watches anyway, transfixed. No one has noticed him yet. “It sucks, dude, it really does, but
it’s what he wanted, and it would have been better than this!” He gestures around himself, at the
mess they’ve made.

“Who the hell even are you?” Rogers has gotten up now, his shoulders squared. Blue eyes dart all
over Quill, analyzing his clothes, his weapons, his possible strength level, his ancient Walkman.

“Someone who cares a lot more about Tony than you,” Quill says with a sneer. Peter could applaud
him right now, damn.

Rogers’ expression narrows even further, and he takes a few steps, looking like he’s ready to get into
Quill’s face. “I don’t know who you are, but you better watch yourself, bub.”

Quill is a nervous person, and after being in space for so long, trusts no one, not even Captain
America. He’s without his family, he’s among complete strangers, and it’s been a long damn day.
His weapon is out in a flash. “Yeah, and you better stay back, tortilla chip, or I’ll blow a hole in you
as big as your mama’s-“

“Stop it, both of you,” Strange demands, and Peter’s seen enough, too.

“Hey,” he shouts to get the room’s attention while he descends the staircase, and everyone stops to
focus on him. He suddenly wishes he had a hoodie on or something, so he could hide his burn. “I
don’t mean to interrupt- er, actually I do, but… look, you’re a doctor, right?” Of course, his question
is directed at Strange.
“Uh, neurosurgeon,” Strange clarifies as Quill holsters his weapon with a huff and eyes Rogers distrustfully.

“Could you maybe take a look at Tony?” Peter requests, “now, rather than later.” Strange’s expression softens immediately. In fact, the whole room seems to shift with uncomfortable pressure. It only angers Peter further. “What, did you all forget about him?”

“How is he?” Black Widow asks, and Peter scoffs, not willing to be wowed by her celebrity status, or her good looks. He’s extremely aware of her traitorous actions during the accords fiasco, having been there to witness it. She’s the reason they lost. She’s the reason Rhodey was paralyzed.

“In pain. A lot of it,” he tells her fiercely. He’s pissed, and he wants these people to know it. She looks at the floor with pursed lips, and good, Peter hopes she’s feeling guilty.

Strange is in the process of summoning a portal. “Shower, food, rest, is through here. You’ll each get your own rooms. There’s copies.” He says as it materializes to reveal a room identical to the one Tony’s in. It clicks for Peter then, why Tony can’t use Extremis. He’s in another dimension, or realm, or something right now, a copy of this reality, maybe, and he’s way out of range. Weird. “All of you, get cleaned up. We’ll discuss tactics in the morning. You’re no use to anyone half dead as you are.”

“I need to make that call,” Quill demands, forever persistent and Strange nods. Master of portals, he just summons another. Peter can see the mangled remains of the jet on the other side in a large room, and though he has no time to check, he wonders if Leia is okay. Tony placed her in a gentle sleep mode before they left to conduct their mission and stored her in the safe, to be woken up by Peter as soon as the task was complete. As cryptic as it is, it was best for her.

Quill moans his displeasure. “Oh god, I hope it works.”

“Do whatever you need to do to not attract Thanos to us,” Strange requests pointedly. “I’ll check on you soon.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever. Pete, tell Tony I’ll be by to see him when I get a chance,” Quill says, before stepping through the portal with urgency. Peter hopes beyond everything he’s able to reach the rest of the Guardians in time. They have to do something with that Stone, and they definitely need to get off Titan. No doubt, Thanos will look there soon.

“Cap,” Peter says stiffly as Widow is leaving, and Rogers pauses, looks over at him. His expression is pinched, like he already knows what Peter is about to say. “You need to tell him. It has to be you.” Peter will play diplomat between these two if he must. Rogers delivering the bad news is the first step in reclaiming Tony’s respect.

Rogers nods. “Where is he? I’ll do it right now.” He says with resolution, and despite all his faults, and how fucking furious Peter is with him, there’s a lot to respect about the guy.

“Hold up,” Strange says, and he’s grimacing, seemingly already aware that he’s pushing some extremely delicate limits, “let me talk to him first.”

“No, I really think he should-“ Peter starts, pointing at Rogers, unwilling to back down, but Strange interrupts him.

“Trust me,” he says, nodding at Peter with high eyebrows, “he’s going to want to hear what I have to say. I have good news.”

Peter squints at him with skepticism. *Good* news? What is this weird concept being presented to him
right now? Is this a joke? If so, it isn’t very funny. He’s been through too much over the last month for stupid jokes. “It’d better be good. You have no idea how rare that is in our world.”

“I’ll bet,” Strange says.

“I’m not waiting past an hour,” Rogers informs them, and Peter wonders if an hour is enough time to get Tony comfortable. “Let him know?”

“Sure,” Peter says shortly. Rogers nods his thanks, before stepping through the portal and into his own version of Tony’s room. It collapses with a burst of orange sparks.

Then, Strange is walking. “We’ll knock,” he says, as Peter trails along behind him, “Something tells me Mr. Stark has had enough of portals for one day.”

Peter smiles his now lopsided smile. He likes this guy.

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Tony’s not okay when Peter leaves.

“Shit,” he hisses, raising his hand, the only one he can use, and watching it tremor. Closing it into a fist and flexing it is pointless. Breathing deeply is impossible. He’s terrified, and it’s not going away.

*Thanos got his hands on Peter. And you let him.* He can barely process what just happened. It’s one of the most unimaginable things he can think of. Literally nothing else would have broken him like that.

The memory of it, the… the *nightmare* of it, skips through his mind in vivid detail. Tony wasn’t strong enough to protect the closest thing to a son he will ever have. And he was forced to watch this very important person be tortured right in front of him, and… Tony finds he would rather have his teeth ripped out a thousand more times than deal with merely the memory of Peter screaming so fucking loudly. It bombards him, and like his pain, it’s something Extremis can’t just fix for him. Maybe he could tweak it to… no, but then, where does it end? He’s already cyborg enough for his taste.

Poor Peter. This is what it was like for the kid following the Kree ship incident, and Tony wasn’t even there for him. Second chances, though, and there’s no running and hiding this time around. But why are second chances always so painful?

Now it’s Tony’s turn to feel sick. He hasn’t eaten anything in nearly two days, hasn’t had the stomach for it. “Oh-,” he groans, stiffening his whole body against the nausea, swallowing rapidly, fighting it with Extremis, but he doesn’t possess the necessary coping skills for this. Years of therapy did fuck-all to prepare him for something like this. And now, Peter bears a constant reminder of the event, one he can’t see, but Tony can, every single time he looks at him. “Oh, god, c’mon, don’t do this--“

Throwing up will be damn miserable happenings for him if he gives into it, so he fights with valor, even though Peter is screaming and screaming, and Thanos is *smiling* at him while it’s happening, and Tony isn’t strong enough to handle it.

Ultimately, Extremis steps in and puts a stop to it. He won’t puke, because puking is dangerous right
now, but he remains sick as a dog. Nothing is free.

His thoughts are racing, addressing topic after topic, unorganized and nearly incoherent, even to him. Damn concussions. There’s just so much happening to be mentally impaired like this. Peter was tortured and will probably suffer acute complications from it. Tony’s critically injured. His technopathy has been muzzled into a mute static by something. Rogers is back in his life, alongside a handful of other people he’d rather actively avoid. Earth has been invaded, and he won’t even be fully ambulatory without aid for another four days.

Three deceased Avengers remain nameless to him. Why? Why are they, Romanoff, Strange, Rogers, insisting he endure this torture, after witnessing everything he’s been through today? Why be that cruel as to keep him in the dark, when he’s already so thoroughly drenched in darkness? Maybe he’ll drown in it someday. Suffocate in it. It’s so prevalent in his life now, he hardly expects anything else. Doesn’t he deserve to know which of his friends died?

Everything is shit.

“Dammit, Rogers…” Steve owes him an explanation before Tony’s mind begins running away with the possibilities. It doesn’t take much deductive reasoning to begin speculation, and Tony’s sure he’s already aware of at least one death, because it only makes sense. It’s torment. It’s fucking cruel.

The physical discomfort is creeping on him as well. His painkilling nanobots are dissolving at an alarming rate, forced to work overtime when he was brusquely dropped from a portal onto unrelenting tiled flooring. His dislocated arm is slowly catching fire. Short breaths become hoarse as his broken ribs shift, causing incredible suffering with each inhale and exhale, and this is only the beginning.

Then, a knock at the door.

He thinks maybe he imagined it- until a second knock comes. “Yeah?” he forces out, and groans because speaking hurts again. The door opens, and Stephen Strange steps through, followed closely by Peter. Tony feels incredible relief at the sight of the kid.

The man he’s shown up with is tall. Too tall, with sharp features, gripping blue eyes, and a goatee Tony can proudly say is outclassed by his own. A long red cape swishes around his ankles, and blue robes embrace him. There is a distinguished hint of gray at his sideburns. Tony knows exactly who this is, has been looking for him for some time. Unfortunately, magic has always thwarted him.

“Mr. Stark,” he says in greeting, and though tuned, searching eyes flicker over Tony’s numerous injuries, they respectfully do not linger on them.


“You know who I am?” Strange seems a bit surprised and certainly wants to know how Tony recognized him so quickly.

“You know who I am?” Strange seems a bit surprised and certainly wants to know how Tony recognized him so quickly.

“Of course,” Tony tells him, even though it hurts, “You’re a renowned neurosurgeon who transformed himself into an actual fireball-slinging wizard.” He grunts and pauses, overcome by a swift wave of pain. It’s coming fast. The painkillers are at 4% operability, now, and waning. “Anyone who’s anyone… should know who you are.”

“Perhaps you’re just sharper than most,” Strange observes, and suddenly there’s a small table containing supplies required to begin an I.V. sitting next to Tony. Without a need to explain his actions, Strange moves towards him and takes his good arm, flipping it over and laying it against the
bed. “The team leader of the Rogue Avengers had no idea who I am.”

“Phenomenal.” Tony doesn’t wince as the needle is inserted expertly, removed, the catheter taped down, and cool saline begins to flow through him, because he has other things to worry about. Honestly, Tony couldn’t be more disappointed in Steve Rogers than he is right at this moment. “Should have just let me die. Do you happen to practice euthanasia, Doctor?”

Strange smirks as he hangs the bag of saline from a bed post. “I try very hard not to kill people in my practice.”

“Bummer.” Tony watches as Strange introduces an obligatory pre-dosed syringe filled with acetaminophen to his line. He knows only because Extremis is analyzing everything this guy is doing. Trust is something that is earned in Tony’s world.

“But, I am in the healing business,” Strange states, and after disposing of wrappers and empty syringes, addresses Peter, who has stumbled over to sit in the chair with an exhausted huff. “And that looks very painful.”

“It is.” Peter exhales sharply. Tony notices that his hand is shaking as he brings it up to tentatively poke at the wound. This kid needs a break.

“Pain’s the name of the game around here,” Tony says, watching with sympathy and guilt. “You got something up your sleeve for him, Doc?”

“I think I might,” Strange says, considering Peter’s face. If Strange can heal Peter, he’ll be A-OK in Tony’s book. As of right now, he has absolutely no reason to trust the guy aside from Peter’s possibly naive insistence. “May I?”

“Be my guest,” the kid grumbles.

Peter doesn’t watch as Strange approaches him, but Tony can tell he’s nervous. After a quick flourish, a bright ball of light appears behind his shoulder. “Relax,” he says only once, taking Peter’s head on the top and under his chin and gently tilting it up so he can get a better angle in the light. Other than the one word of encouragement, Strange is dispassionate about it, viewing the injury not with reluctance or horror, but calculation. Peter winces and hisses in a breath between his teeth, bites his lip and squeezes his eyes shut. Then, Tony notices orange light thrumming through the wound.

“What are you doing?” he asks, watching warily, trying to force a lid over his bubbling anxiety. Peter is in pain. There’s sweat on his brow, and he’s started to groan. And Tony’s going into panic mode again, because he just cannot deal with seeing Peter in pain, he’ll slaughter anyone who hurts the kid-

“Numbing it,” Strange tells him, just as the orange light blinks from existence, and Peter moans with relief, his entire face going slack with it.

“Oh my god, thank you,” Peter says, looking up at Strange with awe and immense gratitude.

“It’s temporary,” Strange warns him. “A few hours, at most. If it wears off, feel free to come find me, no matter what time.” More hand movements and bandages from nowhere are wrapping themselves around Peter’s head. “I can’t heal it completely without causing an extreme amount of pain over a fairly lengthy period, and something tells me you two have experienced enough of that today. We can try later, after some rest.”

“Sounds good to me, man,” Peter says, relaxing into his newly pain-free world, sitting back in the chair and exhaling slowly. Tony hopes the same awaits him, but for now, just the sight of Peter out
of pain is good enough.

“Now, for you,” Strange says, addressing Tony with sharp eyes, and Tony realizes then that he’s just become a project. A puzzle needing solved. Tony gets it, better than anyone.

“I don’t need a doctor, I need a mechanic,” he says with rueful reluctance, glaring at his I.V. disdainfully, because he hates this part. There’s too much work to be done, there’s no way this won’t be a long, agony-filled process. He’s covered in injuries. He is an injury.

“Well, think of me as a people mechanic,” Strange says with a smirk, and Tony frowns.

“Don’t patronize me.” Then, pain. Lots of it, and he gasps, shocked by the fresh breath of hellfire that just consumed him. Without strong medication, Extremis likes to present ongoing pain to him in waves. It provides him a break, but when it finally does hit him… “Give me… a minute. Fuck.” It brings tears to his eyes, and he hides away in his good shoulder, curls into it, and just endures as quietly as possible.

He can hear Strange sigh. “I’m sorry this happened to you,” he says.

Tony scoffs. “Save it.”

A slight pause. “Just know, your sacrifices are not in vain.”

“What-what is this? Lord of the Rings?” He can feel Strange’s eyes on him. Studying him. It’s fine, he’s extremely aware of how worthy of study he actually is. Extremis and its glowing bioluminescence will heal his broken ribs in seven days. Last time he broke a rib, it took nearly three months to heal fully. He’s a medical miracle.

“Can I touch you?”

Tony opens one eye to a distrustful, watering slit. “Only if you want to.” But Strange is moving in before he even offers an answer aloud, forcing a tight scowl out of him. “Did you read my mind, or something?”


“But you can do it?”

Strange shrugs like it’s no big deal at all. “Sure, but I wouldn’t just do it, come on, now.”

“Sorry, I just went through something trying… but still, stay out of my head, Gumby,” Tony says with a sneer. He’s being difficult because he’s nervous. It’s just how things go.

“Yeah, really not something I need to be warned about,” Strange says with a raised brow. “I can only imagine what horrors I’d find.”

“You’re damn right.” The pain is subsiding once more, simmering down into an intense ache.

“Ready?” He’s placed his hands atop Tony’s right flank on either side of his broken ribs, and Tony nods, braces for more pain with clenched teeth. But it doesn’t come.

“Huh,” Strange is grunting in displeasure so Tony risks a hesitant look to see what the problem is, finds a curious Peter standing over him and watching as well. Beneath his skin, he can see that orange magic is at war with Extremis. “You have vibranium in you. And something else I’m unfamiliar with—“
“Badassium,” Tony informs him as he receives warnings and readings, and despite his insistence that Strange is a good witch, not a bad one, Extremis remains vigilant. It’s a safeguard against mind-invaders.

Strange raises one sleek eyebrow at him. “Badassium? Really?”

“Hey,” Tony says, mildly indignant, “I made it, I get to name it, don’t judge. I’ve heard of the ‘Strange Technique’.”

“Well, whatever it is, it doesn’t like me very much,” Strange mutters, forehead wrinkled with concentration. “This is remarkable.”

“It is formidably defensive,” Tony grinds out, and his hope is sinking into a dank pit. Of course, this means no pain relief. Just his luck. “Sometimes I can control it, sometimes I can’t. It’s an ever evolving relationship.”

“Is this… code?” Strange seems baffled, and somehow, Tony knows that doesn’t happen often anymore. No doubt, this guy has seen some shit. “You have really done something to yourself haven’t you?”

“Yes, something necessary, as you plainly saw,” Tony narrows his eyes accusingly. “Oh, and where were you at, eh Merlin? Whole Earth at stake, you just kick back in your blue pajamas, and watch the proceedings on your goddamn crystal ball?”

“I was doing very important leg work for you,” Strange informs him, with only a hint of annoyance. “As of an hour ago, I have personally located both Thor and Doctor Banner.”

“What?!” Tony and Peter shout in unison, and Strange smirks.

“Sure did,” he says, smug, and Tony’s mind is flying away already. “Now, I’ll just need a strand of hair—”

“No, wait, wait, wait, back up,” Tony insists, “where the hell are they? I’ve been looking for them months.”

“On a planet trillions of light years, and one dimension away.” Trillions of light years… well shit, that would explain why he couldn’t find them. Strange takes it upon himself to pluck a hair from Tony’s head, and Tony doesn’t even care. If true, this information could turn the tide of the entire war. They need Thor and Hulk more than anything.

Tony gapes at him, his pain forgotten. “Both of them?” At Strange’s nod, Tony huffs. “Are you absolutely sure? How did you find them?”

“I have a somewhat reliable contact who happens to possess mutual enemies.” The strand of hair Strange stole is now floating in midair between his hands. A few flourishing movements, and the hair deconstructs, and Tony has so many questions, and so little breath to get them out on. There’s too much going on, his mind is racing around it all like an excited animal. “We’ve been discussing things in a realm that treats time and distance a little differently. I’ll need your help retrieving them.”

“Holy shit,” Tony breathes. He’s pretty sure Strange is literally dissecting his genetic makeup right now, but it’s not as interesting. Smiling, Tony looks to Peter, who grins back. “We’ve still got a chance.” Really, Strange found three allies for them, as Banner and Hulk are considered two people, and this truly is good news. “What do you need from me?”

“A reliable spacecraft,” Strange says, “an expert in alien technology. Getting them out will be…
complicated."

“Look no further,” Tony assures him. “I possess both.”

“I know, and I look forward to your recovery, so we can begin. Unfortunately, I’m going to have to do some reading first,” Strange announces, and the strand of hair fizzes away. “For now, I can set your arm, address the bleeding, help you get cleaned up. I have some narcotics, not much—”

“I can’t take anything like that,” Tony says, and Strange regards him with surprised curiosity. “Alcoholic. Former. Magic will do, if you can figure it out, and it doesn’t get me high.”

“Not high,” Peter informs him helpfully.

“You wouldn’t know if you were, kid,” Tony heckles, feeling more hopeful than he has in quite a while. So, this is why Strange wanted to speak to him first. He’s providing an excellent cushion against the blow to come.

“Tylenol, then,” Strange says regretfully, appearing uncomfortable with Tony being in this state, and Tony knows why. Broken ribs restrict breathing and tiny, rapid intakes of breath over an extended period can cause pneumonia. He’s already received the low-down from Extremis.

“Hah, Tylenol.” Tony shakes his head, rueful. “You might as well pour room temperature water on it. Which reminds me, I’m not letting you bathe me, I’ll figure that out on my own.”

“Your choice.” Thankfully, Strange doesn’t fight with him, though he appears to want to. “Let me see your arm.”

Now, Tony hesitates. He’s hugging the busted limb to his chest, and without his scales keeping it immobile, he’s barely found a favorable way for it to sit for now, he doesn’t want to move it again. Though he knows allowing Strange to set it will alleviate some of his suffering at least, getting there isn’t something he looks forward to. He can still feel Thanos’ Volkswagen-sized hands encircling it and snapping it apart like a fucking chicken wing.

As often as he’s been injured, Tony’s never suffered one dislocation, let alone two, before. It’s a unique pain he’s looking forward to eliminating. “Have at it,” he says, resigned. It’ll be worth it.

“Parker, a hand, if you wouldn’t mind,” Strange says as he moves to the foot of the bed, and following a motion like he’s shoving something aside, the bed splits itself apart, and Tony jumps out of his skin as the half not containing him slides away across the floor.

“Whoa, that was cool!” Peter exclaims.

“Christ, warn a guy!” Tony says, panting, watching the other side of the bed distrustfully. That wasn’t cool, that was horrifying.

“Sorry,” Strange approaches him on his newly exposed left side, and Tony is painfully nervous about this. “So, Mr. Parker, if you would please just restrain him, over there, thank you.”

“Oh boy,” Tony’s saying, sweating with pain and fear. He exhales shakily and adds a little voice to it. “Don’t like the sound of that.”

“I’ll try to be as quick as possible,” Strange assures him as Peter obediently rounds the bed and applies gentle pressure to Tony’s right shoulder and arm. “Or, you could always wait until I can figure out how to apply pain relief—“
“No, let’s do this,” Tony insists. It can’t be any worse than what he’s just been through. A few moments of temporary agony traded for immediate, ongoing relief is a good deal, and he’s a business man, he likes good deals. “Get it over with.”

“Just don’t hit me.” Strange hesitates with his shaking, scarred hands hovering over Tony’s arm, and Tony wonders why he doesn’t fix them. “Ready?”

“Sure?” he says, and glances at Peter, who smirks at him, cocks his head, and makes an expression indicating that this is no big deal. *Get through it, Tony. It’s okay.*

“Just moving it into position, for now.” It’s gentle. Strange moves it slowly over so it’s sitting straight in the air and holds it there. Tony bites his lip against a groan. This is bad. This is going to fucking hurt. One of Peter’s hands is on his bicep, so he clutches the kid’s forearm and receives a gentle squeeze of encouragement back. “Here we go, ready?”

“Tell me about Thor and Bruce.” A last minute request. “What are they up to?”

Strange considers him for a moment. “They’re on a planet called Sakaar,” he reveals, and twists Tony’s arm, and it’s a shock how painful it actually is, so much so, that it has Tony promptly writhing and shouting, damn the broken ribs. Peter’s holding him down, but this is a pain he *must* get away from. “The Hulk was sold to them by Loki, who snatched him up using the Space Stone.”

“Fuck!” Tony sobs out. Another few twists, and honestly, he’s already reached his limit. If not for Strange’s words, all he would be able to see right now is Corvus Glaive dragging him off to ‘string him up’. Thankfully, the news being presented is too important to allow this to send him flashing back.

“Thor, after Asgard was destroyed, was sold to the Sakaarians as well. Hulk battles in a gladiator-style arena for local entertainment. He’s a bit of a celebrity. Thor is being used as a power source.”

Finally, a small ‘pop’, and Tony doesn’t have the ability to appreciate the immediate relief it brings. Thor is *what?*

“What do you mean?” Tony pants out, wiping tears and sweat from his eyes when Peter lets him go, and dreading the answer.

Strange sighs. “They’ve got him hooked up to the stadium, and they’re using him like a battery.”

Forget the pain. As someone capable of producing his own kind of renewable biological energy, Tony is furious. How does one extract energy from a god? Tony tries to imagine it, what the logistics of that would entail. Thor would have to be restrained, maybe sedated, *plugged in*-

No, he can’t think about it too deeply. Thor is alive, and that is amazing news, concentrate on that.

“When do we head out?” he asks intensely and Strange is just holding his arm, maybe waiting to set the shoulder so Tony can have a break.

“As soon as we have a working spacecraft and you’ve healed,” Strange says, and his searching eyes flicker back over Tony’s injuries. “Which shouldn’t take more than a day or two, if I’m able to locate the correct spell. Mr. Parker, if you would be so kind?”

“Sure.” Peter’s hands are back to stabilize him. The kid’s been quiet otherwise, has too much to say, and Tony thinks he knows exactly what’s going through his mind, and honestly, he doesn’t have an answer for it yet.
Anyway, pain. *Pain!* “Holy shit!” he shouts, because this is worse than the elbow. Strange has pulled his arm out from his body at ninety degree angle until the limb reached its limit, and then just continued. Peter’s grip on him is almost painful it’s so tight. He thrashes because he can’t help it. “Oh, god, stop, please!”

“You don’t want me to do that, trust me,” Strange grunts, pulling and pulling, and Tony respects and appreciates the sheer grit it takes to do something horrible but necessary to someone else, even as he’s cursing this bastard’s name with all the colors of the rainbow. “Just a few… more… seconds… there,” then, another pop, and Tony has his arm back.

“Wow, that… that relief is immediate, isn’t it?” he gasps hoarsely, slumping, just as Peter exhales with relief and pats him supportively on the shoulder. The pain isn’t gone, but it has damn near disappeared, and Tony can move it again. He tests it gingerly, rotates his shoulder, bends his elbow, and bruising so deep it’s almost black remains around both joints. “Hey, thanks, I owe you.”

“You don’t,” Strange says, moving to the bathroom to wash Tony’s blood off his hands. He comes back into the room as he dries them. “Just get yourself cleaned up, however you planned on doing so. I’ll be reading. Oh, and one more thing.”

He’s wearing a large necklace, and after making some weird peace signs, Tony and Peter are both gasping at the sight of the goddamn Time Stone.

“Holy shit!” Peter exclaims.

“Just as I thought.” Tony is smiling now. “You were responsible for Hong Kong. Can you control that thing?”

“Yes and no,” Strange says. “I needed to show you this, to give you hope so you wouldn’t despair. Activating it now would be a death wish, but, after Thanos is defeated and if I’m still around, I can use it to bring back those you lost.”

“So, wait,” Peter is saying, cautious excitement in his voice, “does that mean you can bring back New York, too?”

Strange gives Peter a look that tells Tony they’re not going to like his answer. “I’m sorry,” he says, his tone dismal. “Thanos attacked it with an Infinity Stone. And the stones, they counter each other, it seems. As of now, there’s no way that I know of to reverse it.”

Hope for Tony, despair for Peter. Tony watches, helpless as Peter’s lip quivers a bit, and angry, shining eyes consult the ground.

“Pete, there’s still a chance,” Tony tries his best. “Clearly, nothing is impossible. We’ll study this thing, alright? We’ll figure it out.”

“Yeah,” Peter says dully.

“He’s right,” Strange says, gesturing to put the stone away, and the necklace shutters itself, intense green light blinking from existence. “There’s a lot we still don’t know about these stones.”

“Whatever.” Peter shakes his head and doesn’t look at them. He’s so done.

Tony spares Strange a pointed look, and a curt headshake that says silently, ‘this kid’s had enough, back off.’ Strange seems to get the point, because he doesn’t comment further.

“If you need anything, feel free to come find me,” he tells them, apparently sensing that he should
“Whatever time. I’m here to help.” Then he’s gone in a blink.

“Peter,” Tony starts, because the kid looks like he’s seconds away from a break down. “Listen, I recognize that you’re in an incredible amount of pain, and I know there’s nothing anyone could say or do to alleviate it. And, even though I’m pretty damn useless right now, I’m here for you. I love you and I’m here for you.”

“I know that, Tony,” Peter says, and sighs. “I just thought for a moment that maybe… maybe things aren’t as bad as they seem. Come to find out, things are even worse.”

Tony understands this line of thinking better than anyone. “Have hope.” Peter doesn’t appear moved by it. “I’m serious. I’ve been an Avenger for a long time, Pete. Hope is the most soothing reprieve you’ll have.”

Peter seems to be in deep, furious contemplation, and then; “The book,” he says, suddenly, and he’s excited now, not sorrowful, “Thor’s book, maybe Strange can-“

Another knock at their door. Tony eyes it suspiciously, but Peter’s soothing his mind before the anxiety can start back up. “Just Quill,” he’s informed, and Peter gets up to answer the door. It’s no wonder Tony feels better in Peter’s presence. That sixth sense of his is becoming remarkably accurate.

“You get ahold of them?” Tony’s asking immediately at the sight of his teammate. He knows what Quill has just gotten finished doing, he doesn’t need to be told, he’s no idiot. And Tony’s been worried too, about the Guardians. He unwittingly revealed to Thanos the fact that Gamora is nearby, and even though Quill wasn’t angry at the revelation, he was still, understandably frustrated by it.

“Yeah, man,” he says, waving it off, removing his red leather coat and hanging it on a rack set into the wall. He bears a medic bag. Good. “They’re fine, they send their love, and they’re heading to Mars. I told them to planet-hop for a little while.” He’s still bloody. Not even stopping to wash the red off his face, he’s checking on his people before attending to himself like a true leader. Quill turns, and the smile he gives Tony is soft, thankful even, so Tony returns it. “Okay, things suck right now, but it’s damn good to see you alive, dude.”

“Likewise,” Tony says, because he can’t exactly tell whether he’s even happy to be alive yet or not. There’s too many unknown variables.

Quill’s walking over, and Tony holds his good hand out, which Quill takes without hesitation, and it’s not a shake, but more of a tight squeeze, a stand-in for the hug he knows Quill would give him if his insides weren’t pulverized. “Brother, you look like shit- oh! Hey, I grabbed something from the jet.” He pulls a capped syringe from the bag he has, and Tony immediately groans at the sight of what must be his last dose of painkillers. “Figured you might need this. Sorry, I didn’t get it here sooner.”

“You’re a saint,” Tony tells him as Quill administers the dose. “Goddamn knight in shining armor.” Warmth envelopes him. He sighs with relief as the pain slowly dies down into something tolerable. The nanomachines can either absorb a lot of pain now over a short duration, or they can work at a fraction of their capacity for longer. Tony chooses the latter.

“No, that’s you,” Quill says as Tony stretches stiff limbs he couldn’t move before without risking agony. “You’re the one who actually wears armor.”

“Where’s the jet?” Peter wants to know, and Quill scoffs at him.
“Hell if I know,” he says, sounding frustrated. “I walked out the door, turned, and it was gone. Have you been out there? It’s like a possessed art museum or something, it gives me the total creeps.”

Peter huffs a laugh. “That’s exactly what I was thinking.”

“How badly is it damaged?” Tony asks, and Quill turns curious eyes to him, squints at him, and looks surprised.

“You can’t use Extremis?”

“As it happens, I haven’t found a way to breach other dimensions yet,” Tony says a bit defensively.

“Well, it’s, uh… it’s pretty bad,” Quill admits reluctantly. “The hatch is totally gone. Warp-core was ripped out for some reason-” Then Quill appears shocked and sickened when he catches sight of Peter’s bandages and everything falls into place for him. “Thanos did that, huh?” He nods his chin up toward Peter, who affirms it with a small wince. “And he did it to make you talk, didn’t he, Tony?”

Tense silence persists between them all, until Tony clears his throat. “Strange has located two tide-turning allies of mine, so we need to get that spacecraft up and running. This isn’t over yet, Quill. I promise.”

Quill appears conflicted for a moment, but simmers it down, and he smiles kindly at Tony. “You’re covered in dirt and dried blood, you know that?”

Tony winces. “Yeah.”

“I’m pretty sure you’re going to need help washing it off,” Quill says unnecessarily. Of course, it’s obvious to even the densest moron that there’s no way Tony could get through a shower without physical aid. He doesn’t fancy the experience, though, wonders how it would even play out. It was scary and uncomfortable when he thought about Strange doing it, but Quill is like… family? He doesn’t know, everything is so fucked up.

So, he just sighs. There’s nothing to say.

“Come on, I’ll help you,” Quill insists, holding his hand out to Tony, who regards it with hesitance. Quill doesn’t care about him this much, does he? “It’s okay. No judgement, I swear.”

“I’ll help, too,” Peter says, and Tony can’t even fathom the love his new family is capable of. Before he knows it, Peter is there, standing beside Quill, resilient and determined, mature beyond his years, ready to do whatever it takes to help Tony. “Let’s go, shower time.”

Tony’s tired eyes dart between them. How can he refuse this? And on a more important note, how exactly has he gone about ensuring that these people care for him so deeply? “I don’t want to,” he says, understanding how painful this will be. “Please. I’m so tired.”

“You’re on your last painkiller,” Quill reminds him. “No better time to do this than now, and you’ll sleep better clean, anyway.” At Tony’s disinclined expression, he scoffs. “Tony, we all have the same hardware.”

“I know that,” Tony insists haughtily, and avoids everyone’s gaze.

Quill clears his throat. “I’ll get naked too, if you want.”

“God, no, that’s… just no,” Tony says, and huffs one final sigh. He would run his hand down his
face if it wasn’t littered with fractures. “Okay.”

“Okay…?” Quill wonders aloud. “Like ‘okay’ you *do* want me to get naked?”


“Of course, anytime,” Quill says, placing a hand on Tony’s back and helping him sit up. It’s agony. Tony grunts his way through it and dreads dealing with this pain. He’s covered in bruises and thick road rash. Introducing water of any temperature to his skin will be hell.

Oh well. He lives in it anyway.

With Quill on one side, and Peter on his other, he ‘walks’ to the latrine, or, more accurately, is walked there. It’s not so bad. The restroom is nice, and the shower is a huge step-in, big enough for three people, or hell, even six. He zones out for it. They undress him, get him beneath a warm, gentle spray, and Tony leans on Peter, stares at the floor in a state of detachment as Quill talks endlessly and washes him down with a cloth and some unscented anti-bacterial soap they found in there, a slow process he’s extremely careful about. And, aside from the occasional twinge of white suffering that doubles him over, flashes a loud blue through the small space, and gives them all pause, this is fine, Tony is okay with this. When exactly did he allow himself to become so close to these people that this is comfortable for him? Maybe it’s Quill’s casualness, or perhaps Peter’s enthusiasm to help that’s putting him at ease. For once, Tony truly feels that he’s not inconveniencing anyone. They actually *want* to help him, and they’ve made it very clear that this is how things are.

There’s still blood on Quill’s face and Peter looks exhausted. “You guys don’t have to do this,” Tony grumbles to them while Quill is toweling him off.

“It’s not about *having* to do anything,” Quill informs him, encouraging Tony to use his shoulder as an anchor to help himself step gingerly into a pair of boxers he’s holding out for him, “If you fall, the Guardians will pick you up, even if we have to use both hands to do it. I’m pretty sure I’ve told you that before.”

“Well, thank you,” Tony utters, feeling halfway human again, and enjoying his surprising lack of embarrassment.

“You’re worth it,” Peter tells him, “just remember that.”

Tony can only smile serenely at the floor. This would be so much more horrible right now if he didn’t have these two with him.

There’s a few spots that need bandaged, so he sits in a chair at a lean to take pressure off his ribs. The wounds Glaive gifted him in particular, *still* have not stopped bleeding, and he winces as Quill’s fingers brush the skin around the three cuts. “These might need stitches.”

“No,” Tony says immediately, flinching away. He’s done with this, with pain, with triage, and he can feel a total patience drought coming on. “Sorry, I’m not sitting through that. It’s not necessary, and I’m dog fucking tired.”

“Hey, that’s fair, bro,” Quill says, and settles for gauze instead of a needle. Bandages are wrapped around his ribs. Gauze is taped to a few deeper wounds on his arms, face and legs that are still oozing, and a silver square is reapplied to his thigh, because that wound is deep enough to hobble him.

“You guys are the best,” Tony says as they get him situated in a comfortable position on the bed, and
it feels inadequate, but he has no idea what else to say. His arm still aches, so he covers himself with scales and pins it strictly back to his chest. In a matter of hours, the ligament damage will be fully healed. Until then, pain is on the menu.

“Like Pete said, you’re worth it,” Quill says. The peters are beaming at him. Tony smiles back, truly thankful for these people. Maybe he is happy to be alive after all. The pain is rough, but this level of kindness and affection makes it all a little but more bearable.

But then, it’s shattered by a rapping of knuckles against the door. Tony hopes it’s Strange, looks to Peter for aid, and is discouraged to find a deeply furrowed brow.

“It’s Rogers,” he says darkly, and all of Tony’s saliva dries up.

“Fuck,” he says quietly.

“You want us to go?” Quill asks, but he doesn’t sound too enthusiastic about it.

“No, stay,” Tony sucks in a huge, steadying breath. “Aside from today, the last time I saw this guy, he nearly killed me.” And even though he knows Rogers will deliver devastating news, the revelations Strange provided will indeed act as an efficient cushion.

He was pissed off before, but Tony recognizes why Strange wanted him to wait. Now, surrounded by people who love him, Tony is prepared to receive this news.

Or, so he hopes.
Okay, before you do anything, please PLEASE head over to emkayohh's tumblr and appreciate the incredible fan-art she has posted for this fic. Within the last two weeks, this wonderful person has completed three whole pieces of fan-art for How to Repair a Broken Heart, and they're all absolutely outstanding.

The first includes a more accurate depiction of the second skin; http://emkayohh.tumblr.com/post/175932545505/long-time-no-htrabh-fan-art-i-have-to-say-that-i

It's beautiful. Please go check it out

The second is Peter with his terrible wound, which I LOVE, holy shit, http://emkayohh.tumblr.com/post/176009405110/so-i-decided-to-try-to-draw-peters-gnarly-burn

The detail on Peter's wound is so accurate that i feel like I'm standing next to him while he looks at himself in the mirror.

The third and final piece of art she's gifted me with includes Tony healing from having his teeth getting ripped out, and it's available here http://emkayohh.tumblr.com/post/176214833540/more-fan-art-for-how-to-repair-a-broken-heart-in

This girl is on fire, do you understand? Give her the props she deserves, PLEASE. She has been wonderful.

And by the way, if anyone want to do art for this, please let me know. I love it. I fucking adore the art that is coming out of this.

So, a few people have commented with their regrets about how tiny my kudos accumulation is, and I have to say, I believe it's my own fault. Though I consider 3k+ kudos to be remarkable for a gen fic with no identifiable 'ship', I understand entirely that I deserve more. And I don't get that recognition because I have a terrible fear of social media. I don't have an instagram, a tumblr, or even a damn facebook. I honestly rely on my fan's ability to advertise for me. So, if you feel like you want to do something to help me out, please just advertise this best you can on whatever social media platform you're involved in. I'm too nervous to. I'm sorry, I just have too many insecurities.

Anyway, this chapter contains my favorite Tony/Peter exchange I've ever written. I'm so excited to share it with you guys. Please, PLEASE let me know what you think. I love every single comment I receive.

When Steve enters his room, a copy of Tony’s, apparently, he sits in the single chair and stares at the floor. What has he done? Before spitting curses, an injured Tony had graced him with one of the nastiest looks he’s ever seen. A combination of a snarl, a sneer, a pointed, fiery hatred. Okay, maybe Tony doesn’t hate Steve, but he certainly looked like he could in that moment.

Tony doesn’t… he doesn’t hate Steve, right?

Steve would groan at himself if he possessed the willpower or the energy to do it. But… he’s got to
channel what little he has left into the upcoming conversation with Tony. Because Tony was right. Tony saw all this coming years ago, and Steve doesn’t have a single leg to stand on anymore.

They lost. As Tony told him they would.

“Then, we’ll do that together.” Steve doesn’t even finish the thought, so embarrassed by the memory that it stirs a physical pain in his chest. He was a different person then. It’s amazing what two years can do to mature a psyche.

And… Thanos sped over them like a muscle-bound bullet train once Vision foolishly made his presence known. Steve can understand why Vision did it, but… no. Steve shakes his head at the floor. He can’t be angry at anyone. Or, come to think of it, he can. He can be angry at himself and only himself. As a leader, he has failed hard if he doesn’t take full responsibility for this.

He looks at his hands. There’s blood on them, and it’s not his. He’ll need to wash it off before he goes to see Tony, but he doesn’t feel like moving at all, feels as though a big leaded blanket has been thrown over him. Before, in the staircase room, he had been transforming his despair into aggression to hide from it, but now he must admit, he’s an absolute wreck over the task he faces. Over what he’s caused. Steve doesn’t usually get nervous about things that logically should make him nervous, but here he is, watching his damn bloody hands tremble uncontrollably, because he can barely fathom what’s just happened.

And it’s been one of his flaws his whole life. He’s not nervous enough, possesses too much confidence, and now it’s transformed into arrogance… and due to it, people are dead. The guilt is… it’s painful. It has been ever since Tony was almost arrested and Steve finally found the courage to open that package, read that letter. Tony’s words had filleted him. But they also enlightened him, energized him, drove him to begin coming out of the shadows so he could start preparing. They were words that needed to be spoken to him two years ago, and yet… would Steve have listened had Tony been granted the opportunity?

With a sigh, he buries his face in his hands, ignoring the blood, since it’s everywhere already. How exactly is he going to present this news to Tony? It’s his responsibility to do it, and he knew so even without that kid’s choice words, but what a weighty responsibility it’s turning out to be. Steve has no idea how a reunion between him and Tony could have gone given different circumstances, but this might be the second worst one he could imagine. The first would have been if Tony never came back at all, and Steve never got a chance to try and make things right. And try he will, but…

Tony, he knows, is furious. Maybe there was a chance to mend their relationship before all this. Now, however, Steve has not only failed his own mission, but forced Tony to fail his as well. Steve would be a demon to whoever did that to him. If Tony never forgives him, he will understand.

And who is that man who claims to care more about Tony than Steve does? What all has Tony been doing for a month? Steve has so many questions, and he’s sure Tony does as well.

A coppery taste floods his mouth, and Steve grimaces, having re-opened a wound inside his cheek by chewing on it so violently. A trash can is nearby, so he pulls it over, spits a glob of red into it.

An hour has been allotted before Steve ventures out to locate Tony, and he wonders what new misery that man is experiencing right now. Tony has suffered egregious wounds at the hands of Thanos and his disgusting zealots, and Steve wants to be there for him, he really does, but somehow, he understands that his presence would only make things worse. Uncomfortable, even. Tony views him in a different light now. An unfavorable, flashing red one, a warning light. It’s so obvious, he can feel it like he can feel a pinch or a punch. Steve isn’t ignorant as to why, either. In a moment of cruel detachment, Steve left Tony completely destitute on the side of a Siberian mountain knowing
full well how much his former friend hates the cold. To this day, he wonders how Tony got home.

God, his actions two years ago were designed to help no one but himself. Steve should have signed the stupid papers. They all should have signed the stupid papers. Not having Tony around to help him plan for this invasion has been… eye-opening. He needs Tony, needs his smarts, his logic, his futuristic Ying to Steve’s outdated Yang. Tony Stark was the perfect counterbalance, always there with a smirk and a joke to ensure Steve didn’t take himself too seriously.

He shakes his head at the trashcan and feels dead inside. Steve doesn’t deserve Tony.

Paralysis overcomes him. A deep, tingling numbness aches in his heart. He’s injured, needs bandaging, probably stitches. But what’s the point? Why clean himself up, why take care of himself? He doesn’t deserve it, just like he doesn’t deserve Tony. Self-punishment is counter-productive, he’s been told, but it does alleviate the guilt a bit, and the guilt bites him harder than the physical pain ever could.

Hope and courage, Steve’s two most defining traits, are failing him. Though it’s great that Strange found them, Banner and Thor might not be enough. Thanos is a monster beyond Steve’s comprehension, and he’s faced Red-Skull and aliens and giant, killer robots and watched a synthetic being come to life right before his eyes. It’s been a wild ride, but Thanos…

“Every time someone tries to stop a war before it starts, people die,” he had told Tony in the most shameful abortion of foresight he could have committed. Perhaps he should have considered that even more people could die in the war Tony was trying to avoid. He’s been so damn stupid.

Minutes tick by at the speed of hours. His gut roils with intense anxiety that he hasn’t experienced since waking up from the ice. He sits for an entire hour and just thinks and worries and beats his mind into a gory pulp—until, finally, it’s time. Steve huffs a sigh and uses the last of his waning resolve to head to the latrine and wash the blood off his hands and face. Hoping that Tony is more prepared than he is, Steve exits his room, and waits a moment. He’s not sure what he expected to happen, but some kind of green-tinted ghostly, wispy version of Doctor Strange showing up right next to him wasn’t it.

“Sorry,” Strange says when Steve jumps at the sight of him, “my physical form is a tad busy at the moment. This is an astral projection of my spirit. And I’m guessing you’re ready to face Stark.”

“Face?” Steve inquires with a sideways glance, because that was a weird way to put it.

“Yes, face,” Strange says again, “he’s pissed off for a damn good reason. Tony Stark was right, and you know it.”

Steve glares at the floor. “Why did you wait so long?” he questions Strange.

There’s no need to elaborate. “Because I thought that maybe, just maybe there was a slim chance in the seven hells that your team would be put together enough to end this,” Strange says, and grimaces. “We both committed terrible miscalculations.”

Steve runs a hand down his face. The stress is enormous.

Strange… or, his ‘astral projection’, sighs heavily. “Look, just be tactful,” he advises. “Stark has been through a lot over the past month, or really, the past ten years. And you’ve contributed to it. Maybe it’s prudent to be aware of that.”

Steve doesn’t know how much further he can sink at this point. “I am. Intimately,” he says, defeated.
already.

Strange observes him with quizzical eyes. “Your ability to work with Stark is integral to Thanos’ defeat,” he says, and waves his hands around to produce orange sparks. The door behind Steve shifts weirdly, but he can’t identify a single physical difference from his own door when he turns to look at it. “Whatever you do, don’t piss him off and widen the rift further. Good luck. I’ll be back when you’re done.”

After a wink of green sparks, Strange is gone. And Steve has no idea what to do with such information, other than be as respectful as he can be.

Good God. The stress is unbelievable. He actually feels sick.

The door before him will open into a room that contains Tony, maybe the Spider-Kid, perhaps even that mysterious man Steve’s never heard of before who claims to care so much more about Tony than he does. It’s intimidating, and Steve isn’t intimidated by much.

But he must face this. Three deep breaths later, he’s knocking on Tony’s door with strict knuckles.

There’s a tense moment of silence, maybe ten seconds of it, before the man Steve doesn’t recognize is answering the door with a targeted expression of warning. Of threat.

“Come in,” he says stiffly, intentionally letting go of the door early, and Steve has to move through the doorway quickly to avoid it slamming in his face. He watches the man strut away with incredulity. Great, what a wonderful way to set the tone for this.

The inside of Tony’s room smells of blood, a familiar, heavy scent. Steve’s calculating eyes dart over everything.

The first person they locate is Tony, naturally. He’s laid on the bed, bandaged, clean, shrouded in a black and glowing flight-suit or, something. Steve wonders why he didn’t take it off to get washed up. Maybe he put it back on. Maybe Tony is unique in ways that Steve could never imagine, if the odd, dim blue glow he’s producing within the numerous injuries marring his face is any indication. Depthless brown eyes regard Steve with intense, guarded reserve. Steve notes the droplets of blood leading from the bed to the latrine and thinks on what all has occurred here. Tony isn’t going to be in a talking mood, that’s for sure.

That kid is in there too, the teenager. With a distrustful gaze, he watches Steve’s every move, and Steve has to wonder what all Tony has told him. Keeping that secret, that secret, from Tony was shameful, absolutely. Did Tony tell these people about it? Somehow, Steve doubts it. That’s not in Tony’s character, to bash Steve behind his back, he far prefers to do it straight to Steve’s face. And yet, the hostility he senses tells a different story. It’s incredibly confusing.

Tony is trying to sit up, and Steve is noticing black scales that shift with his movements, almost organically. Grunting, struggling to put an elbow beneath himself, Tony is suffering through incredible pain to just sit up.

“Tony, you don’t have to-“ Steve starts, but Tony’s scoff silences him.

“Just don’t, Rogers,” he forces out, and the kid is helping him now with gentle hands, pushing him slowly into an upright position, “I’ll be damned if we have this… this conversation while I’m bent into anything less than an eighty-degree angle.”
“Whatever makes you comfortable,” Steve says, noting how the stranger who let him in has moved to flank Tony, a persistent body guard, and now that Tony is sat up at a desirable angle, the kid has gone back to watching Steve’s every move. He doesn’t seem angry like the other person, but simply wary, defensive. Tony’s two new friends guard him unceasingly, and Steve recognizes why. Tony has requested these two stay with him, because Steve’s presence makes Tony uncomfortable. The realization is devastating.

With the Spider-Kid to the left of Tony, and the unnamed man at his right, Steve approaches with caution.

“Steve Rogers, Peter Parker, Spider-Man,” Tony introduces the kid first with a lazy gesture between them. He only has one working arm he can use. The other is pulled up against his chest, and those adaptive scales have linked together beneath it to keep it immobile. No longer contorted, it seems to have been set already. Good. That’s good. “Steve Rogers, Peter Quill, Starship captain and leader of the Guardians of the Galaxy. Yes, they’re both named Peter, and yes, it gets confusing.”

“It’s nice to meet you-” Steve tries just before Tony interrupts him.

“Look, Spangles, I am bone-deep exhausted,” Tony informs him in a voice that is hoarse and so unlike him, “I simply don’t possess the physical or mental strength required for the delicate conversation we both know needs to take place, so let’s keep this real simple; you’re here for one thing and one thing only, and that is to tell me which Avengers you’ve lost.”

Though Steve wants to mend things right here and now, he understands completely why Tony isn’t willing to subject himself to further stress. He’s been through enough already today. Discussion and forgiveness will need to occur later. Within feet of the man he’s dreaded talking to for years, Steve nods his concurrence, braces himself. The anxiety is staggering.

“Vision,” he says quietly locking eyes with Tony, whose expression doesn’t change, and it’s clear that he expected this. “Thanos grabbed Wanda and tossed her into a… a portal to space, I think it was. After he teleported your spacecraft back into the field, and she was able to get a hold on the gauntlet… it enraged Thanos. He attacked her. Vision managed a successful extraction, but…” Steve sighs, and wishes he would be offered a seat, even though he doesn’t deserve one. “He… he, uh… he killed Vision, got the Mind Stone.”

Tony swallows audibly, nods his acknowledgement, and the kid looks away with anger. “Next,” he demands.

Steve sighs. This is one of the hardest things he’s ever had to do. “Clint,” he discloses, and Tony’s eyes shut for a moment, reopening to reveal a noticeable shine. “He jumped in front of that- goblin’s weapon, and-,” Steve struggles for a moment, his voice cracking. He’d seen the entire thing, had held Clint as he bled and smiled a crimson smile up at Steve and told him to tell Laura he’s sorry. Wakandan healing tech wouldn’t touch the wound, even though Steve tried. He tried, dammit. “It was aimed at Natasha. Clint saved her, but… he didn’t make it…” The blood on Steve’s hands had been Clint’s. Barton died in Steve’s arms.

“Jesus, Rogers,” Tony breathes, looking away for a moment, collecting himself, before turning back to sneer at Steve. “Have you at least gotten ahold of Laura?” It’s asked with a note that tells Steve one thing; Tony already knows the answer.

Steve internally curses himself. “No,” he says ashamedly.

“You need to do that within the next twenty-four hours,” Tony instructs fiercely, and his patience is draining away, Steve knows, and dreads revealing the next name, has saved it for last out of pure
cowardice. “Let her know I’ll be giving her a call as well if she’ll accept it. Who else?”

“Tony…” Steve sighs, wrings his hands together, glances around for an escape, and he’s willing to beg at this point, has to say something to properly express how terrible he feels about all this. “Please, I- I just want to-“

“I don’t give a fuck what you want,” Tony all but snarls back. “The last name. Now.”

Steve hesitates for the entire agonizing length of a minute. “Rhodey,” he says, avoiding everyone’s gaze, feeling his stomach clench painfully when Tony inhales sharply, and Parker lets loose a rather harsh curse for his age. “Rhodey engaged Thanos directly while he was taking the mind Stone, deployed precision missiles thinking he could catch him off guard. He… I… I don’t know if you want the details-“

“Spit it out,” Tony growls, vibrating with barely restrained fury that Steve can literally feel crackling in the air. Seriously, he thinks maybe the energy in the room is actively stirring with the intensity of Tony’s rage. What all can Tony do after his enhancements? A small spark originating from Tony’s fingertips startles Steve. So that’s what he’s feeling, a shift in the electromagnetic field surrounding them, an impressive manipulation. Steve can feel the hairs on his arms rise up in response to it.

He clears his throat, and honestly, he’s close to tears. When he speaks, his voice cracks, and his eyes do not meet Tony’s. “Rhodey fell two-hundred feet,” he reveals, sniffing, containing the emotion with sturdy resolve, “Thanos did something to… to phase the War Machine armor into nothing, and… I’m, I’m sorry-“

Sparks are arcing off Tony more frequently now, and not just from his fingers. His respiration has deepened significantly. Steve watches as Tony closes his eyes, takes a deep breath that looks painful, and opens them again to display absolute rage and pain. Steve’s seen that face before, just one other time. “Get out,” Tony demands dangerously, and turns away.

Steve is almost in panic mode. This is awful. “Tony, please-“

“Rogers, I could electrocute you to death by thinking it, and I’m feeling the urge right now,” Tony says in a low, menacing tone. “You managed to get the only two people willing to help me with the Accords fucking killed. I’ll be honest, I’m going to need some time before I can even look at you normally. Now, get out.”

“I think you should do what he says,” Quill advises sternly, his hand hovering over the alien weapon at his hip. “Now.”

Parker is staring at the ground.

Steve cannot believe this is happening.

“Okay,” he says after a tight swallow, and holds up his hands as he backs away, “I’m leaving. I’m sorry.”

Not one further word is uttered towards Steve as he exits the room, and when he hears a sob that’s distinctly Tony’s before the door slides shut, Steve realizes that his path towards forgiveness is going to be a long, arduous one. And it’s one he’s willing to take. He deserved everything he just got. And if he’s honest, they were light on him.

Strange’s apparition appears next to him, and he doesn’t flinch this time. “You did well,” Strange tells him, and Steve huffs skeptically. “No, you did. The parameters set for you were inherently restrictive. Considering the circumstances, that went about as well as I could expect.”
Steve shakes his head. Not a single ounce of him wants to discuss what he’s just had to do. He says nothing, stares dejectedly at the floor, and waits for Strange to get the message.

After a moment, he apparently does. “Do you need any medical assistance?” Strange asks, swirling his hands around, and Steve can feel the shift in realities as his own private room appears behind him once more.

“No,” he says, and it’s only half a lie. Stitches are required for a few parts of him, but he’s already inconvenienced too many people. “Thank you.”

“Then get some rest,” Strange requests. “We meet in ten hours to discuss our options.”

Then he’s gone, and Steve is left there alone with unshed tears in his eyes.

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Tony never expected to have to deal with all this shit minus his Rhodey.

When Rogers leaves, Tony covers his face as much as he can with one hand, because this is it. Wit’s end has arrived, and he’s about to meltdown like an unstable reactor, he can feel it coming on as a persistent hum in the back of his mind. Hysterical sobbing followed by a full-blown anxiety attack is in the immediate forecast. As fucked up as it is, he could have coped with the third person being T’Challa, or Wanda or even Natasha… but he’s known Rhodey since college. That was his best friend, the first real friend he ever had who didn’t want his money or a ride in his car, and Strange’s ability to reverse Rhodey’s death rides on whether he survives this war or not. And so far, the odds are not at all in their favor.

Tony lets loose a sob because he just can’t hold this back anymore, not for Peter, not for anybody. Oh god, fear and despair threaten to consume him. Vision, Clint, Rhodey… they’re all dead. And their possession of the Time Stone is doing very little to make it better. Tony is still in so much pain, and now, this…

“I’m sorry, Tony,” Peter says next to him. Tony chances a hazy glance and finds Peter looking up at him. He’s pulled his chair over and crossed his arms on the bed right next to Tony’s hip, laying his head down in them, his bandaged side up. The kid’s amber eyes are distant, troubled, shining with pain and tears, but unwavering from Tony’s gaze. A hand seeks Tony’s arm, his good one, and he can’t feel Peter’s warmth through his scales, so he retracts them a bit. Peter’s hand is warm. Knowing that he doesn’t need to hide his pain from these people, Tony abandons the task of shielding his face against scrutiny and grabs Peter’s hand.

“Rhodey was my best friend,” he says amongst a whimper, and the pain reaches astronomical proportions for him, then. Not even Thanos’ massive hands are capable of hurting him this deeply.

Fuck. Son of a bitch. Tony must apply some mental Novocain to this, stat, or he won’t be able to operate at any capacity let alone maximum. That tweak to Extremis he’s been avoiding has never seemed more appealing… feeling is overrated anyway, right?

But then Peter squeezes his hand, and Tony decides that if he must experience a mountain of pain just to keep these little moments of comfort in his life, then it’s all been worth it. Besides, he would abuse it, anyway. A sure-fire way to numb pain? Tony would abuse it more than necessary.
So, he cries until his painkillers begin to wear off, and doing so becomes too much for his fucking powdered ribs to handle.

Quill sighs and fetches a box of tissues for him, and Tony only notices when it’s being placed down on his nightstand. The sight of them forces a misplaced, soppy chuckle out of him as he abandons Peter’s hand and grabs one, because once again, he’s wondering what this would be like for him if Peter and Quill weren’t here. Who would be in here with him? Nobody, probably. Maybe Pepper, but in a distant state that would just make things weird. He would snarl and refuse Steve or Natasha’s aid, and the time Strange was allowed around him would be significantly reduced. He’d still be a dirty, disgusting mess of a thing. Perhaps he’d be drunk. But no doubt, he would be alone.

After he’s done using his tissues, Tony snags Peter’s hand back up and holds on tight. Having these people here to witness his pain… it’s preferable to being alone.

Which reminds him, there’s still blood on Quill’s face. Rhodey, Clint, Vision… they may be gone, but Tony has people left to keep his shit together for. “You should go take care of yourself,” he says once he’s composed himself a bit, and Quill catches him looking, knows that the demand is aimed at him.

So, Quill observes himself in the mirror and shakes his head. “Dude clocked me good,” he says, messing with his light-brown, curly locks to see if he can’t find the source, his face scrunched into a permanent wince. Then he turns and smiles kindly at Tony and Peter. “Anything y’all need before I go?”

Tony glances down at Peter- and is shocked to find him dead asleep. Jesus, the poor kid…

“No, we’re okay,” he says as quietly as possible. Peter never did let go of Tony’s hand.

When he sees Peter’s passed out, Quill smiles sadly. “This is a lot for a kid to handle,” he says as he heads to the rack and puts on his coat. “I had a ten-year head start over him, but still… this stuff is hard. It still is.”

The respect Tony feels for both the Peters is unbelievable. His own very first encounter with aliens and space left him deeply traumatized.

“Thank you,” he tells Quill, “for patching me up.”

“You can thank me by getting some sleep,” Quill says, and leaves after a wink.

Peter doesn’t even flinch when the door closes, an action that would usually have him up and as alert as a morning glory without his earplugs in. He’s so damn tired that no reaction comes even as Tony’s disentangling his hand from Peter’s.

“Hey,” he says, gently touching Peter’s shoulder, a little wary, because last time Tony woke him up, it earned him a punch to the face. “Hey, buddy, come on. Peter…? Pete, wake up.” A little more sternly now, he pushes Peter’s shoulder, and the kid wakes with a shuddering gasp and a pair of darting, terrified eyes. He takes no swings, though. “Hi.” Tony smiles when Peter’s eyes lock with his. “You’re okay, you’re safe.”

“Shit,” he says, taking deep breaths to relax, wiping at his dazed eyes, “I’m sorry, Tony, I didn’t mean to fall asleep, that was a bad time-“

“I don’t want to hear another apology exit your mouth,” Tony says as Peter sits up and stretches, and boy, Tony wishes he could do that, that looks nice, but every movement is a brand new fiery hell,
and doing something like stretching might black him out with pain. Being injured truly makes one appreciate not being injured. “I woke you up so you could properly hit the sack.”

Peter nods, bites his lip, looks around to the door. “Okay,” he says, but he appears uncomfortable. Fearful, even, and he’s not getting up. He takes a deep breath, and Tony already knows what he’s about to ask.

“You can stay if you want,” Tony says in as neutral a voice as possible for him at the moment and will never reveal how much he prefers Peter does stay.

Peter smiles a little, but only with the right side of his face, looking relieved that he didn’t have to ask. There’s thick, dark circles around his eyes. He’s pale. Tony knows he’s probably starving.

“It’s okay,” Tony reassures him, nodding over to the unoccupied side of the bed that Strange had mashed back together. “Come lay down, alright? I get it, it’s fine.”

“I know,” Peter gets up and pulls out one of the dresser drawers, and Tony spots blankets inside it, a few of different thicknesses, sheets, spare pillows, pillowcases, and the drawer appears depthless. “I just… I don’t want to be alone right now, you know?”

Or, maybe Tony will tell him. Peter’s face is red as he brings a sheet over to Tony. “I don’t either,” he reveals, feeling as fragile as cracked glass, and the smallest of collisions could shatter him. “I need you here, Pete. I really do.”

He looks away, experiencing guilt, because here he goes, putting an extra burden on an already burdened seventeen-year-old kid, again.

“Well, I’m not going anywhere,” Peter tells him, throwing a sheet over Tony, and taking one of his own around to the other side of the bed. As before, he lays down facing Tony, and curls up under his sheet. “I’ll be… right… here…” It doesn’t take long at all before the kid’s eyelids droop shut and his breathing depresses rapidly. He’s out literally in seconds.

And good, Tony thinks to himself, glaring ruefully at the ceiling, ignoring the readout telling him how very depleted his painkillers are. He’s glad Peter is getting some rest, because the night that awaits Tony won’t be nearly as pleasant.

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Despite currently existing in another dimension, being back in New York has re-tuned Peter’s internal clock into something mystical thanks to his sixth sense. And using it so much in space has strengthened it significantly. So, he knows it’s almost 3am on the button when he awakens to Tony suffering beside him and attempting noticeably to keep it under wraps. Dense sleep hinders him, but Peter has enough wherewithal to instantly understand what’s happening.

“Hey,” he says groggily, clears his throat of gunk, and he can see every detail of Tony’s misery, even through the gloom. Tony’s gone and rolled onto his left side, apparently preferring the discomfit of laying on the cuts Corvus Glaive sliced into him, over that of putting pressure on his broken ribs. He’s been hiding his face away behind his arm, sans a pillow, and he looks up at Peter, eyes dull with enormous pain. He’s sweaty, panting raggedly, and Peter can tell he’s been crying. Aside from losing his best friend and enduring unspeakable pain, Tony doesn’t just cry.
Jesus Christ…

Peter reaches out to him, touches his shoulder. “You alright?”

“Yeah, s-sorry,” Tony mutters, wiping at his eyes. “I’m okay. Go back… to sleep. You… ugh… you need it.” He can barely get two words out before his next, pained, shallow puff of air. The broken ribs are causing him a great deal of torture. Peter wonders if Tony has gotten any sleep at all.

“How hurts, huh?” Peter asks rhetorically, eyeing those damned broken ribs shining a visible, dull blue beneath the black shirt he and Quill helped Tony slip into the night before. The second skin has been put away, maybe becoming too much effort for Tony to maintain, so the extent of his injuries is extremely apparent within the cerulean glow highlighting them. Tony said his ribs would heal in a week. Peter just hopes the whole week isn’t like this for him.

“Every… every damn breath is… a new hell,” Tony reveals, whimpering as he curls further into himself. His chest flashes brightly with the movement.

Peter rolls his eyes, yet his smile is extremely kind and sympathetic. “You’re the most dramatic person I know.”

“I wish I was being dramatic,” Tony forces out, holding his ribs, but gingerly, prodding at them with unease. Apparently, Tony’s arm is almost fully healed, as Peter’s just realized that Tony is comfortable laying on it now. Extremis must have already eaten away the ligament damage.

“Dammit, just kill me.”

“How about water instead?” Peter offers.

“Fuck your water,” Tony spits, and Peter doesn’t take it personally, never does anymore. Instead, he shimmies closer to Tony, and snags his left hand up, understanding that Tony wouldn’t be like this unless he was in some ungodly pain. Tony releases a stuttered whimper and a crushing grip is returned to rival Peter’s.

All Peter can do is sigh. “I’m here for you. Whatever you need, I’ll get it.”

There’s about five seconds where Tony seems incapable of speech, until he replies with; “I need you to- to go to sleep. You don’t… you don’t have to babysit me.”

Peter doesn’t elaborate on how difficult sleep can be when someone he loves is suffering loudly right beside him. “It’s not babysitting. Seriously. What can I get you?”

“A goddamn lobotomy,” Tony grinds out, “a short rope with a loop in it-“

“A noose?” Peter posits in an innocent voice.

“Whatever.” Tony groans just as blue flashes through the room. “Some fucking rat poison… at this point, a… a .45, anything that will take me out. Fuck.” He shudders and presses the back of Peter’s hand to his forehead. There’s sweat, but it doesn’t matter. Peter’s scrubbed Tony’s blood off his hands more times than he should ever have to. “A sledgehammer.”

“I honestly doubt any one of those things could kill you,” Peter points out.

Tony huffs and shakes his head with the irony of it. “How about all those things? All at once?”

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“Wouldn’t… wouldn’t hurt to try.”

“Uh, yes it would.” Peter sighs and rubs Tony’s arm with his free hand. “You don’t want to die, Tony.”

Tony scoffs. “Kind of do.”

“No, you don’t.” Peter smirks, shrugs when Tony re-emerges from the protective confines of his elbow to glare at him. Of course, Tony Stark despises being told how to feel, but Peter knows better, dammit. “Second chances, right?” There’s no lie that will convince Peter otherwise, especially since Tony admitted it already, under the influence of multiple concussions, and in what was probably a punch-drunk state. Tony basically revealed that he wants to live for Peter. He’s going to live out the second chance Howard Stark never got. Peter’s more than capable of combining two plus two and getting four.

It doesn’t need to be said directly. The way Tony’s eyes shine beneath the agony that’s turning them darker than usual tells Peter they’re on the exact same page. Then, they flick over the bandages Peter had completely forgotten about.

“How’s it feel?”

“It doesn’t,” Peter says, surprised the spell has lasted so long. “It’s great. Sorry he couldn’t figure you out.”

“Yeah,” Tony says drearily, resigned like he expected to have such terrible luck.

“Let me go get him,” Peter says, and Tony narrows his gaze at the suggestion. “Don’t look at me like that. Come on Tony, he’s got painkillers, just once won’t hurt—"

“That’s what I told myself when I started drinking again,” Tony clarifies, and Peter sighs deeply, because he knows there’s no argument available here. “It’s a slope, that warm, detached feeling, and it only goes down, and that’s exactly where I don’t want to be. Not to even mention, being what I am now… I mean, I could inadvertently, remotely launch nuclear weapons with my brain while in a blackout state. It’s just not worth the risk, Pete. I’d rather suffer like this forever than live with having hurt or killed someone using Extremis while fucked up. It would be like drunk-driving, but constantly. It’s irresponsible. And just once could send me spiraling all over again. I’ve got too much work to do to allow that to happen.”

Peter doesn’t want to say it aloud, but he wonders why Tony thinks he’s not strong enough to resist such urges. Perhaps Peter will never understand, having not been addicted to anything more than the occasional video game, and his ability to empathize only treads so far into the realm of imagination. The allure of those feelings must be incredibly powerful if someone like Tony is wary of experiencing even a smidgen of them for fear of falling again.

“That’s… really, really respectable, Tony,” Peter says sadly, and means it. “I just wish there was something I could do to help you.”

“You’re doing it,” Tony tells him, and Peter catches just the ghost of a thankful smile right as Tony squeezes his hand lightly, “you’re here. That’s all I need from you, alright? Don’t feel bad, I’ll be fine. As long as I have you, Pete, I’ll… I, uh…” Then he’s looking at Peter’s bandages again, clearly getting angry. Furious, even. “That purple bastard almost took you from me.”

“Yeah, well, he almost took you from me too,” Peter reminds him, but Tony is focused on Peter’s injury. Laser-focused.
“I couldn’t… I couldn’t do anything but beg and drop f-bombs,” he says, and scoffs with incredulity at himself. “Peter, I was a prisoner of war for three months, and yet, I can’t recall a single moment in my life where I’ve felt as helpless and fucking disgraceful as I did watching him do that to you. I would have done anything to make it stop.”

“Don’t blame yourself, Tony,” Peter says, knowing what comes next in Tony’s world. The Guilt. “Thanos is… he’s this force of nature, he really is. He’s like a tornado. A hurricane, or something. He blows in, and he takes and takes and takes…” Then Peter sniffs, because he’s just begun to remember what all Thanos has taken from him. “He took May. He took my friends, my city. He took Rhodey and Vision.” He sniffs, and he can feel it building in his chest, behind his eyes, in his throat. Everything Thanos has stolen is occurring to him in crystal-clear clarity. A sob escapes him. “I miss May, Tony. I- I miss my aunt. I wa-wasn’t even her b-blood relative and she took me in and treated me like a son, and continued to, even after Ben died, like-“ he wipes at his face, and Tony listens, tightens his grip on Peter’s hand impossibly further. “-that’s- that’s so rare. To have someone who cares that much. She threw everything she ha-had into making sure I was raised right.”

“May was a good person,” Tony says, and Peter understands this is difficult for him, doesn’t expect many words at all, and that’s totally okay. “And I know she loved you like her own. I always felt that.”

Peter is sobbing now, unable to contain it any longer. He’s been through absolute hell the past few days, shit, the past month, has had to soak up so much, and he’s a tired little sponge. “What am I gonna do?” he asks desperately, miserable and feeling lost and alone. “They… they don’t let seventeen-year-olds rent apartments, right? What’s going to happen to me?”

“I’ll adopt you,” Tony says like it’s the most obvious thing, and with a tone that suggests he’s a little hurt that Peter didn’t think of it himself, and Peter has to calculate for a second, his sobs stopping almost instantly. What the hell did Tony just say?

“What?” Peter asks, but he heard Tony. Heard every word.

“I said, I’ll adopt you.” Tony repeats, and Peter’s emotions are warring with each other. He’s upset over losing almost everyone, and yet, excited about being Tony Stark’s actual adoptive son. Why are things so damn weird all the time? “You know, given I’m not still considered a criminal.” Tony huffs sardonically and sneers at nothing in particular. “Fuck, if they still want blood after everything I’ve been through already, then I don’t know what other sadistic punishment could satisfy them. I… goddammit, I bled all over a stadium for this planet, I better get a fucking pass-“

“You want to adopt me?” Peter says in a tiny voice, his mind on a single track.

It’s clear by his confused expression that Tony never once considered it a big deal. “Well, yeah, it’s not like I’m going to hand you over to the foster care system, or CPS or whatever. Christ, do I look like a monster to you? And it can’t be that hard, right, parenting? Fathering. Dadding. What, I have to help you with homework, yeah? Never feed you after midnight, don’t expose you to bright lights or water-“

“Those are Gremlin rules,” Peter chuckles amongst his crying, and Tony smirks at him, even as he suffers intensely.

“Okay, I gotta take you on walks, then?”

“No, that’s a dog.”

“So, you use a litter box, or…?”
Peter wipes at his face as he laughs. “Cats use litter boxes, Tony. You’ve lived with me for a month now.”

“Oh, of course, I’m joking to lighten the mood,” Tony kisses the back of Peter’s hand, something Peter absolutely loves and will cherish forever.

“Listen, you don’t have to do this—” Peter starts, but Tony is silencing him with another deep scoff.

“It’s not a burden, so stop thinking that,” Tony says, and his face, though wrinkled with agony, is comforting. “In fact, it’s probably the easiest decision I’ve ever made. Despite the circumstances, I will be not only happy, but honored to adopt you… if that’s what you want, you can always say ‘no’, it’ll only hurt my feelings a little—”

“I’d never say ‘no’,” Peter reveals with a smile, which Tony returns whole-heartedly. “Thank you, Tony, it means so much.” It’s a lot off Peter’s chest, knowing he has a place to go after all this. If Tony survives, that is. “I do have one request, though.”

“Anything,” Tony says, and Peter thinks maybe he won’t be as enthusiastic here in a minute.

“Delete the slot in your coding language that blows you up,” Peter says sternly. It’s more of a test, in a way, and it kills two birds with one stone. Not only will such an act prove Tony’s devotion to being Peter’s guardian, but Peter will ensure that Tony is never able to sacrifice himself like that. They have Strange, the remaining Avengers, the Guardians, maybe Thor and Hulk, and another Infinity Stone on their side. There’s no reason to think that Tony will have to blow himself up to win this.

The request is difficult, Peter can tell. Tony grimaces, and it has nothing to do with the pain he’s in. “Peter—”

“Nope,” Peter says, shaking his head, unwilling to hear the argument he knows Tony intends to make, “fucking nope. I don’t want to argue. Those are my conditions, I won’t accept anything else. Do whatever calculations you want. The only way I’ll be cool is if you get rid of it. You did trick me into helping you do that to yourself.”

Tony searches Peter’s entire face for about ten seconds. Suddenly, his eyes flash blue, just for a moment, and then he sighs, smiles at Peter.

“Done.” He says.

Peter regards him skeptically. “It’s gone?”

“Yes,” Tony insists. “The socket is completely gone. No more lies. Ever. I’m serious about this, I want to be the best I can for you, alright? I hope this proves it.” Peter instantly deploys his sixth sense, but he can’t detect a single glimmer of deceit in Tony’s eyes. “Okay?” Tony asks, and kisses the back of Peter’s hand again. “Mind settled a little? Get some sleep—”

But that won’t be happening, for now at least. Warning thrums through him, not bad warning, just a heads-up that someone is right outside the door. He can sense the wispy flow of a beautiful red cloak, and Strange’s unique heart-rhythm beats quietly in his ears. “Strange is outside,” he informs Tony, sitting up at the edge of the bed and rubbing his eyes just as three harsh knocks rap at the door. “It’s about time.”

“Yeah? Come in.” Tony can only raise his voice a little, yet Strange is entering like he heard it anyway. Without a second to spare, he approaches Tony with swiftness and a determined
“I won’t bother you with pause or procedure, I understand the pain you’re in,” he says, lifting Tony’s shirt without seeking permission and placing his hands gently atop Tony’s right flank, on either side of the broken ribs that shine obviously through his skin. Peter can see that Extremis has begun pushing the pieces back together because they’re not as scattered as they were yesterday. Still, it’s horrifying to look at.

“It’s appreciated,” Tony grinds out, and Peter watches, and the fist in his chest is slowly unclenching with growing relief as Strange’s orange light delves unhindered into Tony’s chest. Finally, some reprieve for poor Tony.

“Expect severe pain for about two seconds,” Strange tells him. This time, his magic settles to rest beside Extremis instead of warring with it, and following a loud yelp of agony, Tony is relaxing out of a quivering tension he’d been holding himself in. The groan he releases is long and grateful.

“Oh wow,” Tony breathes, a small smile tugging at the corner of his lips. He gazes up at Strange gratefully. “Thank you.”

“Deep breath for me,” Strange instructs, and as Tony sucks in an enormous amount of air, the orange magic shifts, strictly immobilizing Tony’s shattered ribs. The nod strange gives it tells Peter he’s pleased with the results of his studying.

When Tony exhales, he chuckles with it. “Hard to appreciate how great breathing is until someone takes it from you,” he says, his words, far more stable than they were minutes before. Turning cautiously onto his back, Tony seems reassured, as doing so causes none of the typical groans or yelps or sobs. Cautious fingers poke at his ribs, and he smiles when the magic moves to adapt to it. “This is great.”

“Unfortunately, your other injuries pose more of a challenge,” Strange informs him, encouraging Tony to roll a little further onto his right so he can access the wounds on the other side. The bandages Quill applied held up pretty well against Tony’s nocturnal writhing, but Peter spots blood soaking through in some places all the same. “I can numb them and kick-start the healing process, but as of right now, my attempts to locate a spell that will heal them completely have been woefully unsuccessful. Doing it this way may take quite a while… and it will leave scars.” Gentle fingers peel medical tape from Tony’s side, lifting the bandage just enough so he can touch the wounds directly.

“I’ll figure it out,” Tony responds confidently. “I always figure it out.”

“Sure,” Strange says, with a raised eyebrow, clearly doubtful. Orange shoots through the cuts one by one, and Tony hisses, groans and bites his lip until it’s over and they’ve finally stopped bleeding. Strange rubs the medical tape back onto Tony’s skin, re-sealing the bandages. “One more. Let me see.”

“Have at it,” Tony says, rolling one last time, bending his knee to allow access to the wound in his right thigh. “Just… just hold on.” Tony grimaces and bites back a loud groan as he releases the silver cuff around his leg.

Strange scowls at what is exposed. “This is huge.”

“I know.” Tony sighs, and Peter’s relieved to hear how deep and bold it is. “You… you did see what happened to me, right?”

“I did,” Strange says, and Tony only allows a tiny wince in response to Strange’s prodding at his
thigh.

All Peter can do is watch and attempt to stay out of the way.

“Has he re-appeared?” Tony asks, scrunching his face up and groaning as Strange applies his magic to the last of Tony’s awful wounds. There’s no need to clarify who ‘he’ is.

“No,” Strange says, and shakes his head. He seems frustrated. “I’ve been searching. In this realm and many others.”

“Is there any way you could funnel some satellite access into this… dimension, or realm, or whatever we exist in currently?” Tony requests, and gasps with pure relief as Strange finishes up. There’s no need to apply a silver square any more. The bleeding has ceased, thankfully.

“I’ll see what I can do,” Strange says, even as Tony’s eyelids are drooping. “For now, relax. Get some sleep. As with your young friend, we’ll begin mending in the morning.”

“Sounds… good…” Tony says, and even though Peter can tell Tony wants to stay awake due to their circumstances, he’s so drained, he simply can’t. “Magic… magic ain’t so bad… thanks… Merlin.” The guy mumbles, before he’s out like a light. It breaks Peter’s heart, seeing how exhausted poor Tony was and how he had been in enough pain to keep him up through it. There’s a stranger in the room and Tony is asleep? Peter can’t imagine that level of exhaustion, not when Tony has a crippling anxiety disorder that would normally prevent this.

Strange exhales sharply at the sight, apparently partaking in the relief as well. Peter assumes that the thought of Tony writhing in pain has been eating at Strange for quite a while, and immediately likes the man even more than he already did. “Thank you,” Peter says drowsily to this fascinating wizard person. “He wasn’t doing so well. He needed that.”

“Of that fact, I was very aware,” Strange says, nodding and placing two fingers on Tony’s temple. Orange bursts from them and disappears instantly into Tony’s head. Peter wants to ask what that was, but Strange keeps going before he has the chance. “On a similar note, that spell numbing your burn will be wearing off soon. I should re-apply it.”

Tony is snoring softly. Peter smiles at him, and then at Strange. “Sure. Please,” he says, and Strange wastes no time, rounding the bed and snatching up Peter’s face as he did before. This time, there’s no pain. “You have some really cool powers, sir.”

“Thanks,” Strange says awkwardly. It’s obvious he’s not a people person. Perhaps there’s a thick outer-shell to crack, just like with Tony.

“How did you get them?” Peter wonders, supremely curious. “Because I was bitten by a spider, so-“

“Years of study and practice,” Strange reveals as he turns towards the door. “We can exchange origin stories some other time, I think. It’s almost four in the morning and sleep is a precious resource we won’t always have access to in the coming days. I suggest you get some while you can.”

“I will,” Peter promises, then smiles. “Doctor’s orders.”

“Do you need anything else?” Strange asks, and Peter sucks his lip in thought, considering Tony’s completely oblivious form for a moment, before shaking his head.

“No, I think we’re okay, thanks,” he says.

“You can always come find me, if you need me,” Strange says, and after a bright orange blink, and
without even using the door, the magic man is gone.

Peter sighs with relief. Even though everything is awful, the fact that Tony is finally able to rest is enough to comfort him just a bit. Peter has lost more than most kids his age in the last few days, and yet, witnessing someone else, someone Peter loves to death, find relief from terrible pain is incredibly therapeutic. There’s not much to be thankful for in his world, but Tony finally being able to sleep is wonderful.

He lays down facing Tony, his new adoptive father, and seeks his hand. Tony doesn’t respond at all, his fingers remaining slack within the grip, and Peter thinks that Strange might have applied a bit of magic to help Tony sleep.

“I love you, Tony,” Peter whispers, feeling exhaustion drag him away, to the realm of unconsciousness, and Tony offers no response. “I… I can’t wait to be your son for real.”

Then a thought occurs to Peter; is Tony going to allow him to help?

As Peter Parker’s eyelids droop, he wonders what his new guardian’s judgment will entail. May would have never allowed him to help with Thanos, but Tony has already said that if it was up to him, Peter would be permitted to participate. Will he hold the same convictions now that Peter’s fate rests directly in Tony’s hands?

He lays awake and watches Tony’s peaceful form. Tony must let him help. Peter will be unable to accept anything else.
Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

Once again, everyone stop and look at this; https://www.deviantart.com/brokeneisenglas/art/Let-Go-Worm-760550337?ga_submit_new=10%3A1534903734

This is a beautiful piece depicting Tony dangling from the goalpost Corvus Glaive hung him from. Please go look at it. I absolutely adore it.

And, as always, check out emkayohh's tumblr for some more incredible art involving this fic. Links for her are included in chapter 29.

Oh, and, hey, to everyone who commented on chapter 29, thank you so, so much. I need to go to bed, but I'll be answering comments in the morning. Something absolutely fucking crazy is going on in my life right now, and I haven't had much time for fandom, so I figured you all would appreciate it more if I spent time sculpting Chapter 30. Also, I have a piss-poor memory. If I forgot to mention you in this, or you feel unappreciated, please let me know. I lost a user subscription the other day, and it made me so unreasonably sad. At one point someone liked all of my stuff, but now they don't? At what point did they decide they're done with me? Am I just being too sensitive again? Ugh.

Whatever. Here's ten-thousand+ words. Please, tell me what you think.

At 08:24, Tony reboots.

That’s what it takes to wake up any more. A soft hum of programming, a sweep of blue across his steadily returning vision. He blinks as numbers and data flash before his eyes. It’s a tad different from waking up normally, but not much, just faster. Memories are presented to him in numeric value, and, overcome by his most favorite tic, he uses his tongue to count his teeth, just to make absolutely sure they’re all there.

Everything hits him at once, as thousands of lines of code. Rhodey is dead. Clint is dead. Vision is dead. The Avengers have been corralled into two different wizard sanctuaries. Thanos is on the run and possibly watching them. Thor and Hulk are in another dimension. Steve Rogers is just… around, which is generally unpleasant. Tony is injured and non-ambulatory. New York City? Gone. There’s an absolute metric ton of work to do. And then there’s this orphaned kid-

The Kid.

Suddenly, Tony realizes how numb his left arm is. Moving it is impossible, and he’s pretty sure all the damage from the dislocations has been reversed, so that shouldn’t happen, what the hell-

When he looks over to his left, he discovers Peter laying on it, drooling on it even, dead to the world. Sometime during the night, Peter had pulled Tony’s arm around himself and flipped over onto his
injured side. He’s got his head resting on Tony’s bicep, and his forearm is caught in a grip that cements him in place, because Peter is so damn strong. Peaceful, is how Tony would describe him. He’s clearly comfortable, having scooted up right next to Tony, pressing himself into his side. It’s obvious then that Peter draws incredible comfort from Tony. And that’s wonderful.

Tony smiles giddily at the ceiling. Things might be horrible right now, but he has this still. He has Peter, and all the love he’s capable of. And maybe, just maybe, Tony is about to be his adoptive father. He’s going to have a son, and here, he truly believed that to be impossible for him at this point. Too old, too many responsibilities, no love life. Tony Stark could never settle, not with things like Thanos out there. Now though, even if they can bring May back, Tony desperately wants the chance to be a consistent, positive male role model in Peter’s life. If May will allow it, he’ll still sign papers, co-parent or whatever it is. Tony usually hates paperwork, but he can’t wait to get started on adopting Peter. It’ll symbolize a return to normalcy, and he’ll do anything required of him with a damn proud smile on his face, a real one.

Peter had been shocked to hear about Tony’s adoption plans. Ecstatic even. Tony played it off as no big deal to diminish any concern associated with being a burden, but Tony is so excited to begin a normal life with his newly adopted son. He grasps onto it, clutches it close to his heart as something extremely precious in a fucking evil and often painful world. It’s like armor for his soul. It makes everything, the pain, the fear, the uncertainty, completely worth it.

He hugs the kid a little closer to him, and Peter emits a tiny noise and squeezes Tony’s arm impossibly tighter. The grip is bound to become painful soon, but he doesn’t care, wants this moment to last forever. Unfortunately, there’s so much to deal with.

Jesus, the world is burning down, and he’s here thinking about Peter being his kid.

Tony sighs, and the sorrow rears up, a deadly shadow prepared to consume him completely, to swallow him into its sucking void. This solid rock exists right next to him, an anchor to remind him what’s at stake should he give into the despair, and still, everything is so heavy. The checklist of things he needs to address reaches all the way to the moon. Even now, as he battles against overwhelming emotional desolation, he’s constructing it; The List. Shit that Tony must do to make sure they win this.

There’s no time to stop and rest. Action must be taken immediately against the direct threat that is Thanos, and he’s distressed to find that Strange hasn’t yet discovered how to gain satellite access in this realm. Maybe there are no satellites. Maybe things are even worse than they seem.

Who knows where his seven armors are, the ones he left behind during his unexpected expulsion from Earth, but he’s going to need something. One spare Iron Man suit exists in the Malibu bunker. Tony would never leave himself completely without one, his futurist instincts being as strong as they are. Even when faced with what was almost certain death, Tony had prepared to deal with living through the impossible. The Mark XLVII is there, the unfinished armor he always flew in to convince Ross that he only had a couple, when he really possessed twelve of them. It’s the prototype those ten suits were based off of. To be fair, it isn’t really that unfinished. He applied the appropriate upgrades so it could interface with Extremis before he left Earth, but the paint job is a little shoddy compared to what he usually produces, and the weapons system is a tad outdated, and it’s much slower. But it's something more than just his under armor and squishy human flesh.

He needs access to it, must be able to enter those satellites so he can channel Extremis through them and retrieve his damn armor. Plans are in motion to develop a vibranium-based suit, because he doubts Wakanda will bogart it from him any longer, but in the meantime, he needs to aid in Thor and Bruce’s rescue. He will absolutely require armor for that, at the very least. And a repaired spacecraft.
There’s so much to do. Hope is a fickle, fleeting thing, and it wants to abandon Tony so, so badly.

But he must remember the advantages they have. Currently, they possess two Infinity Stones. And that’s not all. Badassium seems to counter them, and Tony has the secrets to it. Not to even mention the Eternium he harvested, sitting safely aboard the Milano. It will take millions of years of heat and pressure to forge a synthetic Infinity Stone from it, but now that he’s met Strange, knows that he has the Time Stone, the prospect isn’t so farfetched anymore. Literally, he plans to fight fire with fire. Thanos has probably never encountered ten other people with Infinity-level abilities.

It’s the only way to win.

Already, Tony is determining who would be most efficient at wielding synthetic Space Stones. Strange, for sure. Strange has more experience manipulating an Infinity Stone than all the rest of them combined. Perhaps Steve would benefit from one. Wanda, too. That woman is capable of things unimaginable, Tony knows. God, he needs Rogers to deliver a full roster to him so he can distinguish who he has to work with. There’s no knowing who exactly Steve was able to group together before all this.

The pain spell is wearing off. Beneath his shirt, his ribs flash a warning, and Tony stiffens against the sharp agony, clenches his teeth and watches Peter in his peripheral, not wanting to wake him up, not just yet. Tony lifts the hem of his shirt up and finds more blue light than orange now. Honestly, he’s extremely impressed with how long it lasted and how effective it was. For five hours it completely numbed the misery of four broken ribs. Best magic trick he’s ever seen.

That Strange guy… what an asset. Portals, medical know-how, injury manipulation, telekinesis, telepathy, some kind of summoning ability, and lord knows what else; Strange is everything they’ve needed all this time. And he said he has a colleague. They might have not one, but two powerful magic slingers on their side.

Things could be better, but they could be worse, he supposes. He could still be on that field getting the shit beat out of him in front of a live audience. He could be dead, and for the first time in a long time, he has a reason to not want to be. Peter could have been killed instead of merely maimed.

Speak of the devil; Peter stirs, so Tony takes the opportunity to rouse him now, before he falls too deeply back into dreamland and Tony is struck in the face by the strongest teenager on the planet again. Considering what they went through the day before, Peter is surely on edge. “Hey, Pete,” he says, squeezing the kid.

“Mmm,” he utters a soft, comfortable sound, shifts around languidly, hugs Tony’s arm closer, and Tony smiles, shakes his head, a deep warmth swelling in his chest. Then, big, brown eyes are flying open, and Peter is scrambling away from Tony, his face red with embarrassment.

“Oh my God, I am so sorry, I must have- have grabbed it in my sleep or something,” he says in a rush of words, sitting on the edge of the bed, but Tony just chuckles, amused.

“It’s fine,” Tony assures him, and after a pause, says; “It’s great. I love it.”

Peter turns his gaze to Tony, looks all over his face, seems to think on his words for a moment, their simplicity, and how they contain so much more than what’s immediately apparent. Then, he nods and smiles at Tony, his embarrassment nullified.

And the kid’s stomach roars.

They both look at it, and Tony snorts his laugh, ignores the pain it causes him. “Bear smuggling is
illegal, Peter.”

“Ohh…” Peter moans, wrapping his arms around his midriff and leaning forward into it. “I’m so hungry, I’m almost too hungry. I’m… I’m un-hungry.”

“That’s the best description of that phenomenon I’ve ever heard,” Tony says. He’s in similar condition, but luckily without the organic moaning and groaning. Neither of them have eaten anything in days, and Extremis is sapped, sucked almost completely dry by the day’s harrowing events. “You need to take care of yourself. Shower, eat, change those bandages—"

Tony notices Peter bristle, and then there’s a knock at the door.

“Strange?” Tony asks hopefully and receives a nod. Thank god. He really doesn’t want to deal with Rogers or Romanoff right now.

“Come in,” Peter says, and Strange does. He appears tired.

“Long night?” Tony asks, and Strange sighs even as he chuckles. Tony wonders if those are the same blue robes from yesterday, or if he has duplicates.

“My headaches have multiplied considerably over the past twelve hours,” he admits, walking over, and Tony knows what he’s here for, turns onto his left and lifts his shirt without prompting. Strange’s hands may shake, but they’re warm and soft and gentle as he lays them against Tony’s side. Orange light plunges into his chest, and almost immediately, Strange’s eyebrows shoot up in surprise. “Wow.”

“Right?” Tony says, grinning. He gets why Strange is geeking out. Extremis has already done a remarkable amount of mending, and no doubt, Strange can see it.

“I can heal these in a little over two hours,” Strange says, his focus narrowed down into laser-precision. “How long would it take without my intervention, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Seven days altogether,” Tony reveals, and Strange whistles his appreciation. “Two hours, you say? Cake. Let’s do it, then.”

“There’s a meeting, though,” Peter reminds them. “Right? You said there would be.”

“I’ve postponed it,” Strange says with a regretful grimace, “I didn’t expect Mr. Stark’s biology to be so… belligerent.”

“And why would you make such a silly assumption?” Tony asks, and Strange shoots him a weary look. “My everything is belligerent.”

“I can’t argue with that,” Strange says, then removes his hands from Tony’s side and looks to Peter. “How’s your burn feel?”

“Good, for now,” Peter says, and his stomach rumbles again. Strange takes notice.

“There’s breakfast in the lounge,” Strange tells him. “I have full faith you’ll be able to find it on your own.”

“You don’t need help with anything?” Peter wonders, always considerate of others before himself. Tony loves this kid more than he’s ever loved anything.

“I think not,” Strange says, looking to Tony, who shrugs, because he doesn’t know what the fuck
Strange intends to do. After last night though, how he practically mowed down the damn door just to get to Tony and alleviate his pain, Tony trusts him, knows he’s a good person.

“Get something to eat, kid,” Tony instructs, “I’m good.”

Peter checks once more, and Tony can tell that he respects Strange to a certain degree. Trusts him. Peter and Tony have little reason to trust anyone, but luckily, Peter is a bad person barometer. So, if his sixth sense isn’t thrumming warning about this guy, then what does Tony have to fear?

“I’ll be back,” the kid promises.

“Allright, Arnold,” Tony mocks, and smirks as Peter rolls his eyes and exits the room. It quickly turns into a worried frown. “You said yesterday that this would be painful.” He isn’t looking at Strange, choosing instead to stare at the curtained window.

“I don’t lie,” Strange informs him. Reluctant Brown eyes meet a pair of stunning, sharp, empathetic blue ones. “We can split this up into intervals, if you want.” It’s said as he’s pulling up a chair, perhaps anticipating an extended stay, because Tony is stubborn as hell.

“No, let’s get it over with,” Tony requests, “I have shit to do. Lots of it. I can’t be laid up like this, it’s goddamn pathetic.”

“You may change your mind,” Strange warns him with a dire note, “I haven’t discovered a way to make this less painful yet. Unfortunately, the universe considers my methods… well, a form of cheating. And it must extract a toll. Pain is that toll.”

“I’d expect nothing less than excruciating agony,” Tony says unironically. “I’ve been in one form of pain or another since 2008. Why would this be any different?”

Strange sighs. “Do you want something to bite?”

Tony shrugs and looks away again, feeling weak. “Maybe.”

“Don’t be ashamed.” Strange waves his hand, and a smooth, flattened, splinter-free piece of wood appears in his hand. “This okay?” he asks, handing it to Tony, who is starting to hate this already. Strange is giving him something to freaking bite on. Cleary, what he’s about to endure is something otherworldly, like everything else about Strange.

“I guess.” Tony is nervous. Tony selfishly wishes Peter had stayed. “How bad is this going to be? Seriously.”

Strange places his hands gently over the broken ribs. So, he pulls up Peter’s picture, the same one he used as motivation while he was being tossed all over a football field. “If you tell me to stop, I will, alright?”

“Not going to happen, Patch Adams,” Tony says, squeezing the bit he was given and hoping this won’t be so terrible that he actually has to use it. Peter’s picture grins at him, reminds him why all this suffering is worth it. “Let’s do it.”
“Take a deep breath,” Strange instructs, and Tony obeys, sucking in one huge breath, and that’s when the misery starts, even before he can let it out. Suddenly, his torso is on fire, or so it feels, as Strange warned him it would, and he shouts before he can bite it back, in shock at the intensity of the pain. The orange light that was so soothing before… it’s turned infernal. It burns, it rages, it bucks around in his chest and every instinct tells him to get away from the agony, but he’s stubborn and remains steadfast, grasping at the comforter in a grip so savage he’s in danger of shredding it. Extremis is upset, disapproving of Strange’s healing accelerant, and that’s an extra nuisance Tony must deal with, reining in Extremis. Dammit, this couldn’t just be easy, could it?

Not even three minutes into it, Tony is sticking the smooth piece of wood in his mouth and biting down as hard as possible. It helps a little, provides a distraction, but not much. Tears prick at his eyes, and eventually, spill freely.

“Breathe, Stark,” Strange reminds him, and Tony vocally gasps for a raspy, desperately needed breath through his nose and around the bit. “Good. You’re doing great.” How long has he been holding it?

Tony settles into a strict breathing rhythm. He must if he wishes to last through this.

Strange is burning him alive from the inside, or so it feels, and Tony groans, moans, screams, and experiences no shame in doing so. Eventually, he sneaks a peek up at the Doctor, through eyes shuttered by immense pain, and finds someone regretful, yet focused intensely on his task. There’s no pleasure derived from this. Usually people, and things, love causing Tony suffering. Not this time. This is different.

Even so, this sucks. Ten minutes turtle by, and Tony is wondering how long he’ll be able to handle such intense pain. And he’s so glad Peter isn’t here to witness it.

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Peter’s not a fan of leaving Tony alone to deal with whatever awaits him, but he needs to eat, and Tony assured him that he would be okay. Still, despite the knowledge that Tony is a full grown adult man, Peter feels guilty as he follows a couple of familiar heartbeats that he assumes are emanating from the lounge Strange mentioned. And the aroma… he sniffs deeply and smiles. Breakfast has been served. It calls to him. It lures him. He can smell eggs, bacon, toast, maybe waffles, grits and oatmeal, fruit, cereal. Peter is so damn hungry. His stride is brisk and long.

He seeks it like a starving blood hound. Like it’s a siren’s call. The guilt can get bent.

After a brief moment of winding through ancient hallways, he locates the doors to the lounge, and pushes one open, flinching slightly at the way it squeals and announces his arrival. Inside, there are multiple dining areas, tables sporting maroon table cloths, dozens of chairs, and a long buffet set up against the wall to his left. The ceiling is high, ‘cathedral ceilings’, Peter thinks is the proper term, and he gazes up at them for just a moment, amazed.

But he can’t appreciate the surroundings for long. Rogers and Romanoff are in there, eating breakfast together quietly. They look up as Peter enters, and he doesn’t know how to address their reluctant gazes, so he waves at them awkwardly. Rogers nods, and Romanoff waves back, both totally stoic. Luckily, Quill is happily loading his disposable plate with food, and he grins when he notices Peter. “There he is. Grab a plate! We’ll eat together.”
“Hey, Quill,” Peter says, his lips creeping into a small smile as he snags a tray, the first item presented to him at the very beginning of the buffet. Immediately, another one appears from nowhere to replace the one he took. The same goes for the plate and silverware, the cup he fills with orange juice; replacements appear without prompting. Peter huffs a chuckle. “God, we really are at Hogwarts, aren’t we?” This is so nice. Finally, a reprieve.

“No idea what a warthog has to do with it, but this is pretty cool, huh?” Quill wants to know, as he places a couple of hard boiled eggs on his plate. “Who knew wizards could be such great hosts? I mean, dude, look at this.” Quill gestures to a Belgian waffle maker, puts his already loaded plate down in front of it, and proceeds to make one. Batter is extracted from a machine into a Dixie cup, and Quill is a giddy child as he closes the waffle maker and flips it over with a flick of his wrist. “Fresh freaking Belgian waffles! I’ve missed Earth food so much.”

“Me too,” Peter admits, loading a bit of everything onto his plate, and maybe he can eat it all, maybe he can’t, it doesn’t really matter. Bacon, scrambled eggs, boiled eggs, hash browns, toast with butter and grape jelly, oatmeal accented with brown sugar, biscuits and sausage gravy, he wants it all. Quill’s waffle is finishing up, just as Peter is starting his own on the other waffle iron.

“I’ve brought you some fresh clothes from Tony’s ship,” Quill says, and Peter groans his appreciation as Quill shows him the outfit contained securely within the satchel he always bears.

“Oh, god, thank you,” Peter says with a smile

“How’s Tony?” Quill wants to know as he transfers his waffle from the iron and onto a new plate. It’s a solemn question, lacking the enthusiasm he expressed over the buffet. He wants to know but doesn’t at the same time.

And now, Peter feels the guilt. He knows Tony is suffering, and here he is, making himself breakfast. Ugh. “Strange is working on him now,” Peter reveals. “I was basically kicked out.”

“How long will that take?” Quill asks, grabbing packets of butter and jelly.

“Two hours, I think he said,” Peter informs him. He chances a quick glance over his shoulder as his waffle cooks. “Should we sit with them?” he whispers to Quill, who raises an eyebrow.

“Well, yeah,” he murmurs back. “Not sitting with them would be a little salty, don’t you think? We can’t stay angry at them forever, we still have to work with these people. This isn’t school.”

“Right,” Peter says, but he doesn’t look forward to it, has seen with his own two eyes exactly what Rogers did to Tony.

Quill smiles, winks at him as he takes his fully loaded tray and breaks the ice. “Anybody sitting here?” he asks Romanoff and Rogers.

Peter doesn’t watch, he’s too busy preparing his breakfast, but he does hear Romanoff kindly accept Quill’s presence.

Quill settles in a seat with a sigh. “So. I’ve met you already, but I’m spacing on your name right now.”

“It’s Natasha,” she says, and after wiping her hands on a napkin in her lap, reaches out and takes Quill’s for a smooth shake.

“Peter Quill,” Quill tells her, “though lately it’s been just ‘Quill’, ‘cause that kid stole my name, so…” he pokes a thumb over his shoulder at Peter, who’s just now approaching the table. “Or, you
could always call me Star-Lord. Legendary outlaw. Expert starship captain.”

“You’re human?” Rogers asks, and Quill nods even as he’s buttering toast.

“Sure am… or I think. I’m at least half human. I was from Earth, I know that,” Quill says. Peter sits, and quick eyes scan the table. Rogers has barely touched his food. A fork loaded with eggs sits on the edge of his plate, and his cheek rests against a closed fist. “Missouri, to be exact.”

“Why are you not from Earth anymore?” Romanoff asks, flicking sugar from a paper packet into her cup of coffee.

“A bunch of space pirates abducted me when I was eight. This is my first time back on Earth in almost thirty years,” Quill says, absolutely tearing into his food. Peter admires the man’s resilience. No matter what, Quill just moves on. “I was a little guy, could fit into tight spaces, was good for thievin’.” Peter’s heard that line before.

“Sounds like you’ve had a rough life,” Rogers observes, sitting up a little taller. His eyes are very sad. Peter looks him over, and he can feel the man’s sorrow, can sense it in the way his shoulders are slumped.

“I guess,” Quill shrugs, then smiles at them. “Wouldn’t know. It’s the only life I’ve had.”

Rogers’ lips quirk up a little at this, and Romanoff raises her eyebrows in surprise.

“Have either of you been to see Tony?” Rogers asks, and it’s almost forced, as though he dreads hearing about it, just as Quill had.

Peter swallows a bite of waffle quickly. “Strange is performing magical surgery on him right now.”

“His injuries?” Widow inquires, and Peter sighs as he considers them.

“Most of the minor ones are healed, bruises, fractures, abrasions. His arm is good. He still has four broken ribs, some crippling lacerations on his left side, and one really deep one in his right thigh. I know he had a punctured lung at one point, no idea what the status of that is, but he seems to be breathing a little better.”

“That’s amazing,” Natasha points out, looking to Rogers with concern in her narrowed gaze.

“How can he do that?” Rogers asks, and there’s a moment where Peter wonders how much he should disclose to them. But it’s just like Quill said; they have to work with these people.

“Extremis,” Peter says simply, and Rogers and Natasha exchange a knowing glance.

“He would,” Rogers says, shaking his head. There’s some guilt there, now, poking out from behind the curtain of sorrow.

Peter really wants to say something about how that would be the obvious route to take after all of Tony’s friends fucked off to be criminals, but he doesn’t mean to stir the pot right now. “If you want to know anything more about it, you’ll have to ask him yourself,” Peter says, and stuffs his mouth full of biscuits and gravy.

“Of course,” Romanoff says, taking a sip of steaming coffee, observing Peter over the brim of the cup with intense green eyes.

Quill clears his throat. “I’ve been working on repairing Tony’s ship,” he says, slurping at a quick
swig of orange juice. “I might need some muscle, and you look the part, Schwarzenegger.” He pokes his fork at Steve, who smiles and nods like he’s used to such references. His eyes, though… they retain that desolate sadness.

“Anything I can do to help,” Rogers offers sincerely.

“Same,” Romanoff chimes in. “All I need are blueprints.”

“Oh, I’ve got those,” Quill says, takes a bite of waffle and moans in ecstasy. “God, it’s been so long since I’ve had a damn waffle.”

Breakfast proceeds. Peter eats and listens intently as Rogers and Romanoff pick Quill’s brain, asking him questions about Thanos, the Black Order, the Guardians, and Quill answers them all willingly. Soon, Peter notices Rogers gazing at him, considering him, just before looking away at whoever is speaking. At the end of it, after dishes have been returned, fresh clothes have been transferred, and Quill and Romanoff are headed off in the direction of Tony’s ship, Rogers stops Peter with a hand on his shoulder.

Peter halts, and Rogers makes an obvious effort to ensure the others are out of earshot, before he asks his question. “Can I talk to you?”

Peter shrugs, and Rogers takes his hand off his shoulder. “I guess.”

“You and Tony seem… close,” he says, and Peter doesn’t deny it, just waits for more. “I was wondering if you couldn’t offer me some advice.”

“Advice?” Peter repeats skeptically.

Rogers sighs and looks away. Seeing cap like this, desperate, needing advice… it’s weird. “I don’t know what he’s told you,” he admits.

“Nothing,” Peter says truthfully. Tony has never divulged exactly what happened in Siberia, but Peter has seen enough of it to know it was awful. “I know you two had a… violent disagreement in Siberia. But he’s never talked about it.”

Rogers appears simultaneously confused and ashamed. “Then how do you know about it?”

Peter hesitates. “He has nightmares. Bad ones. I’ve heard them.”

The information seems to break Rogers’ heart, the way he slumps and looks away. “I want to make things up to him. It’s… it’s extremely important to me. And I don’t know where to start.”

Peter considers every inch of Steve before he begins. “You have to make an active effort to approach him,” he begins, choosing his words carefully so he doesn’t reveal too much. “Like, you have to force yourself into his comfort zone. And when he shits all over you, which he will do, harshly, the only way to earn his respect is to deal with it. Play along with it, even. Tony can be an asshole, but he’s like that because he’s…” Peter stops, searches for the right words, cracks his knuckles because he has nothing else to do with his fidgeting hands. “Look, he has layers. He’s sensitive. And he’s super fucking intelligent, which can be inconvenient for him. These two characteristics of his combine and it makes him experience stuff on a deeper level than most people.”

“What do you mean?” Rogers asks, and Peter consults the air as he chews his lip.

“I guess… I guess that means after everyone has already moved on from something horrible, Tony’s mind keeps going over it. Dissecting it, breaking it all the way down into atoms so he can try to
figure out how to keep it from happening again. Meaning he obsesses over his own trauma because he feels like he has to.”

Steve is watching intently, clinging to every word Peter says. Good. This is good. This is how a person who gives a shit takes steps to fix something important to them. Respect for Rogers is swelling once more. It’s clear he’s very serious about this.

“Tony can’t just get over things, Cap,” Peter reveals. “It’ll take more than an apology to fix this. By all means, apologize if you need to, but just remember, as you’re sitting there apologizing, or explaining yourself, or whatever, Tony is actively constructing an algorithm using all the information he has about you, and that algorithm is giving him three-hundred reasons not to trust you.”

Rogers nods. “How…” he swallows, wrings his hands together. “How would you approach this? If you were me, I mean.”

Peter shrugs. “Just talk to him,” he says, like it’s obvious. “And don’t get scared off. Because Tony’s pissed. He’s going to yell, and he’s going to curse, and he’s going to make you feel like the biggest turd in the universe. But being intimidated by it makes him automatically lose respect for you. You’ll just have to suck it up. He tells you to leave? Don’t. Make him see how serious you are about this. I can see it… but then again, I never had to think you were literally going to kill me, so…” Peter grimaces heavily when Rogers sighs. “It may take a little while for Tony to see it.”

“I was never going to kill Tony,” Steve says, a little desperately, and Peter nods his head to the side just once.

“Don’t tell me that,” he says with a raised eyebrow, “tell Tony.”

“I will.” Rogers assures him. “Thank you.”

“Listen,” Peter requests, and Rogers does. “I know you’re a good person. And I know you care about Tony. So, I’m going to have to warn you; don’t you fucking screw up.” At Rogers’ surprised look, Peter scowls. “I’m serious. I’ve worked so hard to make Tony stop hating himself. Do not fuck that up for him.”

Rogers appears perplexed, further saddened. “He hated himself?”

Peter nods. “He blames himself for… god, for everything.”

Steve shakes his head and appears so disturbed. “You said two hours?” He wants to see Tony, that much is apparent.

“That’s what Strange said,” Peter tells him. His belly full, Peter is eager to get back to the room, to shower and care for himself, change his bandages. Check on Tony.

“I’ll be by to see him in three,” Rogers promises.

“Good,” Peter says in response, and turns away.

Breakfast was nice. Returning to his and Tony’s room, not so much.

Peter can feel Tony’s elevated heart rate before he even grasps the door handle. He’s only been gone for an hour. Tony still has another sixty minutes or so before Strange is done with him. As soon as Peter opens the door, he sighs, because Tony is suffering loudly inside. Orange magic is pulsing throughout Tony’s torso, and Peter feels a little ill when he moves around the bed and spots the wooden bit Tony is biting down on.
“Hey,” he says, and Tony opens his tear-filled eyes just as Peter is grabbing one of his hands. Then, he closes them again, and *screams*. The grip he returns is titanic. It rattles Peter. “Tony, hey-“

“Trust me, nothing would make him happier right now than knowing you’re off taking care of yourself,” Strange is saying, with some effort. He’s not wrong. Peter hasn’t bothered to change or shower or *anything* since the fight with Thanos, has been so focused on keeping Tony alive and sane, that he hasn’t had time for much else.

“Kid…, m’ okay,” Tony tries to assure him, but it’s very clear that he’s *not* okay.

“Can I get you something?” he asks, but one brown eye is popping open to glare at him. Tony doesn’t say anything, can’t, it seems, just points to Peter, then stabs his finger in the direction of the restroom.

“*Go,*” Tony grinds out, before he’s overtaken by pain again. He releases Peter’s hand and buries his face in his arm, that piece of wood lodged securely between clenched teeth.

Peter sighs. “Hang in, there,” he says, and receives a sharp cry of agony in response.

The latrine is sound-proof. As soon as the door is shut, Peter’s letting out a long, relieved exhale. Though he’s witnessed Tony in pain over and over and *over* again, it never gets easier. And he’s a bit guilty to admit that he’d glad he doesn’t have to be there to watch it this time. Maybe he’ll just spend the next hour in this little sanctuary.

The burn is still numb, thankfully. Strange’s bandages have begun to stick to it, so Peter begins peeling them off slowly, not wanting to lose more skin to this. Orange wizard magic could heal it in very little time, but after seeing the state Tony’s in, he’s not sure he wishes to go that route, might want to just reup the spell every so often and let his body repair it. Besides, it’s healing on its own already. Peter sticks his lip out with surprise once he’s got the bandages off. It’s not as bad as it was the day before. It’s bordering on second-degree status now, but it’s still raw, wet and tight and scabbing in places. He’s sure that without the spell, getting to this point would have been a certain kind of nightmare.

It’s the worst wound he’s ever had, and he has no idea whether it will scar or not. Tony said he could fix it if it does, but what cost will *that* extract? Will Peter have to endure an Extremis-like procedure? Because honestly, he’s good on that. He’d rather have the scar.

There are huge bruises on his neck and shoulders from where Thanos was holding him down, revealed once his thin, black turtle-neck is removed. “Holy crap,” he hisses, scowling at it in the mirror. He makes it a point to ensure Tony never sees the wounds. It will only upset him further. It will give him more reason to not allow Peter to help.

As he steps in the shower, he scowls and allows his body to take over, moving through the process of cleaning himself as an automaton, needing all the concentration he can spare. There’s a storm brewing in the background of all this. A fight awaits him, dark and looming and unpleasant, tornado conditions, perhaps. He has to plan for it, because Tony is a damn formidable verbal adversary. And the disadvantages he faces already are gargantuan. Tony has a lot of ammunition. Thanos knows that Peter is Tony’s weakness, now, and will likely seek to use him against Tony once again. Shit, the man was seconds away from giving Thanos everything, and Peter just *knows* that Tony will bring it up. How does he counter that?

Peter wants to help… he just can’t deal with it, if they lose-
Then it hits him, and his expression turns stony. Suddenly, he knows exactly how to tackle this problem. He just needs to wait until the time is right.

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Tony lasts the full two hours, goddammit.

When Strange finally lets up, and the pain is just gone, Tony releases a long, shuddering groan of pure ecstasy, because he feels so, so much better. The piece of wood he’s been biting now sports deep impressions, and he sneers at it when he removes it from his mouth. “Fucking hell,” he gasps. “You gotta work on that, Doc.”

“Hey, that was impressive, even to me,” Strange admits, sweat on his brow. He was working exceptionally hard. “And I’ve died a thousand deaths.”

“You have got to tell me that story someday,” Tony says, genuinely curious as to what Strange meant by that. He sits up with a wince, because despite all that work, Tony is still wounded, and he prods at his ribs, sighing happily when he feels no pain. Extremis presents him with a detailed progress report, and Tony is superbly satisfied to find that his chest is whole once more. Finally. He smiles at Strange who actually smiles back. “This is great. I don’t think I’ll ever stop thanking you.”

“We’re not done yet,” Strange reminds him, lounging a little in his chair. He’s visibly exhausted.

Tony nods his acceptance and with some effort, sits on the edge of the bed, appreciating so much that he can pull himself up without assistance. “We can do the rest some other time. I think you should hit the sack, there, Merlin. I’m sure you’d advise a patient against abusing themselves like you’ve been doing.”

“You’re not wrong,” Strange says, and chuckles. “But I need you to promise me that you’ll do the same. You might feel a little better, and you might be some kind of weird… cyborg, or whatever, but you’re still mostly human. And that human needs rest and refueling.”

“That was almost insulting,” Tony says, and Strange rolls his eyes. “Calling me human, what bullshit.”

“Just stay in bed,” Strange instructs, “get fluids, rest, relax, for Christ’s sake, you deserve it.”

“Maybe, but that doesn’t mean Thanos is planning to pamper me when he sees me next,” Tony reminds him, and Strange frowns. Out of nowhere, a cart containing a loaded tray appears, and Tony catches a tantalizing whiff of breakfast.

“Maybe this will tempt you,” Strange says with a knowing smirk, and Tony’s mouth is immediately watering at the aroma.

“That was a dirty trick,” he says, shaking his head, and his stomach finally vocalizes its displeasure with a deep groan. It’s completely empty, and it hates Tony for it. “Exploiting my weaknesses like that. You’re a bad person.”

“I’m going to bed,” Strange tells him, “I want you to stay in here and take care of yourself.”

It’s then that Peter emerges from the restroom. Tony looks to him, and is happy to see he’s showered,
changed into fresh black clothes, rebandaged his burn. The kid smiles when he sees that Tony is sitting up.

“You look a hell of a lot better,” Peter says, appearing so relieved. Tony barely notices Strange changing his saline bag because he’s busy looking at Peter.

“So do you,” he says sincerely. “Sorry I kicked you out.”

“It’s cool, I get it,” Peter assures him, toweling off his wet hair and depositing the towel into a hamper to the right of the restroom door.

“I have a request of you,” Strange says, addressing Peter, who perks up, no doubt, excited by the prospect of being useful, as always. “Keep this stubborn son of a bitch in this room.”

“I’m right here,” Tony says, indignant, but he understands all the same. Strange isn’t wrong, he does need rest, and he is incredibly stubborn. Extremis needs to recharge. Tony needs to recharge.

“I’ll try,” Peter says skeptically.

“I have a spacecraft to piece back together,” Tony attempts, but Peter is there with a counter.

“Quill, Rogers and Romanoff are working on it,” he tells him.

Tony scoffs. “Oh, yeah, that’s reassuring.”

“Rogers wants to talk to you,” Peter says, and Tony groans at this.

“God, this day just keeps getting better and better,” he grumbles, but sighs with resignation. “Any progress on getting some kind of satellite or internet access in here?”

“I’ve been working on it,” Strange says, still lounging. Tony thinks he might be lying.

“I need it,” Tony says, “I really do.”

“I know.” Strange finally rises with a wince. “Give me six hours.”

“Hey, thanks again,” Tony says, standing as well, but the few steps taken towards Strange are accented by a heavy, painful limp. He holds his hand out and Strange takes it. “You’re the only reason we still have a chance against this guy. So, thank you.”

“No need,” Strange assures him, and graces him with a smile that Tony understands is probably extremely rare. “Just please, eat, rest, heal. The universe needs you at your best.”

He leaves with a majestic swish of a long red cape.

“You alright?” Peter asks him after a moment.

Tony doesn’t answer. “Did Rogers say when he’d be showing up?” He asks instead. Honestly, he’d rather face Thanos again.

“In about an hour,” Peter answers, and Tony limps back over to the chair Strange had occupied and collapses into it with a groan, because simply standing is still incredibly taxing for him. “I spoke with him a bit. He really wants to make things right.” Peter is rounding the chair so he can sit on the edge of the bed and talk to Tony face-to-face.

Tony sighs, and avoids Peter’s gaze. “I’m not sure that’s possible, kid.”
What happened?” Peter is asking, and Tony closes his eyes for a moment, opens them slowly, exhales sharply. Peter’s looking at him expectantly, his hands clasped together between his knees. “I’m sorry, it’s just… you’ve never told me about it.”

“It’s a fairly lengthy story,” Tony says following a long pause. “For the sake of keeping it short; his best friend murdered my parents. And he kept it from me.”

“Whoa! What, now?” Peter exclaims, and Tony chuckles his uncomfortable chuckle. “Best friend… do you mean Bucky Barnes?”

“That’s right,” Tony says, appreciating how sharp and aware Peter is. “He knew about it for years and kept it from me. I’d thought they’d died in a car accident. Nope. Murdered. And I learned about it by literally watching it happen via CCTV.”

“Wow,” Peter says, his eyes as big as Saturn. “Holy shit, Tony. Was Barnes there? God, you attacked him, didn’t you?”

Tony nods, clenches his jaw, and looks to the floor between his feet. “I blood-lusted. I saw red, and that’s all I could see. I wanted to kill him, Peter. I wanted to fucking kill this guy. At one point, after some intense exchanges, I had them both down, Rogers and Barnes, and I’d come to my senses a bit. I didn’t want to kill Barnes any more, and I instructed Rogers to surrender, but he didn’t. Rogers… let your guard down around him even for a second…” Tony trails off. The memory is painful for him. He was left to die there. Rogers left him to die.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Peter breathes. Tony looks at him and discovers a horrified expression. Another sigh escapes him. It’s almost his primary way of drawing breath now, sighing. “It’s ancient history, Pete,” he says, but it doesn’t seem to alleviate Peter’s shock in the least.

“That’s awful,” he says, and Tony can tell he’s deeply troubled by this.

“That’s awful,” he says, and Tony can tell he’s deeply troubled by this.

“It is,” Tony agrees. “But to tell you the truth, I’m more pissed off about his childish approach to the accords. Refusing to even give them a try? Come on, now.” Tony stares into the floor for a moment, remembers it all, how Rogers had snarled viciously as he’d slammed his shield into Tony’s helmet, and eventually, his heart.

“Do you want me to stay?” Tony looks at Peter, who smiles at him. “I think, maybe you should have that conversation in private, but… I would understand if you wanted me to stick around—”

“No,” Tony says sternly, “you’re right, this is…” He can’t finish the sentence. He doesn’t know what this is, exactly. “Plus, I’m mobile now, so… not as vulnerable. You know.” The food no longer smells good, and he’s more nauseous than hungry, now. Un-hungry. Tony eyes the breakfast cart with disdain. “And you have armor to repair.”

“You think I can repair it?” Peter asks skeptically, and Tony is already using Extremis to animate the Iron Spider disk, unfolding it the armor so it’s standing next to the bed, and blue eyes scan every inch, inside and out. The helmet’s missing completely, and it was damaged at the neck and shoulders from where Thanos’ hand-

“Yes,” he says simply, the memory too much for him at the moment. “I want you to diagnose the issues and draw up a supply list for me. If you’re going to have armor, you’ll need to know how to repair it.”

“Thanos tossed the helmet somewhere,” Peter’s saying, chewing his lip thoughtfully. “I wonder if it’s still on the jet.”
“Might be,” Tony says, folding the Iron Spider back up into its disk and flinging it at Peter, who catches it smoothly just as Tony knew he would. Groaning, he sits up, and when Peter offers his hand to aid him, Tony refuses it, waves it away. “I’m good. I need a shower, I just got done sweating for two hours straight. Do me a favor and check on my jet, would you please? I’d rather it not get an eighties-themed makeover courtesy of Peter Quill.”

“Will do,” Peter says, then squints suspiciously at Tony, “but you have to promise me you’ll rest.”

“Sure, whatever,” he says, but when Peter leaves, his eyes are as blue as the sky.

Once he’s waited long enough to make sure the kid is gone, Tony limps over to the door, but his hand hesitates over the handle.

Don’t, he tells himself. Whatever’s being said can be handled some other time. Get the armor, get off the network, keep your promise to Peter. Do not look at the news. The footage of his beating is no doubt sprayed across various news outlets and numerous unaffiliated channels. Who knows what’s being said. He doesn’t need it right now.

Tony opens the door. On the other side, his mind hums with energy, bombards him with signals and messages and warnings. Get the armor, that’s it. He finds it, stowed away amongst the clutter of the Malibu bunker, and haunts it, putting it into auto pilot and launching it out of the armor chute. It will take three hours to get to him.

He steps back and closes the door before he’s caught and has to hear about it. Slowly, he shuffles to the bathroom and appreciates simply having the ability to walk.

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Quill wasn’t wrong when he said he needed muscle.

Steve waits quietly as the piece of the jets ramp he’s holding up for quill is welded back onto the spacecraft. According to Quill, this vessel is capable of repairing itself, but the pieces have to be together for it to work. Once the welds are complete, the ship will untwist itself automatically. Steve will never not be wowed by Tony’s tech.

He’s extremely glad to be of use.

Natasha is inside working on what is apparently a warp core, the jets fuel source and hypertravel device. If they manage to piece the ship back together properly, it will mend itself in a few hours. At that point, Steve understands that Tony will be leaving with Strange to rescue Bruce and Thor. He wonders if they’ll accept his help. Then again, he might be more useful staying back and preparing Earth for another invasion. Now that Tony is available to provide guidance, the task is no longer so overwhelming for Steve.

But first, he must apologize for what he’s done. Face-to-face. Properly. Somehow, even with everything going on, it’s the most important task in the universe. And now that he’s gained a little more insight into Tony’s person, because those were some profound realizations the kid smacked him with, Steve feels like he’s prepared to face this.

Soon, Parker shows up.
“How’s it going?” he asks, sharp eyes darting over their progress. Tony sent him to check on them, that much is apparent.

“It’s going,” Quill replies, shutting off the soldering iron and disengaging his mask so he can smile at Parker. These people are so close with each other, it’s astonishing. “Tony good now?”

“He’s up and walking,” Peter informs him, and Quill chuckles.

“Uh oh, better watch out,” he says. “A mobile Tony, we’re all in for trouble.”

Steve clears his throat, and Parker looks over at him. “He up for company?”

“He’s showering right now, but a little later, yes,” Parker says, passing by them, entering the spacecraft and rummaging around the scattered insides for something. “Give him a minute.”

Steve nods. “You tell him I’d be by?”

“Sure did,” Parker says, shoving aside some debris, and groaning with relief as he extracts the severed head of his armor. “Oh, thank god.”

“How did he react?” Steve wants to know.

“Oh, he dreads it,” Parker says casually. “And I can sense that you do too. Just keep that in mind. He’ll try to hide it, but this is as hard for him as it is for you.”

Steve observes this kid with intense interest as Quill gets back to soldering. “Your powers. What are they?”

Parker looks up in surprise, but it’s only a moment before his countenance turns contemplative. “Super strength, enhanced agility, a ‘sixth sense’ that warns me something is about to happen, bad or good. Heightened senses. Like, I can literally hear your heart beating right now. Oh, and I can climb walls. You know, like an actual spider. I was bitten by an extremely unique one, and this happened to me.” The kid shrugs as he turns his helmet over in his hands and observes the damage done to it.

Steve nods. “Sounds like Tony knew what he was doing when he recruited you.”

“I guess. I’m not one to gloat,” he says, and Steve likes this kid already. He’s clearly intelligent, aware, empathetic, and he’s got one of the most difficult people on the planet completely figured out.

A few more minutes, and Steve is roping Parker into taking over his job of holding the ramp in place. He needs to see Tony. It’s important that he does this. The call to Laura was difficult. She had sobbed on the phone, but she was receptive and accepting, and Steve felt loads better after, due to her encouraging words. He hopes facing Tony will bring similar relief.

Soon enough, he’s standing outside Tony’s room, experiencing the same anxiety he felt before calling Laura. But, it’s always better to face adversity head-on than it is to avoid it.

He knocks.

“Yeah?” Tony answers from within, and Steve sighs.

“It’s me,” he says, feeling no need to elaborate further. Tony knows Steve’s voice.


Tony… looks amazing. Sitting on the edge of his bed, clean and alert, wrapped in scales that appear
to be vibranium-based, his hands clasped between the knees his elbows rest on, Tony looks up as Steve enters, and he appears so young. Steve didn’t notice it before, because it had been masked behind grime and agony and injuries and that blue bioluminescence, but Tony looks like he’s in his thirties, now. Tony is forty-seven, and yet, his face sports not a single wrinkle or scar.

“You look fantastic, Tony,” Steve tells him sincerely. Then, he gestures to the chair that’s been pulled up close to the bed. “Mind if I sit?” An untouched cart full of rapidly cooling food exists nearby. Steve glances at it only for a second.

Tony scoffs. “God, you are disgustingly polite. Just sit in the fucking chair. You don’t need my permission.”

So, Steve does. An awkward silence persists between them, until Steve clears his throat. “That kid. He cares a lot about you.”

Tony huffs a voiceless chuckle and shakes his head, crosses his arms over his chest. “You wouldn’t believe what we’ve been through together,” he says, and his tone is repentant, his gaze, distant. He’s reliving it right now.

“I’d like to hear about it,” Steve says, and Tony shoots him a skeptical half-frown. “I’m serious,” he insists. “I want to know.”

Tony sighs and buries his face in his hands, runs them up through his hair, which is such a deep shade of black now. Steve had forgotten that Tony’s hair used to be jet black, before the stress of being Iron Man started getting to him. “I’m adopting that kid,” Tony reveals, and Steve raises an eyebrow at this. Tony Stark, a father? “He lost everyone when New York was destroyed. I’m all he has left, so, I’m going to adopt him. That’s my son. It’s not legally bound yet, but… goddammit, that’s my kid. And I love him.”

Steve smiles, even as Tony pierces him with an intense expression. Tony used to talk endlessly about wanting to have a child with Pepper. It’s great to hear that he might still get to be a father, even if it’s in this very limited capacity. Steve has never had such ambitions. “I’m happy for you.”

Tony’s looking at him, brown eyes flicking over his whole body. Eventually, he sighs deeply. “This is so weird. Do you find this weird?”

“I do,” Steve admits, shrugging. “But… ‘weird’ isn’t how I’d choose to describe this. No, I think ‘surreal’ is more appropriate. This is extremely surreal.”

“Yeah,” Tony agrees, looking away.

Steve flounders for a moment, before realizing what he has to do. “I’ve been seeing someone,” he says, and Tony scoffs.

“I really don’t give a shit about your gross romantic pursuits, Rogers-“ he says, but Steve stops him there.

“No, I mean…,” he sighs heavily. “I’ve been… I’ve been going to counseling.” Tony immediately shuts his mouth, and now Steve has his full attention. This is what it takes. Empathy. Relatability. “You always told me I should try it. Well, I finally did.”

“And?” Tony is extremely curious.

“Well… they, uh…” Steve swallows. This is still difficult for him to admit. “They diagnosed me with Major Depressive Disorder,” he reveals, and Tony waits with more patience than Steve’s ever
seen the man employ before, big brown eyes never wavering from Steve’s face. Steve sighs and chuckles ruefully at the ground between his knees. “It’s a side-effect of the serum, apparently. It makes me want to fight. Constantly. And if I can’t, if there’s no war to be a part of, it sends me into a spiral. Makes me feel terrible.”

“Sounds like you’ve learned a lot about yourself over the past two years,” Tony says, his aggression still perceivable, but respectfully muted.

“I haven’t just been on vacation,” he says, desperate for Tony to understand that this hasn’t been a cakewalk for him. “Since you left, I’ve been working on myself, on the Avengers, on repairing relations with the government. Tony, I messed up. I really did. And… I’m willing to do whatever I can to fix this. To mend our friendship.”

“I don’t know if it can be mended,” Tony tells him, his snarl barely contained. “Rogers, you broke my heart. Do you realize that? My parents’ death…” he stops, looks away, and Steve can tell he’s collecting his emotions. Parker was right. The man truly is sensitive. “That whole thing was so traumatic for me… dammit, what the hell right did you think you had to keep that from me? That they were fucking murdered. They were murdered, Rogers, and you knew, and you knew that I didn’t know. And you made an active decision to not inform me. Why?”

“Because I chose Bucky over you,” Steve admits, his right hand flopping uselessly in his lap. “I thought that maybe… maybe if I told you the truth you wouldn’t fund Sam’s search anymore.”

“Ah, okay, the ole’ ‘Tony Stark’s a complete asshole’, cliché. Great.” Tony rolls his eyes, then glares at Steve, who braces himself. Here it comes. “Your opinion of me has always been piss-poor, hasn’t it, Rogers? How many more nukes do I need to fly into space to earn your platinum-coated respect? How fucking highly do you regard yourself that you feel you’re allowed to judge everyone else, huh? Do you ever get your blue tights caught between your ass cheeks while you’re sitting up there on that goddamn high-horse of yours?”

Parker had told Steve to prepare himself for verbal abuse, but Steve didn’t realize how vicious Tony could get. “I don’t think about myself like that anymore,” Steve says as calmly as he can manage. Humble and docile. “And I think a lot more highly of you than I’ve led you to believe. I realize that, now.”

Tony scowls at him sideways, until he scoffs, seemingly at himself, and sighs a cavernous sigh. “Major Depressive Disorder, huh?” he asks, his voice dialed down a few octaves now, his face sporting less rage wrinkles. “You on pills, or what?”

“No,” Steve says, regretfully. “My metabolism burns up anything I put in my body. And that includes anti-depressant medication. There’s a psychologist in Wakanda doing research for me, but as of now, there’s not much that can help. I go to counseling twice a week. That’s it.”

A curt nod from Tony. “You feel like it’s working?” he asks, and when Steve looks into his eyes, he shoves aside the anger there, and finds that it’s shielding genuine concern.

Steve gives a deep sigh. “I don’t know,” he admits, feeling the drag of his depression, the weight of it. It’s so damn heavy. Even with a fight on the horizon, the misery is as heavy as the moon.

There’s a moment of tense silence before Tony responds. “It takes a huge amount of courage just to admit you have a problem.”

“I guess so,” Steve says, meeting Tony’s eyes, and chancing a smile that Tony doesn’t return.
Suddenly feeling awkward, he searches desperately for a change of topic. “Your flight suit… it has vibranium in it?”

“Sure does,” Tony says smugly, squinting at him a bit, daring Steve to ask.

Steve nods and clasps his hands together. He knows the answer to his next question already, but he wants to hear it directly from Tony.

“Where’d you get it?” he asks, and Tony smirks at him.

“You see your shield around anywhere?” Tony questions, and Steve… Steve is okay with it. It’s fine.

“You used my shield? Melted it down?” Steve asks, and Tony shrugs one shoulder.

“I did. Had a heart attack. Needed it to keep me alive,” he says, then waits for Steve’s reaction.

And Steve smiles, which Tony clearly doesn’t expect, the way he scrunches his face up. “Well… I’m glad you could use it to save your life,” he says, totally sincere. He’s not at all surprised about the heart attack. He knows enough about Tony to understand that he was due for one.

Tony’s eyes dart between Steve’s. Then he sighs and appears a bit guilty. “I had no other choice.”

“It’s okay,” Steve assures him, “I’m not mad.”

“Is it fucked up that I kind of wish you were?” Tony asks with a sneer.

“A little bit,” Steve says, “But I understand why.”

“Well, I don’t forgive you,” Tony tells him, and Steve’s heart sinks. Honestly, he expected this, but it still hurts to hear. “You’ve caused me a shit-load of stress, Rogers. You abandoned me, and you took everyone with you. I started drinking again because of you. And you should have let me kill Thanos, goddamnit. You… you’re… fucking hell, you screwed up big time.”

“I’m sorry,” Steve says, and he wishes Tony would meet his gaze, would look into his eyes and see how truly repentant Steve is. “I acted stupidly. You’re right, I did abandon you. And I regret it. Every single day.”

There’s a lot of silence.

“Whatever,” Tony says, finally, rubbing a hand down his face. “We have fateful work to do, and it can’t be clouded by personal differences.”

Steve nods. “You’re going to get Bruce and Thor?” he asks.

“That’s right,” Tony says. “My jet on the mend?”

“It’s being worked on,” Steve assures him.

“You called Laura?”

“Yes.” Tony nods his appreciation. Steve can tell he’s incredibly tired. “You should get some rest.”

“I’m not sure why everyone expects me to be able to sleep, goddammit,” Tony snarls. Crap. Steve has hit a nerve. “Rest isn’t going to happen. Not with space-Barney on the loose and pissed off as he is. He wants me, Cap. Do you understand? I know things. He knows that I know things. And he’ll
do anything to me to make me talk.”

“Regardless,” Steve says, and he wants to assuage the fear he can sense in Tony. “you’re no use to us like this. You absolutely need to rest.”

“You ever been tortured, Rogers?” Tony suddenly asks, his gaze so distant, and Steve is taken aback by the question. “Like, legitimately tortured until you do or say something that someone else wants you to do or say?”

“I mean… I guess I haven’t experienced that, no,” he admits, wondering where Tony is going with this.

“Well I have,” Tony tells him, and Steve shuts his mouth, “multiple times. I’ve been tortured multiple times, Rogers. I…” Tony appears more desperate than Steve’s ever seen. “Nothing is more important than preparing to face Thanos again. You were staying in Wakanda, correct?”

“I was,” Steve says, not willing to pretend he even begins to grasp what Tony’s endured. He’ll ask about it someday. Not now, but someday.

“I’ll need more vibranium,” Tony says after a few steadying breaths. “My under armor is damaged, and I’ll need supplies and an adequate facility to repair it.” He’s fingering at the wounds that were carved into his left flank. “Think you can work out a deal with T’Challa? Let us all squat there for a little while?”

“I’m sure he’ll be a welcoming host,” Steve says with absolute confidence. “We need to hold a meeting.”

“Agreed,” Tony admits. “Problem with that, though; Strange is in sleep mode at the moment, and I really think he should be present for any meeting we put together, since he seems to know more about the stones than all of us. It took a lot out of him to heal my ribs. He asked for six hours, and I’m inclined to give it to him.”

“That’s understandable,” Steve admits. Things are dire, but victory requires them all to be at their best.

“And never mind me, you look like complete shit, Rogers,” Tony observes, and Steve doesn’t deny it. He hasn’t slept in days, has barely eaten, knows he’s deathly pale, that his eyes have sunken a startling distance into his face, and his wounds haven’t healed yet. He looks at Tony, and allows his pain to accent his gaze, refuses to hide from his friend it any longer. Tony stares deep into his soul, and his expression has softened considerably. Then, he nods to himself, as though he’s just come to a weighty decision. “Listen, if it makes things easier for you… I do appreciate your apology. I can’t totally forgive you just yet, but this… this was a good start. Do you get it, Rogers? This was a tremendously good start.”

Steve smiles sadly, and Tony finally, finally, smiles back. It’s more than Steve expected, and he’s so relieved to see it. “Thank you,” he says. “It helps. It really does.” There’s no deceit there. Steve, though not completely forgiven, feels so much better now, as he knew he would.

“Get some sleep,” Tony requests of him, “don’t fret over anything that isn’t Thanos, alright? Especially not me and what I thank of you. There are more important things happening.”

“Exactly,” Steve agrees. “But once this is over…”

“Then we’ll work on it,” Tony says, promises even, based on his intense expression. “We’ll work on it, I swear. It’s worth it.”
Steve feels better than he has in quite a while. Even as screwed up as everything is, Steve is so damn happy to have Tony back. “I’ve missed you, Tony.”

“Yeah?” Tony says skeptically, and Steve scoffs light-heartedly.

“Of course,” he says, like it’s the most obvious thing, “you’re the ying to my yang. Don’t even try to deny it, dammit.”

Tony rolls his eyes, but his smirk is almost playful, “I guess that statement was curse-ridden enough for me to believe you.”

“It was no lie,” Steve assures him.

After a long pause, Tony addresses him. “I’ve missed you too, Rogers,” he says, and Steve knows right then that they’ll get through this.

One way or another, they’ll get through this.

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