Will You Be There (When the Sun Goes Down)

by Salitice

Summary

Tony Stark could never have imagined fatherhood would be this stressful—oh right, he had, which is why he never had kids—but then along came a spider.

Peter Parker is your average dorky kid; he attends high school, plays video games with his friend, tries to get his homework in on time, and—oh right—swings through the city, dodging bullets and roping up bad guys in his spare time. Life can get pretty complicated while trying to live two separate lives, especially when one draws a lot of attention, and not always the good kind.

Notes

This fic takes place in a universe where Civil War was handled a lot better. Seriously, communication can really get you places. Homecoming compliant though!! WARNING: The rating will probably change in later chapters.
The first time Tony saw a picture of the Spider-Man, he had nearly choked on his coffee. The sight of some grown-ass man running around in horrendously baggy pajamas was a bit too odd (and hilarious) an image for him to take seriously. Then he had watched a couple of videos on YouTube of the guy swinging from buildings and taking down small-time criminals around the Queens area, and he had to admit to being somewhat impressed; the man's technique was sloppy, his outfit abhorrent, his sense of self-preservation lacking, but he had potential. More than that, he was someone who was taking initiative—helping people who couldn't help themselves, not for praise or reward, but simply because he could. So yeah, Tony was intrigued, at least a little. He made a mental note to keep an eye out for the guy, and then asked Friday to keep tabs on him too—just in case.

And that was that for the most part. Occasionally Friday would alert him of news stories or new photos (always in the same shitty pajamas). However, it wasn't until many months later, when he got word of the Sokovia Accords, that Tony made the decision to dig a little deeper.

It had started with a hostage situation at a downtown bank. The robbers were holed-up in the building with 25 hostages. The police had, of course, been notified and had sectioned off the area. Civilians still crowded around trying to get as close as possible, hoping to see some action. No contact had been established and no demands had been made, but Tony had eyes on the inside (well, Friday did) in the form of a very small reconnaissance droid. So while Friday gathered information, Tony kept an eye on the situation from a distance. He was waiting for a sign from their “friendly neighborhood Spider-Man” as Tony had heard him called recently. So far, he was disappointed to have seen nothing. He checked the time: 3:15 P.M. He sighed, it had been 30 minutes since the event had gone down. Then, just as he was getting ready to call it, a ping appeared on his screen and Friday’s voice spoke crisply into his ear.

“Sir, I have picked up additional movement. I believe another individual has entered the building. Should I investigate?”

“Go see if it’s our guy.”

The camera moved into another room and panned up. Tony’s brows raised; clinging from the ceiling was Pajama-Man. Tony snickered at the rather ridiculous sight, but quickly stifled it when the people next to him gave him dirty looks. Right, hostage situation. He backed away from the crowd a bit. Sure, he was hiding his face pretty well, but he didn’t want to cause any more of a scene. Quietly he whispered for Friday to pan back to the hostages. Usually he’d leave something like this to the police or whatever vigilantes were running the streets, but he was here now and if this Spider-Man guy couldn’t take care of it, well, he wasn’t going to stand around and let innocent civilians die.

Watching Spider-Man work was interesting to say the least. Though he sometimes seemed a little clumsy, and spouted enough one-liners to rival Hawkeye, he was proficient. More than that, it was obvious that his first priority was keeping the hostages safe, even going as far as to purposely put himself in harm’s way in order to draw attention or to protect someone who hadn’t run off in time. All and all, the situation was handled quickly, and in just a handful of minutes after Spider-Man had made his appearance, the would-be-robbers were tied up, stuck to the floor and each other with the strange webbing the vigilante used (and wasn’t Tony interested in taking a look at that in his lab) and the hostages were running from the building to safety. Once the police had ushered the hostages away, they stormed the building, but Tony had already left the scene. He had done what
he came to do, now it was just time to wait.

“Make sure to keep following that tracker and let me know when he comes to rest. We are going to
find out who this guy is.”

“Of course, Sir.” Friday replied easily.

Later that evening, while Tony was holed-up in his lab, Friday alerted him that Spider-Man had
stopped at an apartment complex in Queens and had been there for sometime.

“Okay, bring it up.” He said.

Immediately his screen switched to show a layout of the building. The screen zoomed into the
building.

“He seems to have stopped at this unit here.”

“Okay Friday, I want a report on who lives in the apartment and whatever you can find out about
him.”

It didn’t take the AI very long at all to compile the dossiers on the two tenants, and Tony sat
baffled as he flipped through the information on his StarkPad.

“Okay, there must be a mistake of some kind, Friday. The only two people who live here are a high
school kid and his ridiculously attractive Aunt.”

“This is where the tracker remains.”

Tony frowned. “Maybe he’s a friend of the family, or found the tracker and ditched it,” he
mumbled, “Okay Friday, keep watch and let me know if he goes on the move.”

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Tony blinked at the screen in front of him.

“Uh, are we sure this is accurate?”

“Yes, this is where the tracker is now, Sir.”

Tony blinked again. “A high school.”

“Yes, Sir. Midtown High School.”

Tony shook his head. “Looks like our friend in PJs pulled a fast one on us.”

“Should I disengage tracking operations?”

Tony paused, thinking it over. “No, let's get eyes on this,” Tony paused to look over the file he had
on the family, “Peter Parker. He might know something about this Spider-Man or even lead us to
him.”

“Very well, Sir.”

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Tony stared at his screens in shock as Spider-Man swung from the towers of New York, pursuing a
car chase down below. That wasn’t what had Tony in such disarray. Spider-Man was actually Spider-kid. He couldn't believe it, but he had seen it with his own eyes—a small, scrappy, awkward kid pulling those dumb-ass pajamas from his book bag and climbing up a completely vertical wall and then swinging into action.

No wonder the bloody kid was wearing God-forsaken pajamas—he couldn't possibly afford anything else with his milk money.

That train of thought spiraled fairly quickly.

“What the hell is this kid thinking?” Tony exclaimed. “He’s fighting criminals in pajamas! He’s getting shot at right now!” He pointed accusingly at the screen in front of him, which now showed one Peter Parker dodging bullets as he tried to web up the criminals from their, now rather trashed, vehicle.

“He’s like what—twelve?”

“Actually, he’s—” his AI began, but Tony wasn’t listening.

“What kind of protection does he have—what the hell kind of fighting style is this? I don't think they make permission slips for fighting bad guys, Friday. Who signed his goddamned permission slip for this?” Tony winced as a bullet grazed Spider-Man's bicep.

Tony shook his head. “Nope. Nope, not acceptable. Friday, clear my calendar.”

Since it was a little beyond Tony’s reach to ground the kid for the rest of his natural life, he decided to do what he could do.

He was up the rest of the night, and a few after that, designing and building a new kind of super suit. Tony integrated every fail-safe he could think of, and then went back over everything and added more. He even got his hand on a sample of Spidey’s webbing—before it dissolved—in order to properly design and manufacture tech that would be compatible. Tony had to admit, he was maybe, sort of impressed with what the kid had come up with. He was obviously very intellectually gifted with a knack for tech and chemistry. If Parker was able to create what he had in a high school laboratory, Tony couldn’t help but wonder what the kid would be capable of if given a real lab with real resources to work with.

Of course, Parker might still be a little young to give free reign—he cut himself off mid-thought. Tony hadn’t even met the kid. He turned to look over the suit which lay folded before him.

Then he got a call from Natasha. They had found Bucky, The Winter Soldier, hiding out halfway across the world in some small hovel of an apartment, trying to put bits and pieces of his life and memories back together.

Things began to go downhill from there. Tony had already been under a vast amount of stress from dealing with the ridiculous politics that came with the Sokovia Accords. He could see where the world leaders were coming from, responsibility needed to be taken, especially for incidents overseas where American jurisdiction really didn’t have any place. However, he also saw how harmful it could be; it would make it harder for The Avengers to do their job. They were created to fight the powers that no one else could, they were needed, but it was also an opportunity for powers to try and gain control over the earth's mightiest force and turn them into attack dogs. It was a very fine line to walk; powerful political forces were at play that not even Tony could fully tackle alone. Tony had to come to the understanding that the Accords were going to have to happen one way or another, the best he could do was try to make them as accommodating as possible. He
realised that, though the first drafts of the documents would probably be horrendously strict, they
could still make amendments to the documents later on, especially after the world governments
saw how nonsensical it would be to have The Avengers sit around while the big bad guys tore apart
their countries faster than their own forces could handle it. Tony hated having to sit on things, but
he knew that, in this case, there wasn’t much else he could do other than nudge it in the right
direction while networking to hell and back to gain sympathy and support.

It shouldn’t have been a surprise that Natasha already knew about the whole thing or that he got
(another) rather angry phone call from her, asking when he was going to talk to the team about
what was going on behind the scenes. Tony knew that, eventually, the team was going to hear
about the Accords, and he also knew Natasha had a point that it might be better to hear it from him
rather than some government official that couldn’t care less about the ordeal. Tony groaned to
himself, he didn’t want to. He knew exactly how it was going to go; he was going to state what was
going on, the room was going to burst into chaos, no one was going to listen to reason, and then
there wouldn’t be any Avengers for the Accords to control.

Natasha didn’t seem too impressed by his forecast of the events, though, and simply told him to get
his shit together or she would call for the meeting herself. Before Tony could either protest or
counter with some witty repartee, Natasha hung up.

So Tony sent out messages to the team, arranged for a meeting at the tower. He figured it was a
place that they were all familiar with and thus, might be more inclined not to blow it up if shit hit
the fan. It wasn’t long after he sent out the messages that Steve called him from a burner phone,
apologizing and making excuses for not being able to make it. Tony rolled his eyes. First of all,
why Steve bothered with a burner phone in the first place was beyond him. If Tony wanted to
know where he was—he’d know (and did)—secondly, Steve’s excuses were absolute shit. Thirdly,
Steve was a shitty liar.

“Steve—”

“Tony, I’m sorry, but things are crazy right now and—”

“Steve.”

“And there’s no way I would be able to make it back in time.”

“Steve—”

“Plus my mission is of the utmost importance and I cannot simply abandon it.”

“For the love of God Roger’s shut up!”

“What—but—”

“Go north a bit, there’s a cozy little community up there where you and Barnes won’t have to
worry about being spotted. I’ll have transport waiting for you.”

“How do you know about—”

“That’s not the point, the point is I’m offering you help. Now before you get all stubborn and
Captain-America-y, it’s not a trick or a trap. I’m not that big of an asshole. Plus, if what I’ve been
hearing is right, then Barnes isn’t to blame for a lot of the shit he did.”

“You—you could get into some serious trouble, Tony.”
“Have you ever picked up a newspaper? I thought you old-timers were all over those—I’m almost always in trouble.”

Steve sighed. “So this meeting. It must be pretty important.”

It was Tony’s turn to sigh. “Some stuff is going down in DC that will involve us. That’s all I’ll say for now, because it will take time to try to explain and it will be better to just get it over with with everyone present.”

“Well that’s not ominous in the least.”

Tony chuckled. “Don’t worry about it, I’ve been working on it for awhile now, and although it might sound bad at first, I think we can work around it. Just keep that in mind before objecting.”

“Sure, all right, I guess?”

“Okay, good. I’ll send you the coordinates for the pick up.”

“Sounds uh—sounds good. Oh, and Tony?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks.”

Tony grimaced and replied, “Sure, see you soon.”

He rubbed his face after hanging up. Steve wouldn’t be thanking him soon enough. If anyone was going to object to the Accords, it would be him. Tony knew he was going to have to find a way to sugarcoat the issue if he wanted to persuade Steve to give it a shot.
Tony paced in his bedroom, trying to calm his breathing. He had popped a couple of painkillers earlier for his headache, but they were only doing so much. He knew he couldn’t put it off forever; either the team was going to get bored and leave, or (more likely) Natasha was going to break into his penthouse and cut off his balls.

“Sir, Mr. Barton has just arrived.”

“That’s all of them, then. Well, minus Thor, but not much you can do when he’s off-world.”

“Sir, you are showing elevated levels of stress. Would you like me to cancel the meeting?”

“No! No, Friday, I’m perfectly fine. This has to happen.”

“Very well, Sir.” There was a brief pause before the AI continued, “Sir, Mr. Barton is complaining about your absence.”

“Of course he is.” Tony sighed. “Okay, okay. I’m going.”

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Tony strutted out of the elevator and straight to the coffee machine, pouring himself a large cup and ignoring Clint’s “About time.”

Finally, he turned around and looked at the team—plus one.

Bucky Barnes looked as uncomfortable as Tony felt, his eyes darting around like he was looking for any evidence of a trap. Actually, that was probably exactly what he was doing. Steve stood close by like an overgrown guard dog. It might’ve been funny under different circumstances.

Tony nodded to Barnes. “You must be Sergeant Barnes.”

Bucky tensed at being addressed but nodded nonetheless.

“Well, welcome back to America and, y’know, congrats on the whole breaking-out-of-Hydra thing,“

Bucky frowned, wondering if there was an insult meant within the rather flippant welcome. Steve just sighed and shot Tony a look.

“Stop procrastinating, Stark.” Natasha said.

“Hey, I’m just trying to be friendly.”
“No, you’re avoiding the issue at hand, and the sooner we discuss why we are here, the sooner we can come to an agreement.”

Tony sent her a half-hearted glare, but sighed and conceded.

“All right, so. Here are the facts.” He said, looking over the group.

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All in all, things started about as smoothly as he had imagined. Barton started cussing, Wanda was wringing her hands nervously, Steve stiffened and then began yelling about rights and freedoms and such. Bruce groaned and tried to block out the angry atmosphere, while still putting in his two-cents here and there. Vision simply began spewing out statistics and probabilities in favour of the idea. Steve’s buddy Sam seemed to be spurring on Steve’s ranting, and Tony couldn’t help but let out some sarcastic jabs once blame started shifting about the room. All in all, it didn’t take long for the situation to turn into an all-out argument. Tony thought, at one point, Natasha tried to take control of the room, but tension was much too high at that point. The whole thing came to a climax when Steve stormed from the room in righteous fury, leaving a strained silence in his wake. Barnes remained for only a moment before following after his friend, and considering how silent he had been during the whole mess, Tony honestly had no clue what the other thought.

It was Natasha who finally broke the silence.

“Let me talk to him.” She said, voice as calm as ever.

“You can’t possibly be in favour of this, Nat!” Barton exclaimed loudly.

“Shut up, Clint, and think. This goes beyond us, and right now we need to know how to play our cards. Now, I know Stark has been working hard to pull things in our favour. This isn’t something we can stamp our feet and act like children about. This is a situation that has the potential to turn into something much uglier than it is now if we do anything stupid.”

Barton glared at the ground and huffed, but otherwise stayed silent.

Natasha walked over to where Tony stood, leaning in to whisper quietly, “Calm down, get the facts together, and lay them out for us. I’ll be back as soon as I talk to Steve.”

Tony nodded tiredly. “Sure, sure. You’re right.”

Natasha smirked. “Can I get a recording of that?”

“Shut up and go get Captain Stubborn.”

Natasha laughed as she walked off.

“Okay, well that could’ve gone better. But, well—meeting adjourned for now I guess.” Tony sighed, waving those who remained off.

“Have you really been working on this?” Barton asked, though the heat that had tinged his voice before seemed to have faded.

Tony nodded. “Some contacts of mine from within the government alerted me to the bill. I pulled some strings and was able to get involved.”

Barton nodded and sighed. “Okay, then.”
“Okay.”

“You got any food, man? I have a feeling we might be here awhile.”

Tony rolled his eyes, then pointed toward the kitchen. “Have at it, Barton.”

“Sweet!” The archer immediately jumped to his feet.

“Clean up after!” Tony shouted after him and glared at the lack of reply.

“If you don’t mind, I’m going to go down to the lab for a bit.” Bruce told him. Tony nodded in acknowledgement.

“Knock yourself out, pal.”

“Err—I guess I’ll head out,” Sam started, obviously feeling awkward now that tempers had cooled.

“No, you’re all welcome to stay. Lord knows there’s enough room. Just—just ask Friday and she’ll be happy to tell you where the bedrooms are and anything else.”

“Oh—uh—okay, thanks.”

“Yep.”

“Come get in on this, Wilson! I’m making a fucking masterpiece in here!” Clint shouted from the kitchen, followed by a loud crash.

Sam snorted. “Okay okay, I’m coming!”

Wanda looked concerned but decided to stay out of it. “You said we have rooms?”

Tony smiled at her. “Yeah, I made sure there was enough room for the whole team.”

“I would be happy to direct you to where you will be staying, Ms. Maximoff.” Friday’s voice rang out.

She smiled shyly. “Okay, thank you.”

Vision immediately followed suit. “Perhaps I will tour the tower as well.”

“Well, I guess that just leaves me.” Tony looked longingly at the bar. He could really use a drink. Sighing, he dumped out his—now cold—coffee and poured himself a warm glass, then stalked over to the bar and poured in some whiskey. It was going to be one of those days.

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Tony didn’t see heads or tails of either Steve or Barnes for three days. That being said, he hadn’t actually looked for either of them. In fact, Tony had all but locked himself away in his workshop. He had decided to upgrade Spider-Man’s new suit with a personal AI and was busy coding. Sure, he could’ve recycled one of the many he already had, but those had been built to cater to Tony himself—plus, that was just lazy. His slow progress definitely had nothing to do with Rogers and Barnes in his tower—or Tony’s lackluster desire to approach the topic of the Sokovia Accords again.

“Sir, Agent Romanov is requesting entrance to the workshop.” Friday’s voice cut through the music.
Tony groaned, but honestly, he was surprised it had taken her this long to drag him out.

Natasha’s voice filtered through the intercom. “Stop pouting and get out here, Stark!”

Tony rolled his eyes. “Yes Mom.” He shouted back.

“Just hurry it up.”

Tony stood and stretched, cracking his back into place with a groan, then walked over and opened the door to his shop. Natasha stood there, waiting, looking impatient.

“Jesus Stark, you look like crap.”

“Thanks,” he deadpanned.

“Anytime.”

“Sooo—?”

Natasha rolled her eyes. “Steve is ready to listen. Though you might want to thank Barnes, I’m pretty sure he was the deciding factor there.”

“Barnes? Really?”

Natasha hummed in reply. “Everyone’s on the communal floor.” She paused, looking him over, and pursed her lips in distaste. “I’ll tell them you’ll be up in thirty. Go have a shower, Stark.” Without waiting for a reply, she turned and headed back into the elevator. “Thirty minutes.” She glared before the doors slid shut.

Tony gave his shirt a quick sniff and wrinkled his nose. Okay, maybe she had a point. Tony headed up to his floor and to the shower.

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Tony arrived at the communal floor just as his watch ticked onto the thirtieth minute. Truth be told, he had been ready long before that, but he thought it’d annoy the redhead if he waited as long as possible. The elevator doors opened and Tony was face to face with Natasha. The woman raised an eyebrow, looking unimpressed.

“Thirty minutes.” He said, shooting her a large grin.

She sighed and simply turned back into the room.

“Oh thank God!” Clint exclaimed. “She said she was going to drag your ass down here even if it was naked, and that is something I can happily live the rest of my life without seeing.”

“Well, I don't know, Barton, if it's going to make you that miserable—” Tony’s hands went for the button on his jeans.

“Don’t you fucking dare, Stark!”

Tony smirked but relented.

“Can we please just quit the antics and concentrate on why we are here.” Steve interrupted.

Tony sighed and had to push down a jab at how last time went. He was about to reply when he
happened to catch Barnes glaring menacingly at Steve, still standing next to him, but noticeably further away than he was previously.

Steve, it seemed, was all too aware of Barnes’s glare, if the way he shuffled his feet nervously was any indication. Finally, with a sigh, the super soldier unfolded his arms and said, “I realize that I may have not handled the news of the Accords very well. I should have given you time to explain and I apologize.”

Tony raised his eyebrows at the—obviously rehearsed—apology, “Uh—yeah, okay. Thanks.”

Natasha elbowed him. “I—uh, might have spoken hastily, as well.”

Natasha rolled her eyes, but at least it was something.

Both Sam and Clint were trying to suppress their laughs at the awkward situation, Sam being more successful than Clint. Tony sent the archer a half-assed glare, which only succeeded in making the other laugh harder.

“You—you two look—look like toddlers whose parents are forcing them to get along!” He wheezed between laughs.

“That’s rich coming from you,” Tony replied with a signature eye-roll.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. I am a perfectly responsible, mature adult.”

“The last time you used the kitchen I found mustard on my ceiling, Barton. My ceiling. Do you have any idea how high these ceilings are?” Tony said, gesturing above.

“I will not apologize for art.”

The whole team was looking amused at this point. Sam had devolved to all out cackling; even Bruce was trying to hide the small chuckles which threatened to escape. Tony happened to look over at Steve and was surprised to find the man smiling. Steve caught Tony’s gaze and his smile turned more genuinely apologetic than his words had been. He shrugged minisculely and, to Tony, it made the man look much younger. Tony shot Steve a small smile in return, nodding his head. Yeah, they’d be okay, at least for now.

Natasha interrupted the moment. “I’m surrounded by actual children,” she said, shaking her head, though her features told them she wasn't actually mad.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the lack of Peter in this chapter, I promise our favourite web-slinger will be making his entrance soon!
Thanks again for reading and for any feedback :)
Chapter Three

Chapter Summary

Tony pays Peter a visit, and almost has a nice moment with Bucky.

Peter can't believe how cool his life just became.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Things had calmed down substantially since the team had been faced with the reality of the Sokovia Accords, most being placated by Tony’s assurance that amendments could be made after the initial bill was signed. Steve still seemed distressed by the prospect, but Tony had come to learn that much of it also stemmed from having Bucky back, which was an anxiety that was manifesting in all aspects of the soldier's life.

Tony could understand that; after all, he was sitting at that very moment watching another YouTube video of Spider-Man taking down criminals. Earlier, the kid had taken a pretty bad hit that had made Tony wince. Sure, Parker had brushed the hit off fairly easily, but Tony didn’t like the thought of leaving him on his own.

He looked over at the Spider-Man suit that now lay finished on one of the desks in his workshop. It seemed like it was time to pay Peter Parker a visit.

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Tony was absolutely loving this—aside from the fruitcake—who seriously even liked fruitcake? Probably Steve.

That was besides the point, what Tony did love was the look on Parker’s face when he walked into the tiny apartment he shared with his aunt and saw Tony Stark himself seated on the couch. He couldn’t help but crack a huge grin as the flustered teen tried desperately to play it cool.

He also loved the confused naivety about the “Stark internship,” followed by the sheer anxiety that flowed through the boy when Tony confronted him about his after-school hobby. Seriously, Tony would bet the kid couldn't lie to save his life, it was pathetically hilarious. How May Parker hadn’t figured out the truth already was beyond him.

So after teasing the kid rather relentlessly—especially about the pajamas—Tony gave him the suit. Under pain of torture, he probably still wouldn't admit to the giddy feeling in his chest as he told Parker to open up the case—and the look of astoundment as the kid clicked the locks and the lid popped up revealing what was inside. He looked between the suit and Tony as if it he was trying to figure out if it was actually real.

“This—this is the coolest thing I’ve ever seen! Is this for me?” He asked in wide-eyed wonder.

“Well it doesn’t fit me,” Tony replied, nonchalantly.

“Oh—oh my god—Oh my god—this is so—!”
“Yeah, well, it looked like you were in need of a bit of an upgrade.”

Peter gaped at Tony, looking between the suit and Tony himself in excited awe. Tony could metaphorically see the gears whirring in the kid’s head as he tried to wrestle for words in his obvious shock.

Finally, “Are—are those web-shooters?” he asked, pointing to the small devices on display next to the suit itself.

“Yep, and let me tell you, they’re made of better stuff than those dumpster DVD players you scavenge for parts.”

Tony saw Peter look at the old DVD player as if remembering he was still holding it. Quickly, the teen deposited it on his bed.

Tony scooped up the old pajamas that he had uncovered earlier. “Just promise to do us both a favour, okay?”

“Uh—uh huh—yeah of—of course!” Peter stuttered, obviously trying to regain some semblance of control.

“Burn this.”

Tony pressed the cloth into the teen’s hands.

“Oh, sure thing, Mr. Stark.”

Tony nodded.

Peter shoved the old suit under his bed once he was sure Tony wasn’t looking.

“Oh, and in case you’re wondering, no, this does not mean you’re an Avenger.” Tony added, turning back to Parker to give him a pointed look.

“Oh… uh, right—okay.” Parker looked momentarily disappointed but perked back up quickly. “So then, why are you giving this to me? Not that I’m complaining Mr. Stark—this—this is incredible!”

Tony was silent for a few moments, contemplating his answer. “You’ve shown some real guts out there. You like helping people—like to look out for the little guy, right?”

“Yeah—yeah, exactly!”

Tony nodded. “I’m not going to tell you you’re too young to do what you’ve been doing. It’s not my place, and even if it was, I have a feeling it would fall on deaf ears. So, what I can do is try and make it so you don’t die before you graduate high school. So enjoy the suit, kid. We’ll be keeping an eye on you.”

“Yes—of course Mr. Stark, I—uh—thanks—thank you!”

“All right, now as far as your aunt is concerned, I was here offering you an internship at Stark Industries. Roll with it and maybe in a few years, you might actually get it.”

Tony watched as Parker nodded, wide-eyed, and had to hold back a laugh.

“All right, keep up the good work, Spider-Man.”
“I will, Mr. Stark.” It was the first thing Parker had said with confidence.

“Good. See you around, kid.”

Tony was smiling as he got back into his car. It was refreshing, meeting someone with that level of optimism, someone who still had the ability to have so much hope. Parker was a good kid, someone who really had their heart in the right place.

“I take it your little meet-and-greet went well, then?” Happy asked from behind the wheel.

“Yeah, it did, he’s a good kid. Speaking of, I have a job for you.”

Happy glanced at him from the rear-view mirror with a face of distrust. Tony’s smile widened.

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Putting on the suit for the first time was absolutely magical. It was a memory that Peter was sure he’d never forget. He had giggled—yes, giggled in glee when, after putting on the mask, all the tech began to light up before his eyes. He couldn’t believe it, even as he swung through the city, testing his new web-shooters (and oh my GOD were they cool). A part of him was convinced he was going to wake up to Aunt May telling him to get up for school, because there was no way Tony Stark had been sitting on his couch pretending to enjoy his aunt’s rather abysmal baking.

He couldn’t help but let out a little whoop of joy as he moved through the air. The speed and accuracy at which his web-shooters were operating blew him away. Everything felt so natural and smooth. The suit itself was light and flexible, but also appeared to be durable—honestly, Peter was beyond excited to study it more closely.

Not for the first time, Peter wished there was someone he could confide in about his secret life, because at that moment, his chest felt like it was going to burst with how happy he felt. Tony-freaking-Stark, Iron-Man himself was not only in Peter’s house, but had just given him a no-joke, very-real super suit. HOW COOL WAS THAT?

Then again, even if someone else did know, would they even believe him? Peter didn’t even believe it and he was wearing the thing.

Peter scanned the city blocks looking for any suspicious activity. Now, he could never, in good faith, say he would ever wish for crimes to happen, however; it would be really cool if he could test out the new gear in combat. The suit was amazing, and Peter definitely didn’t have any complaints, though it was going to take some getting used to. There was a substantial lack of resistance in comparison to the homemade suit—and a couple of times, he found himself missing—or almost missing—his mark. He was going to have to get used to not putting as much force behind his movements, lest he wipe-out on another roof.

Peter stopped upon a lower building’s roof, overlooking a couple of his favourite food trucks. From below he heard someone call out to him, asking him to show-off a bit. Peter was more than happy to oblige and did a couple of flips as the guy on the sidewalk filmed it on his phone.

“You’re the best, Spider-Man! Great new outfit, bro!” The guy called after pocketing his phone again. Peter waved goodbye and swung off, feeling pretty dang great.

Dinner with Aunt May that night was fantastic; she had declared that Peter could choose to go anywhere he liked in celebration of his new internship. He felt a little bad about lying, especially
seeing how supportive and excited she was on his behalf. It hadn’t been easy keeping his Spider-Man persona away from May, but it was something he knew he had to do. It would be way too easy for her to turn into a target—not to mention that she would probably ground him for the rest of his natural life. She would probably go full-Dursleys and install bars over his window, and Peter didn’t have any Weasleys to save him. A brief image of Iron-Man blasting open his bedroom window nearly sent the teen into a fit of giggles he had to quickly stifle with a cough.

He looked up to see his Aunt smiling at him, fondly.

“I told you that if you kept shining someone would take notice, you’re so talented and now you have an opportunity to really do something you love. I’m just so proud of you! And—and I know Ben would’ve been, too.”

Peter smiled, “Thanks, Aunt May.”

Things hadn’t been easy on either of them since his Uncle Ben’s passing, and he knew his Aunt had suspicions about what he got up to—especially when he’d come home with bruises. Though, Peter thought that she credited it mostly to bullying.

He felt really bad about causing her excess anxiety, but he also knew that if he told her the truth it would only make it much, much worse. So on those nights when things had been a little rough, and he came home a little battered up and she would question him, he would give only vague replies or even dodge the questions entirely—all the while pretending like he didn’t see the tightness around her eyes.

But tonight wasn’t one of those nights, tonight was good—fantastic even. Peter really couldn’t have been happier.

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Tony stumbled into the kitchen, his body heavy, uncoordinated and drowsy from an overall lack of sleep. He had been pulling lots of hours in his lab, playing with different tech for both work and personal projects. There was still a lot of tension in the air since the team still hadn’t come to a unanimous decision on how to proceed with the Accords, and as per his usual fashion, Tony decided to put off facing what was happening for as long as he possibly could, drowning himself in work.

Blindly, Tony reached for the coffee pot, which he knew was filled, based on the pleasant aroma which carried through the communal quarters.

Tony filled up a mug, turned to sit at the kitchen island, and almost dropped his coffee as he nearly jumped out of his skin.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” he swore, his free hand over his arc reactor. “Gonna give me a bloody heart attack, Barnes.”

To his credit, the assassin did look a little uncomfortable.

“Sorry,” he said, quietly.

Tony was rather surprised to be acknowledged at all; from his understanding, Barnes wasn’t much of a talker—well, to anyone other than Steve, anyway.

Things lapsed quickly into an awkward silence.
“So—uh—is everything to your liking here?”

Barnes nodded. Tony nodded back.

“Uh, okay, good, good—though, if there’s anything that you think of that you need just—just let me or Friday know and it will be arranged.”

Barnes was silent just long enough for Tony to believe he wasn’t going to respond at all.

“Thank you. Though—” he paused, his brow pulled into a slight frown, “I don’t know exactly why you’re offering all this to me.”

“All what?”

“You not only sneak me back into the country, but you also give me asylum under your own roof.” He was staring intently at Tony now with a hint of suspicion, though Tony figured he couldn’t fault him that, after what the man had been through.

Tony’s first instinct was to either shrug off the question or resort to humor, because really, Barnes had a point, and Tony didn’t quite know how to face it. Tony did sneak an ex-assassin into a country where he’s wanted for multiple acts of terrorism, and he was allowing him to reside on his property.

“Well, when you put it like that.” Tony huffed.

Clint walked into the kitchen, interrupting whatever Barnes was going to say in return.

“He lives!” Clint proclaimed, gesturing wildly at Tony.

Tony rolled his eyes. It was too early for Clint’s—well, anything.

He turned back to Barnes, only to find the other man gone. He really needed to get that guy a bell.

Chapter End Notes

Alright a little taste of Peter in this chapter, from here on out things will include him a lot more!
Chapter Four

Chapter Summary

WARNING: MAJOR spoilers for Spider-Man Homecoming. I'm sure you've all seen the movie by now (multiple times) or you wouldn't be reading this, but I'm putting up the warning anyway.

So the events of Homecoming, or otherwise known as: How Peter Tries To Give Tony A Heart Attack.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It had been months since Peter had been gifted the Spider Suit, months of fighting crime and simply doing good deeds around the area. It had also been months since he had heard anything from Tony Stark. Honestly, Peter had thought that he would have at least met with the man a few times to help keep up the pretense of an internship. The excuse for staying out late and missing class was growing old with the teen, especially since he had very little to back it up with. Thankfully, Aunt May apparently received a generic monthly email assuring her of Peter's continued work. Probably sent by an actual intern, Peter mused, only a little bitterly.

That wasn't to say he was no longer grateful, he definitely was, the suit was incredible and afforded him a higher level of protection than the one he had stitched together. Peter had also been in contact with a man named Happy—a name which Peter found almost funny it was so ironic, he didn’t think there was a happy bone in his body—who he was supposed to report any suspicious activity to. Peter might have gone overboard in the reports, though, but could anyone really blame him? It had been particularly boring as of recent weeks, and he had maybe been hoping that he might have gotten to help on missions and whatnot. He groaned. He was supposed to be studying for a test in calculus, not moping about things he couldn't change.

He felt if he could just prove himself somehow, that maybe he could get his foot in the door. Who knew superheroes had to go through the same “Experience Mandatory” revolving door everyone else had to fight.

Peter glanced at the clock, maybe he could get a good look around the neighborhood. His aunt was working a nightshift at the hospital, so he didn’t have to worry about her finding him missing. He looked back at his homework and sighed. He wasn’t getting much further tonight regardless of what he did, he was too distracted. With his mind made up he quickly changed and made his way out into the city.

Things were quiet in the streets and it was driving Peter insane. He felt a little bad that he felt so annoyed by it. He knew it should be a good thing—he was really helping out—but his mind had been restless all day and he just needed to find an outlet. It had been getting harder and harder to balance his dual lives. His schooling had been suffering as of late. He had dropped out of all of his extracurricular activities, except for the decathlon team—though he had a feeling that wouldn’t last much longer, either. His aunt had taken notice and it was hard on him to see the disappointment in her eyes. Peter sighed, he really wanted something to punch.
That’s when he met up with some would-be ATM robbers wearing cheesy Avengers masks. At first, things seemed to be going fairly smoothly, but then there was the explosion that sent his favourite deli up in flames. Things got pretty out of hand pretty damn quick and Peter was left reeling.

That hadn’t been any normal weapon, it was scary powerful. Way too powerful to be in any criminals’ hands, let alone some robbers. Peter was left rather shaken, but he knew he had to get to the bottom of it; there was no way he could let tech like that reign free in the city.

He quickly tried to get in contact with Happy. This wasn’t the level of stuff he usually took on, and he was sure it was something Mr. Stark would want to know about.

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Things continued to go downhill from there. First, his one actual friend, Ned, discovered his secret identity as Spider-Man after Peter had been dumb enough to forget the other was supposed to meet him back at his apartment. Lapses in memory like that had been happening a little too much lately. It was really starting to wear him down.

Then, there was the matter of the super-scary alien tech, and the fact that no one in the higher-ups seemed to care about it. Because of course it would be okay to completely ignore alien weapons capable of great destruction being passed around to common thugs like Super Soakers. He wasn’t bitter at all. He continued to try and interrupt deals and help out, but it would be nice to know someone had his back.

Then there was the issue of the decathlon team. Peter really didn’t want to drop out of his last group activity—May had been concerned enough after he quit band. Also, there was the thing with Liz. Decathlon was really the only time he was able to socialize with her—although being slightly awkward, rather than completely—but it was getting hard to balance both, and with this new and dangerous tech on the streets, he was starting to think he might not have a choice.

Peter was starting to feel the strain, it was just so hard trying to juggle everything and act like he was totally fine, especially since he knew he was doing a pretty poor job of that, too, based on how often his behavior was called into question.

Like a lighthouse in a storm, Peter was given a ray of hope. Liz was having a party, a party that he was invited to. He, Peter Benjamin Parker, had been invited to a legit high school party hosted by the girl of his dreams. It was his chance—his chance to go out and have a normal night, be a normal teen and maybe, just maybe, actually get a chance to bring his name up in status.

Okay, sure, there was the little catch that Spider-Man had to make an appearance, but that was something he could pull. Then all his classmates would believe he was friends with a superhero and BAM—instant popularity. No more being shoved into lockers or teased or pushed around, and if he was extra lucky, maybe he could impress Liz enough to get a date.

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In his head it had seemed pretty easy, but as his aunt dropped him and Ned off, Peter couldn’t help but be overrun with anxiety. What if he messed up and people learnt he was Spider-Man, what if this was all some elaborate joke, what if it wasn’t but he embarrassed himself anyway because he was a walking magnet for awkward situations? There were too many variables, none of which he seemed to have much control over. Both May and Ned seemed to feel a lot more confident in how the night would go in comparison to his own spiraling thoughts, but then, Ned seemed to strongly believe the hat he donned would win him popularity points and Peter wasn’t about to tell him
otherwise. So, with a deep breath, he tried to play off their optimistic attitudes and headed in.

To be honest, things started out okay, Liz had been there to greet him right away—and oh man, she was gorgeous when she smiled. Sure, Flash was there to try and ruin his mood as always; however, it seemed to have the opposite effect. Instead, Peter felt more ready than ever to one-up the little troll who loved to try and make his life miserable. So after a quick rundown of the plan with Ned, Peter snuck away to put on his suit.

He was supposed to swing in from the roof, make a dramatic display, and give himself (Peter) a shout-out, before seemingly leaving so he could rejoin the party as Peter Parker. Once on the roof, though, Peter’s nerves flared up once more; he just had the overwhelming sense that something was going to go terribly wrong.

That’s when he saw the explosion.

He groaned. Of course—of course the bad guys would choose now to reappear. They couldn’t’ve waited like thirty minutes for Spider-Man to make his entrance and leave. Nothing was ever that easy for Peter, was it?

Luckily, the fireball was far enough away that it didn’t seem to draw any of the party-goers’ attentions.

He was tempted to just let it be, but he had been waiting for this exact moment for a while now. There could be a deal going on right now that could lead him to the guys who were selling the weapons. This wasn’t an opportunity he could pass up.

So he set off in the direction of the smoke.

Traveling in the city center was always easy for Spider-Man; there were plenty of tall buildings for which to attach his webs, but out here in suburbia, he mostly had to go roof and backyard hopping, which was just awkward and slow. It didn’t improve his already grouchy mood in the least.

Coming upon the site made him perk up a bit. Peter Parker’s luck may have been complete shit, but Spider-Man just found his golden ticket. There were three perps and an unmarked white van. It was obvious he was getting a first look at a sale—his blood throbbed in excitement—this was exactly what he had been waiting for!

Peter watched for a few moments in order to get a good idea of what was going on. Two of the men seemed to be dealers, while the third was the buyer, who didn’t seem too impressed by the show of force from the weapons he was being shown. Obviously Henchman One and Two were trying to upsell their merch. Peter knew he should probably be careful—take things slow and quiet—there were a lot of big guns in the van he would rather not be on the wrong end of. Peter hoped that maybe he could follow the van and it would take him to wherever the bad guys’ hideout was, all he had to do was—the sound of Ned’s ringtone pierced through the tense atmosphere, shattering it in a spectacular display of master yodeling. Peter’s heart lurched as he fumbled for his phone, mashing the block call button as it lit up on the screen.

The silence was deafening, and for a moment, Peter watched as the perps looked around at each other for all of a second before realizing it wasn’t any of them. Well, so much for a stealthy approach, the teen thought as he jumped into view.

Things went downhill extraordinarily quickly. The buyer bailed immediately after it was established that he hadn’t set up the sellers, and said sellers then began raining hell down on Peter.

Every time he thought he had the upper hand, a new gun was being fired at him. The one
Caucasian guy had a really mean electric weapon that was like the unholy offspring of a Taser and knuckledusters on steroids. God that had hurt something fierce, he didn’t have time to dwell on the pain, though, because Henchman Two had hopped in the van and sped off as fast as possible. Peter had to act fast—this might be the only chance he had to catch these assholes. Quickly, he shot some webbing to the back of the vehicle, but soon found himself being dragged helplessly as he was shot at relentlessly. The whole situation was just bad, and Peter would be lying if he said he wasn’t scared.

He was beginning to think he might actually win the fight when things went from bad to worse—and by worse he meant being hauled into the sky by something out of a horror movie. The new assailant soared in on huge bird-like wings of metal, his face completely hidden by a mask—the tech of which made his eyes shine out like two small torches in the darkness. He was silent, fast, and efficient. If he wasn’t obviously one of the bad guys, and wasn’t at that very moment trying to kill him, Peter would have been impressed by the display of tech. As it was, Peter was fighting desperately against the man as he took them higher and higher into the air. Peter couldn’t remember being so terrified.

Suddenly, he was falling. There was nothing for him to attach webs to as he spun closer to the water below. A parachute opened, but it was useless with the way he spiraled downward; it tangled around his body like a net, further restricting his movements. He fought against the material, but it seemed hopeless. He had to keep trying, he had to—the water hit him like a ton of bricks, forcing the air from his lungs and enveloping his body in frigid cold. His body screamed in the agony of it, and Peter was truly panicked now. He was trapped, he was trapped and he couldn’t breathe—he flailed against his bonds, the icy water made his limbs feel so heavy. Oh god, this was it, he was going to die here, caught at the bottom of the river. No, no, no he couldn’t die, he needed to keep going, he had to stop them—but everything hurt—he couldn’t breathe—he couldn’t breathe—he couldn’t—

Something grabbed him. Peter felt himself being pulled, he didn’t know what way—he had lost all sense of what was up or down, but he couldn’t fight it, he was at the mercy of whatever held him now. Then he broke the surface. He gasped and sputtered as air tried to make its way back into his lungs. He was dropped onto the bank of the river on his hands and knees, where he knelt, coughing, gagging, and hacking as his body tried to dispel the water that had snaked its way into his lungs and sinuses.

Peter looked around once he was able to. It looked like he was in a park of some kind, next to the river, and to his right was none other than Iron Man hovering over him. Or, well, just his suit. As it turns out, apparently Mr. Stark could control his suits remotely as long as he had a Wi-Fi connection. Peter sat rather miserably on top of a climbing gym, shivering pathetically as Mr. Stark scolded him, though through part of his spiel he turned on a heating function Peter hadn’t even known existed, and thank god for that.

After, Peter was left with a bit of a bad taste in his mouth. Apparently, along with a magical heater, there was also a tracking device in his suit, which the teen found disconcerting at best and violating at worst. The fact that he had been told to forget about the scary bird-guy and the gun operation definitely left him bitter. How could he just ignore something that big? There was no way in hell he was going to let them get away with this. He had agreed, of course, I mean, not even Spider-Man was ballsy enough to say no to Iron Man’s face, err, suit.

So Iron Man flew off once more, probably to disappear for another few months, and Peter went back to the site where the van had crashed. Of course there was nothing much left of the incident, apart from some scrap—and the power source from one of the weapons. Peter pocketed the glowing stone, he couldn’t wait to study it.
Of course the stone thing was a bomb, of course he found this out after missing his decathlon competition after being knocked out by that asshole Vulture, and of course said bomb had to go off with his classmates and teacher trapped in an elevator at the top of the most inconvenient structure to try and climb. There was a different kind of fear here than at the river—at the river he had been helpless and confused—here, he had to stare at what he was afraid of and force himself to keep going. Both kinds of fear were potent but they were different; in a way, this was almost harder.

It didn’t help that he had a helicopter opening fire at him—apparently that's how they dealt with people climbing their national landmarks here. Peter was suddenly missing the days he helped cats down from trees and little old ladies cross the street.

He had caught the elevator just in time as it began to fall, and had most of his classmates out of the elevator when his webbing gave way from the immense weight of the contraption. For a horrifying, split-second, he thought he was going to watch Liz die. With lightning-quick reflexes, and a bit of brave stupidity, he was able to rescue the elevator from total destruction and Liz along with it.

If the experience had solidified anything, it was that these weapons needed to be removed from the streets and their operations needed to be taken down.

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Tony Stark got three pings. The first, when he was abroad and Parker had nearly drowned in the river; the second, when the kid had saved his decathlon team in DC; and the third—the third was about five minutes ago.

It started like this: Tony had been on his way to an important board meeting when he had decided to call the kid to congratulate him on his work in DC. He thought the kid deserved some praise—it was obvious how hard he had worked, and he had done well. He hadn’t backed down when things got hard and he had saved people, and if Tony wanted to check in to make sure he was actually okay, well, that was neither here nor there.

However, something seemed off when he had called Parker, the kid was acting weird—well, weirder than usual. He was distracted, and covering up the distraction with ridiculous lies (as if he hadn’t known about Parker quitting band—who did the kid think he was?), and then he had had the nerve to hang up on Tony Stark. He had been so ready to march right up to the kid and demand an explanation—because there had better be a damn good one—however, just as he’d been about to tell his driver to turn the hell around, Pepper—who had been with him—sent him her signature death glare.

“Don’t you dare, Tony.”

“He hung up on ME.”

“He’s a teenager, they’re moody. Get over it. You are not getting out of this meeting, Tony. It’s been months since the board has seen head or tails of you.”

“I don’t see the point, Pep. You’re the CEO.”

“I may be the CEO, but it’s still your name on the logo. Quite frankly, it makes my job harder when the board starts to think they can get away with bullshit because their face-man isn’t giving a shit.”

Tony put up his hands in a placating gesture. “Whoa, whoa, okay, I’m going, I get it.” He grew
quiet thinking about the kid; he was still feeling disgruntled about his brief correspondence with Parker.

Pepper sighed, heavily. “I get it, Tony, this isn’t fun, but it is necessary.” She paused, a small smirk playing on her face, “You can go yell at your kid later.”

Tony choked. “Pepper! He—he’s not—that—that’s ridiculous!”

“What? He’s your superhero protégé kid, isn’t he?” She said in fake obliviousness.

Tony frowned.

“Look, here we are.”

Tony groaned, “Do I ha—”

“Yes.” She cut him off, firmly.

“Fine.”

It had been a measly ten minutes into the meeting when Friday sent him an alert on his phone. Peter was in danger. Tony felt his chest clench, as if the shrapnel was still imbedded in him. He was moving before his brain had time to register anything else. He was deaf to the shouts that followed him as he ran from the room, demanding Friday have a suit ready for him by the time he was outside. He burst through the doors of the Stark building, nearly cracking the glass.

“Friday!”

The armour flew down and opened before him, enveloping him.

“Programming coordinates into the suit now.” Friday informed him.

“Friday, do we have eyes on Peter?” He asked as he took off.

A newscast appeared to the side of his screen.

“What the fuck is he doing?” He yelled out as he watched as shots rang out from the ferry.

Tony felt his stomach drop as an explosion ripped through the ship. His breath caught in his throat. Where was Peter? He couldn’t see Peter, where the hell was he? There was smoke and screaming and the groaning screech of metal resounding in his ears and he couldn’t. See. Peter. He had his thrusters at full power—he was only minutes out—but the ferry was splitting apart. It was sinking, he wouldn’t make it. Innocent people were going to die—Peter was going to—there was a flash of red and blue. Tony let out a breath of relief. Spider-Man was swinging through and around the ferry with impressive speed, shooting his webs, desperate to hold the ferry together.

Tony’s feeling of relief was cut short as anger flared through him. What the actual HELL had he done? Tony hadn’t felt anger like this in a long time. He had TOLD him—very clearly—to step out of it, to leave the case alone. Now, not only were dozens upon dozens of civilians in danger, not only had Peter put himself in mortal danger, but his own investigations with the FBI had been interrupted, and the Vulture had escaped once more.

When Tony arrived, it was to see Peter strung up, holding together his own webs—strung up between the pieces of the ferry. His anger rose. Out of all the idiotic—

“Hey Spider-Man, how’s band practice?” He called out derisively.
Tony got to immediate work repairing the ship. Civilians cheered and called out praises, but he couldn’t hear them above the ringing in his ears and his own raging thoughts.

Once done, he retreated with Parker to let the authorities take over the ship. He was more than ready to tear into the kid by that point, and the attitude Peter started throwing was not helping his case. Then the kid had to go and taunt him—imply that he didn’t care—and Tony would be lying if he said it hadn’t hurt. The hurt fueled his anger though, and rather than reply, he stepped out of the suit. He took a small amount of pleasure at the surprised and-then-somewhat-panicked look that crossed the kid’s face at his appearance. After, there had been a lot of back-and-forth as Parker tried to defend himself. Tony only heard excuses, but for the first time, he was really reminded that this was a kid in front of him. As he berated the youth he couldn’t help but get flashes of his own childhood, and it scared him how much he sounded like his own father in that moment.

When he had shown up he hadn’t really had much of a plan, other than fix the ship and get Peter as far away as he could, but looking at the kid in front of him, he knew he couldn’t, in good conscious, let this happen again—and it would happen again. Spider-Man had already proven that he wasn’t much of a listener, and Tony knew that, despite what he told him now, he wasn’t going to let the issue drop. He would continue to chase down the Vulture until he got himself killed—he knew, because that’s probably what he would’ve done and like Parker said, he was trying to be just like him. Tony didn’t know how to handle that admittance. The idea that anyone would use him as a role model was completely ludicrous. So Tony knew that Spider-Man was going to follow the case whether Tony disallowed him to or not—unless—unless Tony took away the means in which he could follow through. He knew what he had to do, but it didn’t mean he would like doing it. He glanced at Parker—at Peter, who was looking at him so openly, and—Tony looked away. He could picture how his face would crumble and break.

“I’m going to need that suit back.” Tony nearly took back his words at the desperate pleas that followed—until Peter said something that brought back his ire full force.

“But I’m nothing without this suit!”

Tony rounded on him, “If you’re nothing without this suit, then you shouldn’t have it.” He pointed at him. That had shut the kid up pretty quick, until he began whimpering about not having any other clothes.

So naturally, Tony had stormed into the nearest thrift store and picked up the ugliest outfit he could find, and then forced Peter to make his way back to his aunt’s in a walk of shame.

Maybe a little unnecessary, but the kid had really struck a nerve and, honestly, needed to be taught a lesson. Still, Tony left with a bad taste in his mouth, and a heavy feeling sitting low in his gut that reminded him too closely of guilt. After all, he had been the one to approach the kid in the first place, he had been responsible for him—or was supposed to be—and had almost lost him twice now. Tony swallowed down the lump building in his throat and made a beeline to his bar.

He really hadn’t been expecting that fourth ping.

The call had come in late, while Tony had been buried in a mountain of papers from the senate and the UN. The plane he had set up to deliver his most sensitive equipment had been brought down in a shower of fire and shrapnel. Happy himself had called, his voice panicked as he relayed what had happened. When he got to the part about the Vulture being found tied up to a pile of crates in an all-too-familiar webbing, with a friendly note attached—well, for a moment Tony thought he was actually experiencing a heart attack. Soon after—once he had calmed himself down—he lamented about how this friggen kid was actually going to be the death of him.
Chapter End Notes

Phew this was a long chapter to write~
Finally a chapter with a bit more Peter!
Hope you all enjoyed, the Next Chapter will be out next week as always! <3
Chapter Five

Chapter Summary

Peter makes it home after the fight with Vulture.

Tony and Steve have a conversation.

Chapter Notes

Happy September, here's the chapter a day early!

Honestly I realized that tomorrow I was going to be much too busy to post anything so I'm posting it now.

Enjoy~

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Peter laid himself down gingerly on his bed, groaning as he sunk into the soft mattress. Once lying down, Peter found it hard to move at all; he knew his healing factor would take care of whatever injuries he had sustained, but that didn’t mean he didn’t hurt. It had been hard to sneak into his bedroom; once the fight had ended and the adrenaline had worn off, Peter had been hit with the full brunt of his injuries.

So, getting a building dropped on you, fighting an arms-master, and crashing on a beach in a spray of fire and metal, hurt. Who would’ve guessed?

Peter raised his head to examine his chest and sighed at the large bruises and cuts that littered his flesh. Of course, many of them were already fading. He sighed. He missed the days when painkillers actually worked on him—now his body simply metabolized the medicine too quickly for it to take effect. That being said, he had never received any hospital-grade pain relievers—Peter never went to a hospital when he was injured. It just seemed too risky to him—he was too afraid that his fast recovery would rouse suspicions. Not only that, but obviously his biology wasn’t exactly all normal, and who knew what a doctor would see if he had to get tests done. The last thing he wanted was to turn into some kind of science experiment—the very thought sent shivers up his spine. He groaned again as sharp pains shot through his chest. These were definitely the worst injuries he had received, like, ever.

His phone ringing startled him back from his own self-assessment.

He rolled over, wincing as he did so, to grab his phone off his floor. He briefly considered not answering—it had been a really long day—but he knew that his friend wouldn’t stop calling until he picked up.

“Hey, Ned.”
“Oh my God, dude! Thank God you're okay! You are okay, right? Have you seen the news? They’re talking about an attack on Stark property, they have pictures of the crash, it looks super messed up. That was you and bird-guy right? They’re calling it a terrorist attack and that someone has been arrested.”

Peter couldn’t help but crack a smile. “Yeah, that was the Vulture’s work, and yeah, the police or FBI or whoever probably has him now. I tied him up to the stuff he tried to steal.”

Peter heard Ned start laughing, “Aw man, that's so cool, you must’ve been such a badass! But seriously dude, I was super worried when I couldn’t get a hold of you!”

“Yeah, don’t worry, Ned.” Another sharp pain caused Peter to let out a series of coughs. Real smooth, Peter, he berated himself mentally, then worked on turning himself over onto his back, since putting pressure on his ribs really wasn’t helping him at all.

“That didn't sound really good—”

“I’m okay, Ned. I just took a few good hits, it's nothing that won't heal in a few days.”

“Things looked pretty serious on TV,” Ned began, no longer sounding as excited as earlier. “Like, there was a lot of damage and stuff.”

“Yeah—uh—it got pretty intense.”

There was silence on the other end of the line.

“But like I said, I'm fine!”

Peter’s phone began to beep, alerting him of another call trying to come through. He sighed and rejected it without looking at the ID. He barely had the energy to talk to Ned, never mind having to deal with what was probably just one of those automated phone scams.

“Do you, like, need something or whatever?” Ned continued, hesitantly. “I can be over in like, forty minutes!”

“Thanks, but I’m fine—really I am, I just need to get some rest.”

“Oh—right, you're probably really tired after tonight! Sorry, I’ll let you sleep!” Ned spoke in a rush.

“Okay, I'll, uh, see you on Monday or something.”

“Yeah, okay. Night Peter!”

“Night.”

Peter pressed the end call button and rubbed his hands over his eyes, his head was starting to hurt. He focused on evening out his breathing; he must’ve cracked some ribs or something—probably when the warehouse had come down. The memory made Peter break out into shivers. That was an experience he never wanted to repeat. Ever. That feeling of being trapped in helpless agony. God, it had hurt. He had honestly thought for a few moments that he was going to die there, alone and afraid, but Mr. Stark had been right; Peter was more than just some (awesome) tech, more than just his suit. He was Spider-Man, and he had been fighting for a year before Mr. Stark had come along, and he was going to keep fighting. That’s just who he was. He wasn’t going to back down and retreat when things got bad.
It was like Mr. Stark had said all those months ago: Peter liked to stand up for the little guys, and that’s exactly what he was going to keep doing. He was going to protect those who couldn’t protect themselves, because if he could save even one person from feeling helpless and afraid, then it would have been worth every second. So super-suit or no super-suit, Spider-Man was still going to be there, whether to help cats down from trees or to stop supervillains.

It was with these thoughts that Peter finally drifted off into a restless slumber.

---

Tony frowned down into his glass of whiskey, as if it held all the answers to life’s problems.

He huffed and downed some more of the liquid, before looking back out over the city skyline. He had just gotten back from helping clear up the mess of what was, at one point, a plane, and was now trying to calm his beating heart while out on one of his balconies.

Apparently, taking away the Spider-Man suit hadn’t done squat—the little shit had still gone and tried to fight a crazed arms-dealer wielding superweapons built using alien tech. That was just it though, wasn’t it? Peter hadn’t tried to do anything; he had fought the Vulture (as people were now calling him), he had fought the man and won, effectively closing down his operations, and saving multi-millions of dollars’ worth of Tony’s own personal tech from winding up in the hands of people who would misuse it for lord-only-knows-what evil. Tony had already gone down that road, and it wasn’t an experience he would like to see repeated. Peter had disobeyed him, again, so yeah, he was pissed off as all hell. Tony was mad at Peter for explicitly defying him, for going to fight without proper protection, alone might he add, and for metaphorically giving him the finger in the process.

He almost wanted to laugh for a moment; he had told the kid if he wasn’t anything without his suit then he shouldn’t have it—so what does the kid go and do? He proves he is more, proves he can— and will—keep fighting with or without Tony’s endorsement, and damn if that didn’t that make Tony proud of him.

Tony had felt guilty taking away Peter’s suit. He knew how much it had meant to him, but he had felt pretty damn justified, especially after it became obvious Peter had forgotten why he had been gifted the suit in the first place. Tony had given him that tech because he saw something in him, something good that had the potential of being great, and he had wanted to help that develop. It, of course, hadn’t gone according to plan. Spider-Man had developed quickly, but somewhere Peter had lost himself along the way, had created some sort of mental wall between who he was as a person and Spider-Man, he forgot how they were one and the same.

So maybe it was good that he had taken the suit from Peter, maybe it’s what he needed in order to remember that, to make that connection again. Or maybe this was just Tony talking himself out of the guilt of taking away a teenaged troublemaker’s only protection.

He had seen the aftermath of the fight on the news and with his own eyes, and then the expense reports given to him by his own people. It really had been a shit show.

Peter had already been long gone by the time the cameras had shown up. It made Tony anxious not knowing what shape the boy was in. Peter should have been at his Homecoming dance like a normal kid, not fighting off supervillains. But Peter wasn’t a normal kid, was he? He was a part-time vigilante with no intention of stopping that particular career path.

Tony thought that maybe he should pay Spider-Man another visit. The thought made him nervous, though; Peter probably hated him at this point. He had tried to call him earlier but it had gone
straight to voicemail, which of course he refused to leave. He sighed, the least he could do was buck up and give the kid his suit back. He had proven that he deserved it if nothing else. Also, the AI he had programmed into the suit—which now only answered to KAREN, for some reason—had been especially ornery and hadn’t taken to being separated from the boy very well at all.

Tony would have found it amusing, if it hadn’t cost him a couple hours of frustration as he tried to go about reviewing auto-recorded footage the suit took while being worn—only for the video files to become corrupted, skip, or just not open. At first he thought the AI had been malfunctioning, which nearly threw Tony into a panic, thinking he had been letting Peter swing around in potentially dangerous equipment; however, it became apparent rather quickly that the AI in question was just trying to make his life difficult, not anyone else’s.

He couldn’t blame it, though. After all, he had developed a soft spot for the kid pretty quickly, too.

The soft click of the patio door opening interrupted Tony’s thoughts. Curious, he turned his head to see who else would be up at this hour, and raised an eyebrow in question as he saw Steve walking up to him. Maybe he should have taken his pity party up to his private floor.

“A little late for you to be up, isn’t it, Cap?”

Steve shrugged. “Clint was forcing Bucky and I to watch a couple movies from my list that I still hadn’t gotten around to viewing.”

Tony nodded. “How is he settling in?”

Steve took a moment to respond. “I think he’s doing okay.”

Tony raised a skeptical brow.

“Well, as good as you could expect, all things considered.”

Tony nodded. “Good, that’s—good.”

The silence lasted just long enough to begin to turn awkward. Steve cleared his throat as if it could break the new feeling in the air. “I—uh—saw what happened on the news. Is everything okay?”

Tony was somewhat surprised at the question.

“Coming to check up on me, Cap?” He asked with a smirk.

Steve frowned, crossing his arms. “Just wanted to make sure everything is okay, I know the media has a way of... twisting things, and that we often hold back some of the details.”

Tony nodded. “True enough, but yes, to answer your question, everything turned out fine. Lost some tech to the damages, and that stealth-integrated plane wasn’t exactly cheap to build, but all things considered, it could have been a lot worse.”

“They caught the guy responsible?”

“Yeah, turns out it was the same guy running the weapons operation I had the FBI looking into. He must’ve taken offense to that.”

Steve huffed, good-naturedly. “Can’t imagine why.”

Tony smiled.
“They’re saying that that Spider-Man guy who’s been around the area is the one who got him.”

“Yep, he wrapped him up with a bunch of my tech he was able to salvage.”

“Impressive. Maybe we should invite him down to HQ sometime.”

Tony felt a flare of protectiveness course through him so strongly that it startled him. He bit his tongue to prevent himself from ruining the moment by saying something that might offend the soldier. Things had been a little tense between he and Steve since the Accords had popped up, in fact, this was the first time that Steve had sought him out since before the governmental shit-storm, and Tony didn’t want to mess it up.

He hated the thought of his childhood hero thinking less of him, he also hated that he hated it. He would also rather die than let Steve know what Captain America had meant to him as a kid. As Tony thought it over he began to, however reluctantly, come to the conclusion that it would be a good idea to invite Spider-Man along to meet the team. Tony hadn’t let Spider-Man’s identity out, even amongst his fellow teammates. Happy and Pepper were the only other people who knew that Spider-Man was Peter Parker. Tony didn’t want that to change either, especially with the Accords on the table. However, Peter was inexperienced, he was obviously a self-taught fighter, and though remarkably smart, had a problem with coming up with solid plans. Tony had no intention of releasing Peter’s secret out to the Avengers, but inviting Peter to visit the facilities as Spider-Man could be a good opportunity to help the teen improve his skills.

Tony’s thoughts were suddenly rushing. Sure, he had given the kid the suit, but he hadn’t really taught him what to do with it. Maybe that had been one of the problems. It was obvious that Peter wasn’t going to lay down his side job, so maybe Tony could help further his education in combat instead. There were plenty of people around HQ, not just the Avengers, who could help train Peter. Tony would have to be careful, and Peter would have to wear his suit constantly while there in order to protect his identity, but it was a plausible notion.

“Tony—hey, Tony?”

Tony snapped back to the present. “Sorry, Cap. My mind wandered.”

Steve frowned, though. Tony noted that it didn’t seem to be in disapproval, more—was it concern?

“When’s the last time you had any sleep, Tony?”

The question kind of took him off guard, and so did the fact that he had to think about it for a moment in order to come up with the answer.

He finally answered with a shrug, “It’s been a busy week, haven’t had much time to rest.”

“How come?”

Tony stopped himself from replying right away so he could consider his answer. He didn’t really want to lie to Steve, but telling him his worries about Peter was completely off the table, and he also didn’t want to start an argument by bringing up the Accords. Then again, maybe telling Steve what they were up against within the international governments would help bring some perspective to the issue—it could also end with him being thrown off his balcony. Again. However, Natasha did keep nagging them about communication or whatever, and he figured he could always just blame her if things went south, so—

“Tony?”
“Sorry, just have had a lot of work to do in the company, and here, and dealing with government bureaucrats is always a pain in the ass, no matter what country they're from. Especially when only half of the ones in your own country are siding with you.”

It was Steve’s turn to drag out the silence before his reply, “The Accords?”

Tony sighed. “Yeeep. I shouldn’t complain too much, considering how much I’ve been able to do, but it’s slow work.”

“You’ve been able to make headway, then?”

“Compared to what the bill was intended to be? Absolutely. Enough that I’d feel comfortable letting it pass? Not yet.”

“You explained a little bit during our last debriefing, but not really about what is was, more about what it is now, or rather its intent. Though I suppose I never really asked.” Steve had the decency to look a little sheepish at that.

Tony sent him a tired smirk. “Can’t say I really blame you Cap, you should’ve seen me when I read over the first draft.”

“How much worse was it?”

“Originally it was to be called The Superhuman Registration Act.”

“Quite the title. I’m guessing it’s as bad as it sounds.”

“Worse, luckily there was a lot of fighting over the bill before I even got involved that was making it hard to pass into legislation. After I became aware of it, I did everything in my power to have it scrapped.”

“What was it?”

Tony sighed heavily. “Just as it sounds, unfortunately. It was a document that suggested that any and all people who exhibited enhanced abilities had to, by law, register themselves with the government, where they would then be placed under security watch for the rest of their lives. It also stated that officials would have the liberty pick up, relocate, and otherwise dictate the lives of these individuals to the minutest detail. The government would also have liberty to punish those who resisted by any means and by any force necessary to eliminate the potential threat.”

Tony glanced towards Steve who was staring at him dumbfounded, his expression soon morphed into one of intense anger.

“So in other words, they wanted to enslave a whole class of people.” Steve stated, hotly.

“Yes, and I’m sure you, of all people, remember how it turned out the last time a government rounded people up to shackles and number.”

Tony watched as Steve’s eyes hardened and jaw muscles twitched. The blond nodded stiffly.

“Now, we have the Sokovia Accords. Instead of superhuman, we have superhero. Instead of a registration act, we have a few leashes. There are a lot of kids out there, now more than ever, born with strange abilities that they didn’t ask for but that make them no less human. They don’t deserve to live their lives in fear that the government will take them away from their families, lock them up, or kill them because they sneezed too loud.”
Kids like Peter, Tony thought as he continued, “Now, at least we’ve been able to write out the common civilian from the bill. The Sokovia Accords aren’t perfect, they may not ever be, but I’m working to make sure that they aren’t unconstitutional or just plain evil like the Registration Act would have been. In all honesty, Steve, the Avengers have been able to do a lot of shit with no repercussions,”

Steve opened his mouth like he was going to argue, but Tony held up his hand, “Let me finish.”

Steve nodded his assent though it looked particularly reluctant.

“I understand that what we do is necessary. There are things that governments and their militaries just aren’t equipped enough to handle. We shouldn’t have to stop what we do, but what we do is dangerous, not just for us, but for civilians. I know it would be worse if we didn’t intervene, but when we make a bad call, that’s a lot of lives that hang in the balance. Not only that, but if you’re looking at it from a foreign government’s position, you have a bunch of overpowered American assholes busting down your borders whenever they feel like it, reaping destruction.

The Avengers are necessary, the battle of New York proved that much, and just about everything we’ve been involved in since. The world needs people stronger than its villains, but Steve, with the way things are going, people are afraid that it’s only a matter of time before we make a call bad enough to put us in the spot of villainy. Honestly, I can’t blame them. Especially after Ultron.”

Tony let out a breath then shot back the last of his whiskey. Honestly, he hadn’t ever really spoken to someone about his feelings on the Accords, and he had never spoken about The Registration Act with someone who wasn’t already informed and—it felt good. Then Tony remembered who he was venting to and was quick to look over, since Steve had been suspiciously silent in the moments following his spiel.

Steve was looking out over the skyline like he had been doing earlier, face set in a serious but contemplative manner. The silence stretched a few moments more before the man finally spoke up.

“So what is your plan, what is your end goal with the Accords?” Steve diverted his attention back to Tony. Tony was relieved to hear that, though serious, his voice didn’t sound accusatory in any way.

Tony nodded. “Regardless of how you look at it, there are people in very powerful positions that won’t allow us to do as we please. Not all of them are war mongering asshats, but a few of them are. The short version is that I want something as far away from The Registration act as I can get.”

“And the longer version?”

Tony huffed a laugh, though it didn't carry much amusement. “The long version is that I’m fighting tooth-and-nail to make sure we have the abilities to continue to do good without turning into the government's personal attack dogs. We should be able to do what we need to in order to relay justice, but not at the cost of threatening foreign governmental powers, or their people. Maybe with the exception of Latveria, ‘cause fuck Doom.

That’s besides the point, though. Right now, our biggest challengers are those who wrote and are still in favour of the Registration Act. I won’t budge on our rights and freedoms as people, I’m not about to let anything like that go through without a fight. My endgame is to make sure the civilians of our country can continue to live out their lives as normally as possible and that The Avengers are still able to operate as is, and not as a branch of government. However, to do that, we are going to have to form partnerships with multiple governments, and no, it’s not the same thing.
I’m hoping to be able to help create a document that will still allow The Avengers to work outside of the USA, but in order to do so we will have to have an open line of dialogue set up with foreign parties. It’s like what Natasha keeps nagging us about—communication. Basically, I’m hoping to get us to a place where we can continue operating as usual, with the exception that we have to clock in for work. No matter what way we cut this, we are now at a point that we are going to have to make compromises, there’s no getting around that if we want to continue doing our work. I’m just making sure we get as much wiggle room as possible.”

“All right.”

“All right?”

Steve nodded. “I still don’t like it, I don’t like the thought of having to dance around red tape but, Jesus, I hadn’t thought it was that bad. The Registration Act is off the table? You’re positive?”

Tony nodded. “Yeah, there are a few that keep trying to poison the Accords into a sneaky version of the S.R.A. but it’s not going to happen. Surprisingly, there are actually enough people with actual souls in positions of power who don’t want innocents suffering.” Tony laughed. “I don’t like red tape either, Cap; I’ve made it a mission to piss off the military and government as much as possible since taking up my role as Iron Man.”

Steve smiled. “That’s very true.” He shook his head. “Well, now I know why you aren’t sleeping. I’m not sure I’m going to tonight either.”

Tony huffed a laugh. “Sorry, Cap.”

Steve shook his head and patted Tony on the shoulder. “No, thank you. I hate not knowing what’s going on.”

Despite the heavy subject matter, when Tony retreated back inside, he was feeling a lot lighter than he had in a long time. Maybe Natasha had a point with this whole talking thing. Not that he would ever, in a million years, let her hear him admit to it—or that he would be making a habit of it. There were still a lot of fights in his near future, but he was going to face them head-on with all the stubbornness his Stark bloodline bestowed upon him. And maybe—if he was lucky enough—he would have an extra fighter in his corner, backing him.

Chapter End Notes

Wow an actual mature, adult conversation. Natasha would be so proud!

More to come soon so enjoy your week lovely readers!
Chapter Six

Chapter Summary

Peter comes home to a surprise.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is unbetaed so I apologize if it seems a little less polished than those previous! I might go re-upload later once it has been looked over and edited properly!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Peter shot May a suspicious glance as she smiled at him, the woman had been acting odd from the moment he walked through the apartment door.

“Is something—?”

“Why don’t you go put your bag in your room, I’ll have dinner ready soon!” May said in a rush, with a brilliant smile.

Peter shot her another confused look. “Okay,” he replied slowly, before turning and heading to his bedroom.

Peter shook his head, figuring he’d forget about his aunt’s seemingly out of place excitement, it was good to see her happy. Sighing, he let his backpack slip from his shoulder to the floor with a thump. Though most of his injuries had healed over the weekend, there persisted some tenderness in his back and ribs that was still causing him discomfort—especially when he had to lug around a backpack full of textbooks. Peter turned to collapse onto his bed, but stopped as he noticed a large metal case, which sat unassumingly on top of his bed. Peter picked up an envelope which sat upon the case with his name printed on it. Frowning at the case once more, he opened up the envelope and pulled out the letter inside, which was written on thick, high-quality paper.

Peter,

_You did good work out there, kid. It hasn’t gone unnoticed or unappreciated, and I’d like to think that, sometimes, our hard work gets rewarded. We will talk in person again soon, but for now, enjoy your new upgrades._

— T. Stark

_P.S._

_I had Happy tell your aunt that this package was a project you needed to work on in order to be accepted back into the Stark Internship program. So you’ll probably want to corroborate that story._

Peter looked up at the case with a new sense of excitement. He placed the letter onto his bed and
hastily examined the case, looking for a way to open it up. He touched the locks and a metal flap at the front was lifted, showing off a small screen just big enough to place his thumb on. Carefully, he did just that, hoping his instincts were correct. A green light scanned the underside of his thumb before a small beep sounded, and with a click, the locks released and the case opened.

Peter whimpered at the sight of his spider-suit, then had to stifle his excited giggles as a sense of disbelief washed over him. A smile huge enough to make his cheeks ache settled unbidden over his face. He couldn’t believe it, Peter never thought in a million years he’d get to see his spider-suit again after the ferry incident. Mr. Stark had been so, _so_ angry—_so disappointed_. It had cut through Peter like an actual knife. He had been angry at first too—furious even, but after he had time to cool off, he was left feeling just so incredibly ashamed. He had let his idol and mentor down, he couldn’t think of anything worse.

Peter took out the suit and studied it thoroughly. The web-shooters looked a little different, and he thought that maybe the material wasn’t the same as before, either—but Mr. Stark had mentioned upgrades in his note. A knock on his bedroom door startled him back into reality.

“Uh, one sec!” He called, and quickly stuffed the suit into the case and closed it. “Yeah?”

The door opened and May popped her head in. “Dinner’s going to be ready soon.”

“Okay, thanks.” Peter smiled.

May smiled back and nodded to the case. “So, what’s in the case?”

“Oh, uhh, just—just parts, and tech and stuff. He’s—Mr. Stark is giving me another chance.” His voice sounded disbelieving to his own ears.

“I’m so happy for you, Peter. I know how much this must mean to you.”

Peter nodded. “Yeah—yeah, I’m—” He took a breath. “I’m going to do it right this time.”

“I’m proud of you, Peter. Now come on, your new project can wait an hour or two.”

---

It had been a week since Tony had sent Happy to drop off Peter’s new suit, and he still hadn’t gone to see the kid himself. Friday had alerted him only hours later that Peter had activated the new suit again. He had kept a close eye on the sensors, but so far, the biggest thing Spider-Man had faced was a few muggers. He hadn’t been avoiding the kid or anything—overdue awkward conversations with teenagers aside—he had just been ridiculously busy. Natasha had damaged her weapons during her and Clint’s last mission, and the archer had brought up concerns about his detonator arrows not having a good enough radius. Tony had heard that Steve had damaged his suit during the last mission, though the man hadn’t asked him to fix it yet, which he found strange.

On top of all that, he had his own projects due for Stark Industries coming up, and meetings with different government officials, including one Thaddeus Ross, now Secretary of State.

Tony despised that man with a passion. He had been one of the men pushing for the S.R.A. Apart from that, the man had caused hell for Bruce ever since his accident. Tony knew he couldn’t exactly tell the man to fuck off, considering his new position in government, but damn if he wasn’t tempted every time he saw the man’s dumb smug-ass face—or heard his smarmy voice. Tony made up his mind that he was, at the very least, going to find a perfect way to hang up on the bastard sometime.
So Tony hadn’t been avoiding Peter, life had just been particularly shitty lately.

Tony’s phone beeped, alerting him that Spider-Man was out and about. He sighed—it had been awhile since he had had some downtime, but—

“Friday, prep my suit.”

“Yes, Boss.”

---

Peter heard the telltale sounds of the repulsors, causing him to glance behind. He watched as Iron Man landed on the roof he sat upon. A nervous feeling fluttered in his stomach as the armor opened and Tony Stark walked out of it. If his thoughts weren’t already on the day the man had taken his suit away, he was sure drawing parallels now. He gulped and shot the intimidating man a smile—or he hoped that’s what he portrayed, only to remember Mr. Stark wouldn’t be able to see it through his mask. Inside, Peter was going over everything he had done since getting the suit back, wondering if he had messed up at all.

“Hey kid, how’s it going?” The man said with a smile.

Peter made to stand up but Tony waved away the motion.

“Uhh, I’m—I’m good Mr. Stark. Uhh. How are—you?” Peter cringed, and was thankful that the mask hid his features.

A smile stretched on Mr. Stark’s face, he was standing next to where Peter sat now. “Pretty good.” He responded, then sat next to Peter with a small gesture of his hand and a “You mind?”

There was a couple of moments of silence that Peter spent shooting glances at the man next to him. All the while, his mind spiralled into a barrage of ‘Act Casual, be cool, act casual, be cool, act casual — ’

His internal mantra was interrupted as the man next to him sighed.

Peter looked at Mr. Stark and felt a dangerous hope rise up in him once more, which was dashed slightly when Mr. Stark began addressing the ferry incident again. That was twisted into slight confusion when the man devolved into a rather terrible analogy about him screwing a dog. Regardless, Mr. Stark seemed to branch off quickly with: “All right, not my best analogy.”

However, Peter’s hope sparked back up by a simple action. Mr. Stark wrapped his arm around his shoulders and clapped him with a smile.

“What I’m trying to say is that, you did good, kid.”

Peter felt a warmth burst in his chest in hopeful pride, the gesture wasn’t unlike the way his Uncle Ben used to clap him on the back or shoulder when he was proud of him. Was Mr. Stark—?

He shook his head minutely. He shouldn’t get that hopeful.

“So—since Spider-Man is sticking around, I’ve spent time thinking it over, and I believe it may be a good idea to get you some professional training. Like a true mentorship.”

Okay, so that hope was back full force, with very little chance of being stamped out now. Peter didn’t even want to know what his face looked like. Thank god the mask hid whatever
embarrassing expressions he must have been making.

“So, uhh—what—what would that, like, mean?”

“Well, a few times a week, or whenever schedules allow, you would shadow me around the Avengers HQ. You would also go through training exercises to help you develop more combative and defensive techniques, and I would actually show you how to use you that tech I’ve given you.”

Peter knew he was gaping, but he really had lost muscle control in his face. There was no way this was real.

“And no, this does not make you an Avenger. It’s just a training program to help you, and thus Spider-Man, be as proficient as you can be.”

Peter couldn’t even be bothered to care about his status as an Avenger or not, because this—getting an actual mentorship—was exactly what he had been hoping for.

“Kid?”

Peter blinked back into reality and snapped his mouth closed, pushing down the sudden desire to hug the man next to him.

“Is—is this for real?” He asked, voice wavering. This couldn’t be a cruel joke, could it?

“Yep, you bet. If you accept it, that is. Though, just saying, I would feel a whole hell of a lot better if you had some training on the suit there.”

Peter nodded mutely.

“So, I should take that as a yes?” Mr. Stark asked.

“Uhh, yeah—yeah of course! Thank you so much, Mr. Stark, I—I won’t let you down this time! This is unbelievable, oh my god.”

“Fantastic!” He gave Peter’s shoulder a small squeeze before removing his arm and standing up.

“And kid, you can call me Tony if you want. That ‘Mr. Stark’ thing is going to get old real quick if you’re going to be around as much as the mentorship will entail.”

“Oh, uhm, yeah of course Mr.—I mean Tony!” Peter coughed awkwardly, but Tony seemed to just smile in amusement.

“Okay, well, I’ll let you know when I’ve set up the first session.” Tony said as he walked back towards the Iron Man armor, which had stood behind them during the conversation.

“Oh, uhh—one sec!” Peter said, Tony stopped and turned to face him again, “So do the rest of the Avengers—you know—know who I am?” Peter was suddenly feeling apprehensive.

“Your secret’s safe with me, kid. Just keep the mask on while you’re in the facilities.”

Peter was surprised at the answer. Had he really kept Peter’s identity a secret, even from the rest of his team?

“Thank you.” He said looking at his feet.

“Anytime.”
Peter looked up in time to see Tony shoot him another smile as he re-entered his armor and flew off.

Peter existed in a state of shock throughout the entirety of the rest of the day. He swung from building to building on his rounds, but had trouble concentrating on anything other than his conversation with Mr. Stark.

He was finally going to get a mentorship—he was going to be trained by Iron Man! His thoughts spiralled from there. He, Peter Parker, was going to be able to see the actual Avengers headquarters. He was so honestly excited that it had almost come full circle into numbness. That was, until a single thought hit him like a ton of bricks: Peter was going to be at the Avengers HQ, and Mr. Stark had told him that his secret identity would be safe so long as he wore his mask, did that mean—

“Oh—my—GOD! I’m—I’m going to meet the flipping Avengers!” Peter exclaimed, unable to stay quiet, almost causing himself to fall four stories when his surprised state caused him to miscalculate the distance of the next building mid-swing. He was, luckily, able to catch himself with fast reflexes, and he headed back to his and May’s apartment.

---

Peter’s initial excitement morphed and twisted into a case of anxiety as he waited for Mr. Stark—err, Tony—he was really struggling with switching that mentality over to contact him about his first training session. It had been two days since he had been presented with the opportunity, and it had been a bit of an emotional war. All his insecurities were raising their heads, trying to convince Peter that Tony had decided against it—or worse, had never meant it. The other more rational part of his mind lectured the other half on how busy Tony must have been, and that it had taken him a week to reach out to Peter after giving the suit back, so in comparison, three days really wasn’t that bad. Despite his rationalising, Peter still struggled pushing down those darker thoughts.

He jumped away from his desk as the bell rang shrilly, signaling the end of the school day. May was supposed to be out at her book club meeting this evening, and he was wanting to canvas the neighborhood as Spider-Man. Swinging across the city always worked wonders in helping clear his mind. It could be a strange sort of meditation at times, and he was wanting to take full advantage of that today.

Peter was at his locker switching out books he needed when he felt his phone buzz in his pocket. Shoving everything haphazardly into the locker, he reached for his phone to access his messages where he had one from an unrecognized number.

Come to the tower after school tomorrow. Bring your suit, obviously.

— T. S.

Peter’s face lit up. This was really happening. His phone buzzed again and another message appeared in the open chat.

Also, this is my personal number, so don’t pass it around.

It took Peter a couple moments of reining himself in before he could text out a reply.

Okay, I’ll let Aunt May know I have to go there for the internship. Thank you so much! He pushed send, then remembered how Tony had added a signature,

Oh, this is Peter Parker btw.
But wait. Tony had messaged him first—of course he knew—

*But of course you know that. Sorry.*

*Oh! And I won’t give your number out, I promise!*

Peter felt his face flush. It’d been less than five minutes and he was already making a fool of himself. There was a pause before any reply came.

*Keep up the enthusiasm tomorrow, kid.*

*Ok, see you tomorrow. Peter texted.*

*See you later, webhead.*

Chapter End Notes

Hope you all enjoyed!
Chapter Seven

Chapter Summary

Peter is nervous about everything, but also excited—and how is this actually his life?

Maybe Tony is a little nervous, too.

Chapter Notes

This chapter hasn't been beta'd but I promise that once my beta reader is back I'll re-upload any chapters that haven't been properly edited! For now please enjoy the new update! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Okay, kid, mask on!” Tony said, after turning down the volume of the music.

Peter looked ahead and noticed that they were pulling up to what looked like a guardhouse. He swallowed thickly and was fast to don his mask. Tony slowed his car to a stop before the checkpoint, and looked over at Peter to make sure his face was covered, before rolling down the window. All he had to do was flash a grin before they were waved through.

“So just relax and take it easy. I’m not exactly sure who’s all going to be there tonight, but you’ll be able to meet some of the team, ask some questions, maybe go a round or two on the training mats. The full tour is going to have to wait until we have more time, but you’ll get to see a bit of the fun stuff around.”

Peter nodded along as Tony spoke. “Uh huh, okay, yeah.”

“If Hawkeye is around, don’t listen to him or do anything he says. Widow likes putting people through the paces. Cap is friendly, as long as you’re patient enough to listen to his speeches on the “importance of teamwork” or whatever. I think you’ll get along with Wanda. Don’t listen to Hawkeye. Oh—and feel free to ask Vision questions if he’s around, he seems to like a good debate—warning, though, he doesn’t seem to get the premise of walls or doors, so watch out for that. Sam is a good guy, but Hawkeye is a bad influence on him. Brucie is the absolute best, and finally—don’t listen to Hawkeye. ”

“Okay, don’t listen to Hawkeye—got it.”

The car pulled to a stop. “Okay, kid, let’s go!”

Peter felt ridiculously out of place walking down the pristine halls of the building in just his spider-suit. Tony would stop here and there, occasionally to point at a room or door and explain the purpose of whatever was inside. They had passed quite a few people in uniform and in business attire, but so far, they hadn’t seen heads or tails of the Avengers. Not until Tony took them onto a viewing deck, from where Peter could see a large training arena below—one that was currently in
“Oh, looks like we got here just in time,” Tony spoke up. “Cap’s got Scarlet Witch and Falcon in the arena right now.”

Sure enough, a figure zoomed passed the glass, narrowly avoiding being hit by a cloud of black and red smoke. They watched the two Avengers dance around one another, switching between defensive and offensive positions. Tony nudged Peter to get his attention back, and then gestured to a side door Peter hadn’t noticed previously.

“Let’s get a closer look.”

“Can we?”

“Of course! C’mon, it’ll be fun.” Tony said with a grin, before leading him out.

The door opened onto metallic stairs, which lead down onto a bridge that circled the arena.

“Well, hiya there, Cap!” Tony suddenly called to a figure who stood up ahead.

“Tony!”

The man grinned and—‘Oh my god—oh my—oh my—god, that’s Captain America. Mary mother of Jesus, actual Captain America is walking up to me and—and—and looking right—at—me, oh god. Don’t do anything stupid, don’t say anything—’

“And you must be Spider-Man!” The Captain said, while offering his hand—which Peter shook a little too eagerly. “I’ve been hearing about you, it sounds like you’re doing some really good work out there.”

“I—yes—I’m Spider-Man. Uhh, thank you, uhm, Captain.”

‘Oh for Gods sake, why am I like this?’

“Steve. You can call me Steve.” He said, kindly.

“Oh, okay, uhh, Steve.”

“So what do you think—” Steve was cut off by a blast of the red and black smokey substance, followed by a loud yelp as Sam was thrown to the ground.

“Way to take it easy, Wanda,” Sam moaned from the mats.

“Sorry, I’m sorry!” The woman said, running over.

“You good, Sam?” Steve called down.

“Yeah, nothing an ice pack—or two—won’t fix!”

“Okay, go take a break, walk it off, and next time, don’t let yourself get distracted.” Steve called down, then looked at Spider-Man, and gestured for him to follow as he started down another flight of stairs.

“Who’s the new guy?” Sam asked, still on his back as Wanda hovered nervously.

“This is Spider-Man. He’s going to be going through some training here.” He turned to look at
Tony. “If my understanding’s correct?”

“Yep, that's it.”

“Huh. Well, good on ya, man!” Sam stood, and waved off Wanda’s help with a smile.

“Name’s Sam—or Falcon, on the field.”

He offered Peter his hand, which Peter accepted gladly.

“Nice to meet you!”

“This kickass girl over here is Wanda. She's going through training, too!”

“Didn’t stop me from taking you down.” She said, smiling more confidently now that it was clear Sam hadn’t been truly hurt.

“Wow, first my spine, now my pride.”

Wanda stepped up and Peter offered his hand. “It’s nice to meet you.”

She smiled. “Yes, it’s always good to see new people here. I’m sure we will get along great.”

“I’d like that.” Peter replied, genuinely happy at the thought.

“Okay, well, since we are already here, why don’t we see what you can do?” Steve said.

It took Peter a moment before he realized Steve was addressing him. Peter pointed at his own chest and Steve nodded.

“Oh, uhh, okay, who will I be—uhm—facing?”

Steve was pulling on his helmet and reaching behind himself to grasp his shield from his back.

“How about me?”

Peter stared in shock for a moment.

“Oh, yeah—yeah, okay, cool.” He replied, his voice a pitch higher.

Steve flashed him a grin and headed into the center of the room.

‘Oh my god, I’m going to get my ass kicked by Captain America.’

Peter cautiously followed the blonde onto the training field, acknowledging Tony’s “Good luck!” with a wave.

“Okay, before we start, a few ground rules. No life-threatening weapons or combat of any kind, and if at any point things get too rough, you can call for a time-out.”

“That’s it?”

“Yep.”

“Okay.”

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Peter groaned as his back connected to the floor with a loud slam. He knew he wouldn’t be able to take down Captain America right at the start, but hell, Peter hadn’t even been able to bring him down once. Captain America: five, Spider-Man: zero. It was more than a little humiliating, and maybe a little frustrating. Sure, Mr. Stark had said he needed more practice with hand-to-hand fighting, but Peter thought he would at least be able to last a little longer than this.

“Why don’t you two take a water break!” Tony called from the sidelines. Steve seemed to consider it, before nodding.

“Yeah, that might be for the best.”

Peter sighed and hefted himself up. Over the course of their sparring match, some of the other Avengers had congregated in the arena to watch Peter get thrown on his ass. Joy. He tried to avoid looking directly at any of them, still feeling pretty embarrassed by the whole display.

He walked back over to where Mr. Stark stood, holding a water bottle. Peter didn’t know where the man had gotten it, but he wasn’t going to complain.

“Okay, listen up, kid,” Mr. Stark continued in a whisper, once Peter was close enough to hear. “You’re getting your butt handed to you out there.”

“Really? I hadn’t noticed.” He muttered, before back-tracking quickly. “Sorry.”

Tony laughed. “It’s okay, kid, but seriously, listen. You’re letting your head get clouded; you need to start analyzing your opponent. Look for patterns in their fighting styles.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well. we all have ways in which we move in battle which stems from habit. For example, our good ole’ Captain America always leaves his legs unguarded.” He explained with a wink.

Peter nodded. “Right—okay.”

“Okay, let’s go for another round or two before we call it a night,” Steve called out.

“Sure thing!” Peter jumped up and stretched, before following Steve into the arena.

“All right—and begin!”

Peter dodged quickly to the side to avoid being hit by the captain’s shield. He barely had time to recover, before he was thrown to the ground by an impact to his side. Peter bit back a swear, and rolled out of the way of a kick, quickly getting back into stance. Peter saw an opportunity as Steve ran to grab his shield, and shot his webs at the man’s ankles. Peter grinned as they connected, and with a great pull, he threw Steve onto his back with the most satisfying smack Peter had ever heard.

Feeling immensely, elated Peter spun around. "Mr. Stark, it worked!” He called out automatically, arms waving in his excitement.

Tony groaned and brought a hand up to his face as some of the others shot him glares, then shrugged.

“He’s here to learn, I was giving him some pointers.”
“Whoops,” Peter whispered, and chuckled nervously, until a sudden prickling at the back of his neck alerted him to danger. Peter moved to jump, but wasn’t fast enough before a hand grabbed him and flipped him over onto his back.

“Let’s make this lesson number two, then: never turn your back on your opponent, unless you know they’re down for good.”

Peter blinked up at the man who stood over him. “Yeah, right—okay.”

Steve shook his head, then offered Peter his hand and a smile. “All right, I think that about wraps it up for the evening. Good work.”

Peter accepted the hand gratefully. He was going to have to have a long, hot shower to soothe the bruises and aching muscles throughout his body.

“Good show, man!” Sam said. “Now why don’t we grab some grub?”

And that was how Peter Parker ended up eating pizza around a large table with the Avengers. It was an odd, fantastical experience, to be completely honest; the group joking and laughing, or bantering amongst one another. Wanda chatting amicably to him, listing off different fun activities they could do the next time he was hanging around. Peter couldn’t help but wonder if this was what it was like to have a large—loud—family.

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Tony was packing some pizza into baggies for Peter to take home with him—because Christ, the kid was a bottomless pit—when Natasha sided up to the counter to clear away boxes. Tony wasn’t fooled for a second by her seemingly casual attitude and actions.

“Okay, what?” He huffed, shooting the redhead an annoyed glance.

Natasha shrugged in turn. “So, how long have you been associating with this Spider-Man, anyway?”

Tony glared. “What is that supposed to mean, exactly?” Tony put the pizza down and crossed his arms, defensively.

“Oh, calm down, Stark. I was just wondering how long this kid has been out doing what he’s doing.”

“What do you mean ’kid’?”

Natasha shot him a rather impressed look. “Oh, please, don’t give me that. It doesn’t take a super-spy to be able to tell that that—” She pointed to Peter, who sat playing some kind of video game with Sam and Wanda, “—is not an adult.”

“I don’t know—”

“Don’t insult me, or yourself, by playing dumb.”

Tony huffed, but otherwise stayed silent.

“I just don’t know how wise it is to be encouraging someone—however old he is—to be risking his life. What we do is dangerous.”

“Do you think I don’t know that?” He snapped. “I don't see how it's relevant.”
“Of course it’s relevant!” Natasha shot a look through the doorway to make sure their discussion had not been picked up on.

Tony glared rather petulantly.

“So. How old—”

“Fifteen.”

Silence.

“FIF—”

“Shh!” Tony hushed, and checked the door. The others were carrying on, unaware.

“Stark, for god’s sake, out of all the reckless, idiotic, irresp—”

“Enough!” He cut her off in a harsh whisper.

“Listen, I know, I get it! I had the same reaction, but hear me out.”

The woman didn’t look happy, but she remained silent, lips pursed, hands on her hips and an eyebrow raised, in an expression which told him that he’d better start talking.

“He was already out there on the streets when I got wind of him. I decided to do some digging, and yes, I found out his age and stuff, and so I went to meet the kid. Nat, he’s a good kid, but possibly as stubborn as Cap is. There was no way he was going to stop what he was doing, no matter what I or anyone else said. So, I decided that the best course of action would be to give him the tools and training necessary for him to not wind up dead in a back alley in Queens somewhere.”

“Tony—” She paused to release a sigh. “Are you sure you know what you’re doing?”

“This—listen, like I said, he’s going to be out there regardless of whether or not he has someone at his back. I’m hoping that building him a support group will help him with everything. So he’s not alone out there. He’s going to eventually run into someone, or something, that’s bigger and stronger than he is, and I just want to make sure there’s someone he can rely on when that happens.”

Natasha studied him for a long moment, before shaking her head. “Fine. But this responsibility is on you, Stark.”

“I know. Trust me, I know.”

Natasha nodded and turned to leave the room, seemingly placated for the moment.

“Oh, and Stark?”

“Yeah?”

"I hope you’re right, I honestly do.”

Tony watched her leave, before running his hands over his face, tiredly.

“God, so do I.”

Chapter End Notes
Hope you enjoyed the new chapter, I hope it's wasn't too rough! More to come next week!
Have a lovely weekend :)
Chapter Eight

Chapter Summary

Peter meets Clint, tries to help make dinner, and shows a bit of vulnerability to Tony. Meanwhile, Tony is way too stressed, and Steve doesn't really know how to help. All in all, this is a bonding moments chapter!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The weeks following Peter’s introduction to the Avengers and Tony’s mentorship had been some of the best in his life. Tony continued to live up to his word, and made time for him twice a week. Peter loved hanging out with the Avengers at HQ; he had actually been learning some useful techniques that had been helping him out in the field. After the initial day of getting his butt kicked by Captain America, the man had seemed to work hard on actually teaching Peter how to defend himself. Apparently, their initial match in the arena had been more of a case study so that Steve (and oh my god, Peter was on a first name basis with Captain America) could study his fighting patterns and style; the exact thing Tony had told him to do that very same evening. Natasha, the Black Widow herself, seemed to have taken an interest in his progress, as well, even going as far as to spar with him on occasion. Of course, every one of those experiences was absolutely terrifying. Peter had the sinking suspicion that the woman could just look at someone a certain way and they’d fall over dead. The redhead didn’t seem to go easy on him, either—in his opinion, anyway—but the others told him differently. Outside the ring, though, Natasha seemed to be rather pleasant to be around, even if she still held an intimidating air about her—and had the ability to seemingly stare into his very soul.

True to her word, Wanda seemed to make it her mission to become friends with Peter. He had to admit that they did get along pretty great; the young Avenger was a bit of a homebody, and seemed to enjoy activities like reading, watching TV, and board games. Of course, Peter had not been able to spend time with her outside of headquarters or the tower, but he appreciated her calming presence. She had this odd ability to make him forget about his anxieties—and a moment of mental peace was a moment he would gladly cherish.

Today, Peter was finally introduced to Clint. The archer had been away on a mission when Peter had visited the first two times. He had just finished sparring with Steve when his spidey-senses flared to life—acting accordingly, Peter flipped out of the way just in time to dodge a projectile that barely skimmed passed his form. Steve raised his shield, and the thing stuck to it with a thunk. There was a moment's pause, where nothing happened, and then with a pop, the arrow opened and a little flag unraveled with “BANG” printed on it.

“Dammit, Clint!” Tony snapped.

“Tony—” Steve began, reproachfully, though he shot the archer a disapproving look.

“What if you’d hit P—Spider-Man?” Tony continued.

“Well, that’s kinda what I was going for,” Clint said with a shrug. “Sorry for hitting ya, Cap—damn good reflexes though, new guy!”
“No! What do you mean you meant to hit him?” Tony interrupted.

“Jeez, put away the claws, Stark! It’s a dummy arrow!”

“Yeah—really, it’s all good—it was pretty funny actually!” Peter butted in, trying to lighten the mood a bit.

“See? He gets it!” Clint said, gesturing wildly.

“Don’t encourage him!” Tony pointed at Peter.

“Okay, okay, okay, let’s all take a breather,” Steve cut in.

Tony huffed a “Fine,” before pulling out his phone and leaving the room. Peter stared after him, feeling a little concerned. Tony had seemed tired and on-edge all morning.

“Yikes, what crawled up Stark’s ass?” Clint grumbled.

“Don’t take it too seriously, he’s got a lot on his plate right now.” Steve said, followed by, “I’ll talk to him,” as he left the room.

“Yeah, sure, whatever.” Clint grumbled.

“Uhm, you’re Hawkeye, right?” Peter asked, approaching the archer.

“The one and only! Also known as Clint.” Clint said with a fake bow. “Now—who’re you?”

“Uhm, I’m Spider-Man.”

“Cool cool, does Spider-Man have another name?”

“Oh—uhm—well—”

“Ah, gotcha. Just Spider-Man.”

Peter sighed. It was awkward trying to keep his identity a secret among a group of people who were all pretty friendly and open with him. He knew everyone’s name, but only Tony knew who he really was.

“Sorry, it’s just that—” he began, but was waved off.

“There’s people—don’t worry, I get it. We can’t all be like Mr. ‘I am Iron Man.’”

Peter snorted. “Yeah, I guess not. I have to admit, that arrow thing was pretty funny. You know, after my heart slowed down enough to convince me we weren’t under attack.”

Clint grinned. “Right? It was hysterical! Ah, the look on Cap’s face over there when the flag popped out—oh man, too good,” the man sniggered to himself.

“I can’t believe you have joke arrows.” Peter continued, happy that Clint seemed to roll with the change of topic.

“Like I’d miss that opportunity. It’s weird, though; usually it’d be Cap doing the reprimanding. Stark usually doesn’t care much, as long as it’s not in the tower.”

Peter shrugged in reply. Though he wanted to agree that Tony’s mood had been rather down today,
he also didn’t feel comfortable talking about the man behind his back like that, even if it was rather harmless subject matter.

“Ah, whatever, Cap will sort it out.”

Peter just shrugged again.

“Sooo—” Clint began.

“Oh, there you are!” Wanda called, running into the arena. “I’m making dinner tonight!”

“Oh, cool!”

“Yeah! Now come help me out—I need a taste-tester.”

“I am all for this job, one-hundred percent!” Clint butted in.

“Not you, Clint. Spider-Man.”

“But—but—but I’m always the taste-tester,” Clint protested.

“No, you always steal food from other people and call it taste-testing.”

“Yeah, I don’t know how it tastes, so I eat it: taste-testing.”

Wanda rolled her eyes. “Stay away from the kitchen until I allow you in.”

“Fine, fine!” Clint threw up his hands and backed out of the room.

“And I’ll know if you’re creeping around the vents!” Wanda called after him, then frowned at the lack of reply. “He’s in the vents.” She muttered.

“Vents?” Peter questioned.

“Oh! Yes, he likes to crawl around in them like some kind of vermin. He is weird, but I hear they did find him in a circus, so…”

“A circus, really? No way, you’re messing with me.” Peter shook his head in disbelief.

“Hey, that’s just what I heard.”

“Whoa…” Peter said, his mind suddenly filled with strange and hilarious images of Clint trapezing, juggling, and dancing around an arena of spectators.

“Anyway, come on, I need a second opinion on this. Vision tries to help, and it’s cute, but honestly, I need someone who will say more than ‘It’s great, Wanda.’” She paused. “I think that might also be because he can’t actually taste the food.”

Peter sniggered, “Really?”

Wanda nodded and hummed distractedly, seemingly lost in thought for a moment.

“Anyway, yes, let’s go and get things started!”

---

Steve walked down the halls, peeking in doors, looking for Tony. The man had left fairly quickly
after checking his phone. Steve wouldn’t lie and say he wasn’t concerned. The two hadn’t had a chance to really talk since Tony had explained the truth behind the Accords, and Steve had a feeling that the man’s earlier outburst may have had more to do with his own building stress rather than Clint’s choice of prank.

Steve stopped in front of a door where he could hear muffled talking. It sounded angry. Quietly, he peeked in and saw Tony pacing, a deep frown etched into his face.

“No, no more excuses, I want this done yesterday—well, the hell am I paying you for, then? Make. It. Work.”

Steve watched as Tony pulled the phone away from his ear and mashed the End Call button on the touch screen with more force than was strictly necessary.

“Fucking idiots.” The man grumbled, as he stopped pacing and turned towards the door—stopping short as he finally took notice of the other man in the room.

“That sounded fun.” Steve remarked.

“Oh yeah, loads.” Tony replied, voice thick with sarcasm.

Steve smiled and shook his head. “Want to talk about it?”

Tony eyed the man before shaking his head. “No, no need, just some stuff S.I. is working on. Well, *supposed* to be, but apparently I only have complete morons under my payroll.”

Steve nodded along, waiting to see if there would be an outburst, but was left somewhat disappointed when Tony simply closed his eyes with a heavy sigh.

“You really held Clint’s feet to the fire back there,” Steve said instead.

“It was irresponsible of him.” Tony replied, but sighed again more dramatically, and rolled his eyes after seeing Steve’s raised brow.

“Tony, Clint’s pranks are practically a rite of initiation at this point. No one’s ever been hurt from them—just annoyed.”

“Yeah, yeah, you’re right, of course. I’ll make it up to him later—maybe add some new tech to his arrows while I still have some in the workshop.”

There was a pause followed by, “So everything is all right?”

Tony nodded. “Yep. One hundred percent.”

Steve wasn’t convinced in the least, but he knew pushing would probably just end in another argument. He was trying to work on *not* fighting with Tony—especially after the other had been so honest with him before.

Steve decided to let it drop; he wanted to help, but honestly didn’t know how. Steve hated not knowing what to do. He didn’t enjoy seeing his friend so upset, and it may have hurt a bit that Tony didn’t seem to trust him enough to let him be a confidante.

Though, Steve figured that it hadn’t been very long since they had been at each other’s throats on a fairly regular basis. It definitely wasn’t something he was proud of, but it was something he was determined to change.
“Steve?”

Steve blinked. “Sorry, what was that?”

Tony shot him an amused glance. “Was just asking when you were going to bring your armor to the tower for repairs.”

“Oh! Well, actually, I was going to wait until you had more ti—wait, how did you know about that?”

Tony rolled his eyes dramatically. “Really, Rogers? Bring it by sometime tomorrow, I’m planning on being in the lab most of the day, anyway.”

“That’s just it, though,” Steve shrugged. “You already have a lot going on—”

“Nonsense,” Tony waved him off. “What happens during your next mission if your armor is damaged, hm?”

“Well, I mean, I was going to ask one of the techs here to fix it just—”

Tony gaped.

“What?” Steve asked, cluelessly.

“You were going to have some—some incompetent, second-rate idiot fuck with your suit? Do you want to die?” Tony exclaimed, offended.

“I—I didn’t mean to—I mean, it’s just a small repair, I just thought that—”

Tony shook his head and patted his arm as he walked passed him. “Luckily, I caught you this time. Bring the armor by for repairs next time you’re at the tower.”

“Right, okay.”

“All right, I better gather up the minion and get out of here. I still have some stuff I need to do tonight.”

Steve nodded. “All right. I’ll stop by tomorrow?”

“Sounds good, Cap.”

Steve sighed once Tony had left the room to collect the kid. He wasn’t sure what else to do but let it be. He didn’t know how Tony had found out about his suit damages, but he felt guilty over raising the man’s work load—despite what the other said about it.

He wished there was something more tangible he could help with, but knew he was just going to have to settle with trying to be a better friend.

---

Tony eventually found Peter in the kitchen, laughing with Wanda and Vision as the three of them hovered over simmering pots and pans—spices, cookbooks, and food littered the countertops in a show of a culinary explosion.

“Hurry, pass me the cream—the sauce looks too thick.” Wanda instructed.
Vision quickly passed over the carton and watched diligently as she poured a bit into the saucepan.

“Are you not going to measure?” He asked, curiously.

“No, I’m kind of going by look and feel.” Wanda said in reply.

“Then why did we spend all that time trying to find that cookbook?” Peter questioned.

“I needed a refresher! I have got it down now.”

Peter and Vision stared at each other over her shoulder and shrugged simultaneously.

“All right, if you say so.” Peter said.

“I do say so, now hush and pass the paprika.”

Tony couldn’t help but smile at the sight. Peter looked like he was enjoying himself here. He felt a pang of guilt that he had to tear the boy away in what was obviously the middle of their attempts at making dinner. He didn’t have much of a choice, though; the afternoon had come and gone, and Tony still had a lot of work waiting for him in the workshop back at the tower, and Peter had his Aunt waiting for him at his own home.

“Well, what’s going on in here?” He asked, making his presence known.

“Oh—hi, Tony!” Peter said.

Wanda smiled and Vision nodded in acknowledgement.

“It’s my turn to pull together dinner.” Wanda said.

“And we’re helping!” Peter added.

“Well, if it tastes half as good as it smells, then I think you have a success on your hands.” Tony said.

Wanda smiled shyly. “Thank you, I hope it turns out.”

“I’m sure you have nothing to worry about.” Tony assured her. “Unfortunately, I’m going to have to steal this one away.” He gestured to Peter.

“Aww, really?” Peter complained.

“You can’t stay for dinner?” Vision asked.

“Sorry, not tonight.” Tony said, looking apologetic.

“Aww,” Wanda said, looking a little despondent that her new friend wouldn’t be able to taste-test after all.

Peter sighed and pushed away from the counter he was leaning on. “Guess break’s over,” he joked.

“Next time.” Tony promised with a smile.

“Deal.” Peter said.

“Oh, wait, before you leave!” Wanda jumped into action and dashed to the fridge. “I did some baking earlier, here, you can take some.” She said, pulling out a plate of some sort of fruit crumble.
She quickly transferred some into a couple of plastic containers and passed them to Peter.

“No—no way, this is awesome, thanks Wanda!” Peter said, voice laced with excitement.

“Tell me what you think of it later!” She replied.

“Oh, okay, I will, see you two later!”

---

Tony listened as Peter chattered happily through most of the drive back to the tower, about a wide range of topics, from school, to work as Spider-Man, to training with the Avengers, to stories about his friends. It was odd how comfortable he found it; usually, he would be annoyed with incessant chatter, but as Tony paused to reflect, he found that he couldn’t find a scrap of said irritation in him.

“...and a couple of my teachers have asked if I’m entering the science fair this year, but, I don’t know—” Peter trailed off suddenly, a frown marring his features.

Tony glanced at the kid next to him. “Well, why don’t you? You’re smart, I’m sure you’d come home with the trophy!”

Peter shrugged, staying silent and unusually still. Tony frowned, shooting concerned glances at Peter while trying to keep his eyes on the road.

“What’s up, is there a reason you’re not sure about entering?” Tony asked in what he hoped was a gentle manner. Peter didn’t answer right away, and when he did, Tony felt his chest constrict a bit.

“I—I don’t know, it’s just that—” He sighed. “The fair was usually a fun thing my Uncle Ben helped me with.” Peter sunk a bit into his seat and then continued, quieter, “I never really thought that I might have to do it alone.”

Tony frowned out over the road, considering what to say. He had read about how Peter’s uncle had been shot the year prior. Peter had yet to really talk about it with Tony, but occasionally, he would start discussing something he and his uncle would do together; those conversations usually ended with Peter trailing off and looking sad, too.

Tony knew he had to be gentle. He didn’t want to cause Peter any additional distress, but he also wanted to encourage him to pursue things he might find otherwise enjoyable. Tony honestly never thought he would ever be in the position where he would be mentoring anyone, but here he was. He didn’t want to mess this up—because, continuing the honesty train—Tony cared—he cared a lot.

“If you’re not comfortable entering this year’s fair, then there’s nothing wrong with that, and you shouldn’t let others pressure you into it.” He paused, unsure about his next words. “If it’s something you still want to do, I could—I mean—I understand if you wouldn’t want to, but, I would be willing to give you a hand on whatever project you’re working on.”

He nodded to himself. That sounded okay, right? He wanted Peter to know that he would support him no matter what, but he was also concerned the teen might think he was trying to replace his uncle.

Tony grew uncomfortable as the silence persisted. He chanced a look over at Peter. The boy was staring at him with wide eyes, wearing what can only be described as a vulnerable look on his face.
“You—you would do that?” The teen finally whispered.

“Of course.” Scoffing at the idea that he would have any other response. “Just let me know the details and we can sort something out.” The tension in his chest eased significantly.

“O—okay.”

“All right, so what were you thinking about making?” Tony asked.

“Uhm—well, I—I wasn’t totally sure, I mean—I haven’t spent a lot of time thinking about it, but…”

“But?” Tony prompted.

“A robot?” Said Peter, with a little shrug.

“A robot.”

“Yeah,” Peter said, sounding more decisive.

Tony laughed. “Okay, a robot. I think we can manage that.”

Peter laughed, nervously. “Okay—okay.”

“Not tonight, though; I have to get you back to your aunt, and then get some work done.”

“Right, of—of course.”

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Later that evening, when Tony dropped Peter off at his building and waved goodbye, he promised himself that he was going to help Peter build the best damn robot his school had ever seen.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you all enjoyed this chapter! I tried to keep most of it lighthearted and fun!

Also a heads up to my lovely readers- My muse has really taken off lately, this is absolutely awesome for me! However that means the tags are going to go through some big changes, as well as a rating change! The main story is still the same buuuut maybe with some extra dynamics ;)

Anyway as always I hope you all have a lovely weekend~
Chapter Nine

Chapter Summary

Now with more Bucky!!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tony rubbed his hands over his eyes, as if he could wipe the exhaustion from them. He glanced at the clock, ‘3:40 A.M.’ glowed back at him and he groaned. He had been working nonstop since dropping Peter off earlier. His stomach rumbled, reminding him that he hadn’t stopped to eat anything, either. Tony stood and stretched, and wandered over to the coffee maker he kept at the ready, and pressed ‘Brew’. Nothing. Tony frowned, and hit the button again, to the same result.

“Sir, you forgot to stock the coffee earlier this week.” Friday’s voice chimed through the room.

“Why didn’t you remind me?” Tony demanded, grumpy that his coffee was being kept from him. He mashed the button once more, petulantly.

“I did, Sir.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “I can reprogram you.” He grumbled, as he made his way out of his shop and into the elevator. He needed his coffee if he was going to finish the work he needed to do.

He half-stumbled out of the elevator and into the kitchen area. His eyes honed in on the coffee maker, immediately grabbing a mug and filling it up. It wasn’t until after he had taken his first couple of sips that he realized that there shouldn’t have been any coffee made at all, nonetheless some this fresh. He frowned, turned around, and nearly dropped his mug as his heart gave a jolt.

“Jesus Christ, warn a guy, would you?” He exclaimed, one hand clutching his chest.

Bucky snorted. “I thought the fresh coffee was sign enough there was someone else here. Not to mention, you walked right past me.” He said, lifting his own mug slightly in show.

Tony rolled his eyes. “Shut up.”

Bucky hid his chuckles behind the lip of his mug. Tony shot him a half-hearted glare anyway.

“It’s a little late to be wandering around, isn’t it, Barnes?”

“Look who’s talking.” The man replied.

“Touché.”

Bucky then frowned as he noticed a dark smear of some sort of grease or oil on the engineer’s face.

“Have you been working all night?”

“Hm? Oh, yeah, well, I have a lot to do.” Tony said.

“You should sleep.”
“Look who’s talking.” Tony shot back.

Bucky rolled his eyes. “Seriously, Stark.”

“Aww, worried about little ole’ me?” Tony asked, fluttering his eyelashes.

Bucky fixed him with a blank look.

Tony huffed. “I can’t sleep, not yet. I still have work that needs to be done tonight, because if it’s not done tonight, then it has to be done tomorrow, and then the stuff that needs to be done tomorrow will get pushed back, and then—you get the picture.” Tony’s stomach chose that moment to let out another grumble.

Bucky raised an eyebrow. “Have you even eaten?”

“Uhh—well—I kind of lost track of time, and then figured eating would just make me more tired, so—”

“Oh, for—sit down.” Bucky said as he stood and walked over to the fridge.

Tony found himself obeying and took a seat at the island, next to the one Bucky had been occupying, as the man began rummaging around, pulling out this and that. Finally, Bucky straightened and grabbed a loaf of bread and began fixing what Tony assumed, with Bucky’s back blocking his view, was a sandwich of some kind.

A couple minutes later, Bucky turned holding two plates, each holding a rather large sandwich.

“Here,” he said, placing one in front of Tony. “Eat.”

“Why’d you give me the bigger one?”

“You’re welcome—and because you didn’t eat dinner. I did. Now, I know it’s hard for you, Stark, but shut up and eat.”

“...Thanks.” Tony said, quieter.

Bucky nodded and took a large bite of his own sandwich. Tony followed suit, after studying the food a moment longer.

“This is actually really good.” Tony said after he swallowed the first bite. Honestly, Tony had expected it to taste like hell. It wasn’t like they offered cooking classes during Hydra brainwashing sessions.

“Thanks. You should try to get some sleep after.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “You’re pretty dead-set on that.”

Bucky shrugged. “Gotta keep you healthy.”

“Ugh. Why?” Tony asked, giving the man next to him an odd look. “Not planning on harvesting my organs or something, are you? ’Cause I can promise you that they are all way past their prime.”

“No, I am not going to harvest your organs, but if you drop dead from exhaustion, then I am out of a place to live. I’m still not exactly welcome back in the country. Fugitive, remember?”

Tony snorted. “I’m not going to drop dead, Barnes.”
Bucky shot him a smirk and shrugged. “Just saying.”

“I’m working on that, by the way.” Tony said after a moment.

“What?”

“Getting you back into the country—legally, I mean.” Tony explained.

Bucky stared at him with a somewhat confused expression. “You are?”

“Of course.”

“Thanks, I—I don’t think I deserve it, but—thank you.”

Tony frowned. “Whatever The Winter Soldier did under Hydra’s influence wasn’t you.”

“That’s what Steve keeps saying, too.” Bucky was smiling, but there wasn’t any joy behind it.

“Well, he’s right, and he’s like Mr. Perfect, and I’m like the smartest person on the face of the planet, so you should probably listen to me.” Tony nodded, sagely.

That got a laugh out of Bucky, and Tony smiled in success.

“I’m telling him you called him perfect.” Said Bucky, chuckling.

“Don’t you dare!”

---

Peter swung through the city towards Tony’s tower. They were spending another day in the lab. Peter was excited—well, more excited than normal—because he had come up with some designs for the robot he wanted to build for the science fair, and wanted to show them to Tony. He was a little nervous, since his plans would take a good deal of programming, which was never his strong suit. In fact, if it hadn’t been for Ned, Peter never would have been able to turn off Tony’s safeguards on his suit when he was trying to take down Vulture. Peter had considered asking Ned for help programming, but his friend was working on his own project for the fair, and Tony had offered to help, and Peter thought that it would be a good opportunity to learn some programming himself. Tony had been more than happy to teach him new things to this point, so Peter didn’t think that the man would mind too much. Or, at least, he hoped he wouldn’t mind.

Programming was something Tony was a master of—

‘What if he looks down on me for knowing next to nothing about it, what if—’

Peter slammed the door shut on those thoughts and forced himself to breathe.

He was being ridiculous, he had known Tony long enough to know that that was just stupid.

‘Still—no! Stop it, Peter.’

Peter reached the tower in no time, and decided to just scale the rest of the way up, rather than dropping down on his webs and riding the elevator all the way back up. He had been so preoccupied with telling himself, ‘Don’t look down’, over and over, that it wasn’t until Peter had reached the top balcony that it hit him that the doors might be locked. He groaned internally, crossed his fingers and tried the door. It slid open easily.
“Oh, thank god!” Peter said in relief.

“Welcome back, Peter.” Friday’s voice greeted him, the moment he opened the door.

He entered the building and immediately pulled off his mask. He sighed in relief, and ran his hands through his hair rather violently. His scalp had a tendency of itching when he spent long periods masked. It was Saturday, and Peter had spent the morning bustling around the city, patrolling for any petty crimes that may have been going down. Apart from a bicycle theft, though, nothing had seemed amiss. His stomach growled loudly in protest, reminding him that it was lunch time and he had yet to eat.

“Hey Friday, could you let Tony know I’m here? I’m just going to grab something to eat quick.” Peter said. He had grown used to addressing the tower’s AI, without feeling too awkward talking to thin air. Kind of.

He hurried over to the kitchen, not waiting for the AI to reply.

Peter stopped short, blinking owlishly at the sight of a strange man standing in front of Tony’s open fridge, yoghurt cup in hand. The man had long, dark hair which was tied out of his face, a muscular build that reminded him of Steve, but most apparent was the man’s metallic left arm.

Peter gulped, startled and confused, and then a bit panicked, ‘Who the hell?’

Peter backed out of the kitchen slowly, not taking his eyes off of the stranger, then he turned all at once and ran into the main room.

“MR. STAAARK!”

Tony came barreling into the room, looking around in a panic.

“What’s going on? Peter, are you okay?” Tony ran to Peter’s side, grabbing him by the shoulder and moving in front of him instinctively.

Tony looked even more startled as Bucky ran into the room half a second later.

“I didn’t hurt him, I swear!” He said, looking panicked himself.

“What’s a random dude doing in your kitchen?” Peter demanded shrilly.

Tony sighed. He didn’t know how someone could feel simultaneously relieved and stressed, but his mind and body were giving it a go.

“Shit.” He said, running a hand down his face.

“Tony?” Peter said.

“Wait, is that Spider-Man?” Bucky suddenly demanded.

“Double shit.”

“What—me? No—no way.” Peter denied.

“You’re wearing your suit, kid.” Tony reminded him, quietly stepping away from Peter. Peter whimpered.
“Bucky, this is Peter. Peter, this is Bucky.”

Bucky ignored Tony’s reluctant introduction.

“This is who Steve’s been talking about?” Bucky gestured to Peter. “But, he’s—he’s so little!”

“I’m not little!” Peter protested, but was completely ignored.

Bucky walked up to Peter, looking at him in amazement. “Steve said he had super-strength, but he’s tiny. Tony, look at him.” Bucky took Peter’s face between his palms and looked to Tony. “I could crush his skull!”

“Wait, what?” Peter asked, sounding much more panicked than before.

“Why is he so little?”

“He’s fifteen, Bucky.” Tony sighed, unconcerned.

“Tony!” Peter yelled.

“He’s what?” Bucky exclaimed, releasing the teen. “Why is he out there fighting? Steve said he’s fighting!”

Tony groaned. Out of all the people Tony imagined finding out Peter’s secret, Bucky hadn’t been the first on the list. Furthermore, he definitely wouldn’t have imagined Bucky, of all people, reacting in such an extreme way. Sure, over the last few days, the two men had gotten to know each other a little better; after their first 3 A.M. meal together, Tony found it was commonplace for Barnes to be up and about during the night hours, and not at all bad company to keep—if not a little moody sometimes, but so was he, so it balanced out.

“Tony!”

“Tony!”

Two voices yelled at once.

“Okay! Let’s have everyone calm down!” Tony said.

Both opened their mouths, obviously about to start in on him, so Tony threw his arms up.

“No, absolutely not, both of you shut it for five goddamn seconds!”

Both Bucky and Peter snapped their mouths shut, though neither looked particularly happy about it.

"Thank you. Now, let’s just—sit down or something.”

It took about half an hour of going around, back and forth and everything, but eventually the three seemed to have come to accept the new situation. Bucky had seemed overly concerned, but eventually accepted the same fact that Tony had a long time ago: Peter was going to be out there being Spider-Man, regardless of who was helping or not helping, and in that case, it was better if the kid had some support.

Peter, in turn, had eventually pulled himself out of his state of panic at having his identity compromised so suddenly. It probably helped that once Bucky calmed down enough to take in Peter’s emotional state, he had adjusted his own attitude in order to try and help pull the teen out of
his anxiety attack.

“Listen, I’m sorry for freaking you out earlier, kid, you caught me off guard there.” Bucky apologized, gently.

Peter let out a breath. “Yeah, must say I wasn’t expecting someone else to be here. You said you knew Steve earlier?”

“Yeah, Stevie and I go way back.” Bucky said with a small smile. Tony was hit by the fact that it appeared more genuine than any other he’d seen the man give.

“He talks about me?”

“He mentioned he was training someone new a few times, but honestly, with his descriptions of your strength I just thought you’d be...” Bucky raised his palm so it hovered above his head, “taller. More super-soldier sized, like me and Stevie.”

“Wait, do you have powers, too?”

Bucky’s smile was gone, and he was quiet for a moment, before replying, “I’m kind of a crude version of what Steve—”

“What he means is that his abilities are a lot like Steve’s. Enhanced senses, strength, and stamina, that kind of thing.”

“That’s cool! How come I haven’t seen you around the compound, then?” Peter asked.

“I’m not exactly Avengers material.”

Tony was outright glaring at Bucky now.

“Oh, sorry, I just assumed, since you said you knew Steve and were hanging out here...” Peter said.

“Steve and I are friends, and Tony is nice enough to let me stay here for now.”

“Oh, okay. So what do you do?”

“Unemployed, at the moment, but it’s kind of hard to find yourself a legitimate job with the resumé I have.”

“For the love of god, will you stop it!” Tony exclaimed.

“I wasn’t going to tell him what I was, Stark. I’m not going to traumatize your kid.”

Peter felt his cheeks flush.

“That isn’t what this is about, the only one traumatized here is you, and—”

“Now we both know that’s bullshit.”

“And I swear on whatever god you believe in, James, if you don’t stop it with this self-deprecating bullshit, I will personally kick your ass, super-soldier or not.”

Peter looked back and forth between both men, who were now just staring intently at one another, wondering what the hell was going on, because obviously he was missing some important context here.
It was Bucky who broke the staring contest first with an aggravated huff, and mumbled something that Peter thought sounded a lot like, “Talk about the pot calling the kettle black.”

“What was that?” Tony snapped.

“Nothing, darling.” Bucky shot him a sarcastic smile, making Tony frown harder at him.

“Don’t make me call Steve.”

“You wouldn’t dare!”

“Try. Me.”

More staring. Peter was definitely feeling awkward now. He was half-convinced the entire thing was going to escalate into a boxing match at any second. All it needed was a good commentator. But just as Peter was sure fists were going to start flying, Bucky fell into chuckling.

“Okay, you win this time, Stark.”

“Damn straight.”

“Uhm,” Peter said. “I can’t help but feel like I’m missing something.”

“Shit, Peter, I’m sorry, that must’ve been awkward.” Bucky said.

“Yeah, sorry, kiddo.” Tony said, following Bucky’s example.

“No—no, It’s o—okay, seriously! Uhm, it’s—it’s fine.” Peter tried to assure them, wide-eyed.

“You’re stumbling over your words.” Tony said with a fond huff.

“Uhm—what?”

“Whenever you’re excited or nervous, you stumble over your words.” Tony said, smiling now.

“Sorry for making you nervous again, kid.” Bucky cut in.

“No—no, it’s—it’s fine—dammit.”

Bucky barked a laugh and Peter groaned, slumping down his seat. Peter’s stomach chose that moment to growl loudly, making the teen’s cheeks flush in further embarrassment.

“Hungry?” Tony said, sniggering.

“Hey, I guess you did catch me in the kitchen, let’s get you something to eat.” Bucky said.

“Oooh, it’s your lucky day, Petey, Bucky is a top notch chef!” Tony said excitedly.

“Oh?”

Bucky shook his head. “What Tony means is that I make good sandwiches.”

“And grilled cheese, and burgers, and—”

“All sandwiches!” Bucky protested.
“Debatable.” Tony said.

Peter was smiling now. “Sandwich or no sandwich, I’m still hungry.”

“To be continued!” Tony said, and went into the kitchen.

Bucky rolled his eyes but followed suit. “To the kitchen, I guess.”

“Barnes, why is there yoghurt all over my bloody floor?” Tony shouted from the other room.

“Whoops.”

---

“Okay, so let’s take a look at those blueprints you mentioned over lunch.” Tony said to Peter, as they sat together at one of the workbenches in the workshop.

“I—I wouldn’t call them blueprints, I mean, they kind of layout what I think it’ll look like, but, it’s not finalized or set in stone or anything—of course. I’m not even sure if it’ll be feasible within the time constraints we have, I mean, the fair is only a little while away, and—”

“Whoa, whoa, slow your roll, kid, one step at a time.”

Peter took a deep breath. “Right—right, okay, so this is what I’ve got so far.” He said, pulling some rather crinkled papers out of his bookbag.

Tony grabbed them off the table and scanned over them. They weren't the most organized drawings or notes he'd ever seen, but they were more thorough than what he was expecting. Looking over the little drawings brought a smile to his face, the messy scrawl of writing and rough linework reminded him of some of the schematics he had thrown together when he was younger.

“The build shouldn’t be too complicated, I’m sure you’ll have very few problems putting it together here in the shop.”

Tony looked up to Peter, who was nodding along to what he was saying with rapt attention, though Tony could still feel the teens leg bouncing, causing a slight tremor through the table.

“It’s the thinky-bits that are going to be a challenge,” he continued. “I know you don’t have a huge knowledge of programming, and this is complicated for even some of the professionals out there.”

Peter grimaced. “Yeah, I figured as much.” He said, sounding disappointed.

"Which is why you’re definitely bringing that trophy home!” Tony said firmly.

“You think we can do it?” Peter asked.

“I think you should be able to complete it with my help.”

It was going to be a struggle for both of them; Peter was going to have to learn some advanced programming, and Tony was going to have to restrain himself from taking over the project. He wanted this to remain Peter's achievement.

“All right!” Peter said with excitement.

“Okay, so first, let’s get some supplies and such. Also, the legs of the robot here—were you wanting full movement or wheels or what?”
“I was thinking functioning legs, but wheels might be easier.”

“Psh, then fully functioning legs it will have!”

“Okay!” Peter smiled.

Tony worked with Peter well into the afternoon on, creating the skeleton and body of the robot. The two totally lost track of time until they heard the shop door open.

“Tony, I’ve been trying to reach you all afternoon, why haven’t you picked—oh, hello.”

Peter looked up at the woman who had walked into the room. He recognized her from some of the press conferences involving Stark Industries.

“Oh, hey Pep!” Tony greeted. “Uhh, Peter, this is Pepper. Pepper, this is my intern, Peter.”

“It’s nice to finally meet you, Peter.” Pepper said, nodding to him in acknowledgement.

“You too,” Peter replied, grateful beyond belief that he had changed out of his Spider-Man suit. Wait. Finally? Did—did Tony talk about him?

“Since when does Tony Stark take interns?” Pepper asked, perplexed.

“Since now.” Tony shrugged.

“Uh huh. Tony, may I speak to you.”

“That’s what you’re doing now, isn’t it?”

“Privately.”

Tony sighed. “Yeah, yeah, okay.” He stood from the bench. “Keep working on the wiring.” He told Peter.

Pepper smiled at Peter. “I’ll have him returned once he looks over these documents.”

“O—okay, sure.” Peter smiled, awkwardly.

Tony followed his CEO and ex out of the room, preparing himself to be fully interrogated. “Sorry about not answering, I have Friday reroute my calls when I’m—teaching? Is that the word? Possibly.”

“Seriously, Tony, what’s going on? I thought you were working with Peter as Spider-Man—now he’s an actual intern? In all the years I’ve known you, you’ve never accepted an intern. In fact, I have a pretty clear memory of you saying, ‘Pep, if I wanted an idiot following me around all day, copying my shit, and rotting away my own intellect with their stupidity, I’d invite Hammer over.’”

“That was before I knew interns could be smart. Seriously, he came up with the project we’re working on right now!”

“How old is that kid, anyway? You said he was a teenager, but—he looks young.”

“He’s fifteen.”

“Jesus, Tony! What if he gets hurt!”
“He’s fine, like I said, he’s *smart.*”

“Tony…”

Oh no, Tony knew that voice.

“Listen, Pep, Peter’s a good kid. Smart, too. I’m just giving him a leg up.”

“Yeah, okay, but—God, it was easier to ignore this when I hadn’t seen him.” She sighed. “Just remember, people aren’t robots, Tony. You can’t just reprogram them when something you don’t like happens, and—”

“I know that!” Tony said, annoyed.

“And, if he’s fifteen, then he probably really looks up to you.”

“I know, Pep, I know! Now, can we please just get to why you needed to march down here in the first place.”

“Okay, just—be careful, all right? But yes, here, I just need you to look over these documents quickly.”

“Yeah, okay.”

---

“I didn’t get you in trouble, did I?” Peter asked when Tony came back into the room.

“Oh, no, just had to go over some business material.”

“Oh, okay.”

“So how’s it coming along?”

“Good, should have the wiring done soon.”

“For now, wiring can be finicky. Could look good, but’ll end up shorting out once you get the bot going.”

“Right.”

“Okay, let’s check on the 3D printer’s progress.”

---

Tony drove Peter home around six-thirty. Peter had told him earlier that May was expecting Peter to be home for dinner that night, and Tony did not want to anger the woman by keeping her nephew captive. Tony pulled up to the side of Peter’s building, and noticed that May was waiting outside for them, which was unusual. Tony hoped that he wasn’t late dropping him off. He came to a stop in front of where May was standing.

“All right, kid, have a good night.” He said as Peter hopped out.

“Hi, Peter. Tony, wait, before you go,” May said, walking up and wrapping an arm around Peter.

“Yep?”
“Why don’t you join us for dinner?” May said with a smile.

“Dinner?” Tony said and thought, he had been planning on playing catch up—with some projects—especially since he was going to be held up in meetings tomorrow—but, this was the first time May had extended an invitation. Quite honestly, he didn’t think she had been all that fond of him, so—

“I’d love to,” He said with a smile. “I’ll just go park.”

“Wonderful.”

Tony was surprised as the evening went on. May seemed to be putting her best face forward, and the banter at the table seemed very natural; he found himself genuinely smiling more than once. Peter chatted amicably about school and the decathlon, and even the science fair. May joked about cooking lessons and told amusing stories from things she’d seen as a nurse. Tony had more than enough stories to fill multiple dinners, but he figured most of them might not have been appropriate. Still, he was more than happy to listen to the conversation, and even put in his two cents here and there where it did seem appropriate. Pepper would be proud—and okay, yeah, that thought hurt a bit. Sure, his friendship with the woman had been healing—slowly—since they split as a couple, but the guilt that he wasn’t able to make it work still stabbed at him.

He forced the thought down and redirected his attention back to the people who were there with him now.

“Peter says you’ve been helping him with his project for this year’s science fair. It’s very nice of you.” May smiled.

“Oh! Yeah well, Peter’s a good kid, smart to boot, I’m more than happy to lend him a hand.”

Peter coughed awkwardly, his face flushed from the compliments.

“I don’t think I would have been able to do it without your help,” Peter said, a bit quietly.

“Doubt it, you’re resourceful. I’m sure you would have come up with something,” Tony said, smiling.

“I don’t know if I’m that resourceful.” Peter said.

Tony wanted to mentioned how Peter had taken on a pretty damn intimidating and dangerous villain, and won, all on his own, but he figured with May still in the dark on the whole Spider-Man thing, it probably wasn’t a good idea—even if it was a good argument.

After dinner was done, May asked Peter to start on the washing up while she walked Tony out. The walk to the front doors was spent in mostly-companionable silence, though Tony could tell May was deep in thought. Finally, when they were at the front entrance to the apartment building, the woman spoke.

“I wanted to thank you,” She said.

“Thank me?”

She smiled. “For everything you’re doing for Peter. Now, though excited for him, I will admit that I wasn’t totally sold on this internship idea—Peter already had so much on his plate with school and his decathlon. Peter’s lost a lot in his life; his parent’s died in a plane crash when he was young, and all he had was Ben and me, and after Ben—” She let out a shaky sigh. “After Ben died, Peter really struggled, but in this last month or so, I feel like Peter is finally letting himself be
happy again. I know a lot of that has to do with you. Peter looks up to you a lot, I don’t even know if you know how much.” May was looking at him, seriously.

Tony’s first instinct was to go back to his wit, to try and break the mood in the room, but he tramped down on those thoughts before he could make a complete ass of himself. He needed to be serious, for Peter’s sake.

“Peter is a great kid, May. He's smart, and talented, and compassionate. Honestly, I’m honored that I can be a part of his life. You’re right, he’s been through a lot, but he hasn’t let that twist him up. I wish I had been able to hold myself together half as well when I was his age. It can’t have been easy on you either, May, but honestly, Peter wouldn’t have such an obviously high regard for you if you weren’t doing a fantastic job raising him. And I know you’re probably worried that I’m going to just drop out of Peter’s life one day, but I can promise you that’s not going to happen. I care about Peter a lot, and I want to be someone he can rely on.”

It felt odd being this open with someone, but Tony thought that May deserved at least that when it came to Peter, and Tony wasn’t lying, either; he had no intention of stepping out of Peter’s life. In a way, it scared him how quickly he had grown attached to the awkwardly adorable ball of energy that was Peter Parker, but he was, and that was that.

Meanwhile, May was studying him closely, possibly looking for any signs of deceit. Tony felt bad for anyone who tried to cross her when she was in ‘protective mom mode.’

She must have liked what she found, looking at him, because she nodded her head once.

“Well, it’s small, and a little broken, but welcome to the family.”

Chapter End Notes

hopefully the tag changes haven't scared you off!! please continue to enjoy and have a lovely weekend!
Tony stumbled out of his bedroom and down the hall toward his minibar, visions of nightly terrors still playing in his mind as he reached for a mostly-filled bottle of whiskey. A dim light shone from the kitchen, so Tony turned and made his way over. He could use some caffeine. He made it to the coffee pot and poured himself a mug with shaky hands. He wiped the sweat from his brow after placing the pot back down, and let out a shuddering breath. Then, he took a long swig of the bitter liquid with no mind of the scalding temperature and how it burnt his tongue and all the way down his throat. Finally, he turned to acknowledge the other in the room.

Tony raised his cup in greeting, Bucky mimicking the movement silently. The other man’s shoulders were sagged and his head was bowed with the invisible weight of an exhaustion that settled far beyond the physical.

He took what was now his usual seat next to Bucky at the island. Tony unscrewed the lid off his whiskey and topped up his coffee, mixing the two liquids together. His next taste was considerably more bracing, but also disgustingly comforting.

The two sat next to each other in silence, only broken once, when Tony offered Bucky some of his whiskey—the other declining. It wasn’t an awkward silence; the two of them had become used to the other’s presence and this dark routine they shared.

Their routine was actually split in two; the first was followed only by the slightly-bad nights, where one of them would be harshly afflicted by past terrors, now seared into the mind. During these nights, it wasn’t uncommon for Tony or Bucky to find the other going for the coffee, usually after having had a bad night. It also became commonplace to give food and drink to whoever was having the rougher time of it. Bucky made Tony his sandwiches, and Tony gave Bucky snack bars or fruit—anything that didn’t involve actual cooking of any kind, after his first attempt to give back. The two would sit, one comforting the other, through conversation, or food, or simply offering the close proximity of a friend. So, yeah. That was routine one.

Tonight was the second routine. Routine two was the worst of the pair; it was a time when both of them were haunted in the night by the shadows of past demons. It was a time of complete misery and wallowing and exhaustion—spurred on when Tony would awaken from dreams of colours, and shapes, and scenes playing back to him in a disjointed amalgamation of memory and feeling—like someone had taken handfuls of different puzzles and then thrown them on the table, and told Tony to piece them together. Some of the pieces of his memories would fit, but others would snap into place in no discernible timeline, as pieces were forced together to make the worst independent film Tony had ever seen.

As horrible as these tortured nights were, there was also a comfort that came with them—now, at least, because when Tony would stagger into the kitchen in a desperate attempt to stay grounded, he wouldn't be alone.

During these nights, Bucky would look just as worn, just as soul-deep exhausted as Tony himself felt. They wouldn't speak, they didn't need to—they would just sit together, exist together, and as fucked up as Tony knew it was to think so, he found it comforting. Comforting in the fact that, for the first time in his life, he didn’t feel like he had to explain himself, didn’t have to pull himself together with someone else around. For the first time in his entire life, Tony felt understood.
Still, even the feeling of understanding only went so far. Tony grabbed the bottle and topped up his mug—it was more alcohol than coffee at this point, not that that was something he minded in the least. Tony knew he probably *should* care, any normal person would, but when the hell had he *ever* been normal?

When had he ever been given the chance?

He didn’t really know why, but his addled thoughts drifted to Peter, the kid who was arriving later that morning for training. His guts twisted in shame. How was he supposed to be *anyone’s* mentor? Never mind to someone as bright and wonderful as Peter was.

He took another swig from his mug, then another, and another. Some respectable adult he was being, working his way up to getting well and thoroughly trashed, *knowing* he had responsibilities to live up to later on, involving someone whose opinion of him he actually cared about.

What was it that Pepper had called him? *Self-sabotaging?*

Tony pictured the look on Peter’s face if he were to arrive at the tower to find Tony passed out in the kitchen, hugging a bottle of whiskey. His stomach churned dangerously and he squeezed his eyes closed, swallowing thickly, fighting the feeling. He was hit then with a sudden urge: red hot and angry, and desperate, and new, and terrifying all at once. In that moment he just wanted to smash the bottle, chuck it right into the sink and watch its contents drain, but not just the whiskey—all of it. Every last bottle in the whole fucking tower. His hands gripped bottle. He wanted to do it so, *so* badly, but there were other thoughts—other pictures, and memories, and dreams that stayed *seared* into his mind. They played over and over, and they were *so* loud, *and* sharp, *and* taunting.

Tony grit his teeth. He wanted them to *stop*, but he didn’t know how to make them. The one thing he did know was that they came from his mind, and the alcohol made his mind go fuzzy and dark, made everything seem muffled. It didn't take the thoughts away, it didn't make them stop, but it made them quieter.

He poured another drink.

Tony’s head felt light and fuzzy as the room around him tilted in a way it really had no right to. Or at least, he didn’t think so, considering his ass had been parked for the last hour. He was getting ready to take another swig from the bottle in his hands when it was taken from him. He frowned, confused and upset.

“What—th’fuck?” He grumbled.

“You’re hogging the liquor.” A voice said, next to him.

Tony squinted at the man next to him. *Bucky*, his mind supplied, embarrassingly slowly. He frowned more, didn’t the guy turn down his offer earlier?

He huffed in annoyance. “You’re lucky you’re pretty.”

Bucky snorted, then replied, “Yeah, okay. Sure thing, Stark.”

Tony hummed and sighed. His hands felt empty now, and he was thirsty.

“Share,” he demanded.

“No, you’ve had most of the bottle, it's my turn.” Bucky stood up and walked over to the sink.
Tony heard him turn on the tap, then watched him pull a cup from the cupboard.

“If you’re still thirsty, then drink this.” Bucky said while placing the cup next to Tony’s hand, which had been holding the whiskey mere moments ago.

“Tha’some major bullshit, Barnes.”

Tony glared at the cup as if he found it personally offensive. He glared long enough that he failed to notice Bucky place the bottle of whiskey out of sight.

“Gimme my whiskey back.”

“Can’t.” Bucky shrugged whilst sitting down next to him again.

“The fuck not?”

“Drank it.”

“Ass.” Tony shook his head. “So lucky you’re pretty.”

“Drink the water, Stark.”

Tony debated ignoring him out of pure, stubborn will, but his mouth and throat felt parched to an extent that would probably be painful if his face didn’t feel half-numb.

He picked up the glass and took a sip, then grimaced as if it was something particularly distasteful. He also missed the way Bucky rolled his eyes.

“You’re really a kid sometimes, y’know that?” Bucky said.

“Am not.”

“A petulant one.”

“Oooh, does that mean you’re gonna spank me?” Tony asked, waggling his eyebrows.

“Don’t tempt me,” Bucky said, dryly. “Drink,” he demanded again, pointing to the water.

“Spoilsport.”

---

Tony didn’t remember falling asleep, and he certainly didn’t remember making it back to bed, but that’s where he woke up, as Friday turned the lights on in his room and spoke.

“Good morning, Boss.”

He opened his eyes and immediately groaned. His retinas stung and his head throbbed like someone had jammed hot pokers into his sockets.

Tony cut her off somewhere between spouting off the weather and the daily stocks.

“Turn off the bloody lights, Friday.”

The lights dimmed by a small percentage, but definitely did not go out.
“Friday—”

“Peter will be arriving on site in approximately one hour, Sir.”

And god damn he did not program her to be that passive aggressive, and also, “Fuck.”

“There’s water and painkillers on your night table.” The AI replied, more gently this time.

Tony looked, and sure enough, there was a full glass of water and two bright blue, liquid caps sitting angelically next to him.

The sight of the water seemed to clue his brain in on the cottony feeling in his mouth and the dryness of his throat. He grabbed the water and sipped at it gratefully, not caring if it tasted slightly stale. Then, when he was sure his stomach wouldn’t revolt on him, he picked up the two painkillers and swallowed them down.

He laid back down with a groan and covered his eyes with his forearm.

“Sir.”

He sighed. “Yeah, I know.”

A moment’s pause, and then, “Mr. Barnes is in the kitchen. He said he wishes to speak with you before Peter arrives, Boss.”

Tony laid there a moment longer, then sighed and hefted himself out of bed. He stood still for a moment, waiting for the room to stop spinning and his stomach to stop churning long enough to make it to the bathroom. The last thing he needed was to smell like a drive bar.

Tony stumbled into the kitchen thirty-five minutes later in casual clothes and a pair of dark, tinted sunglasses. The kitchen was a waft in glorious smells that made his stomach growl fiercely at him. He groaned and collapsed onto his stool.

“Good morning to you, too,” Bucky said in amusement, and pushed a plate and cutlery in front of Tony.

“You are an absolute gift among men, Bucky Barnes.” Tony said, picking up his fork and digging in. He paused after the first bite and let out an appreciative moan. “Yep, it’s official. I’m keeping you.”

“You should taste Steve’s omelettes—now those are good.” Bucky replied, unfazed.

“Nothing could be better than this.”

“Unless it’s made by Mr. Perfect, right?” Bucky replied, teasingly.

“Are you ever going to let that go?”

“Absolutely not.”

Tony decided to change the subject. “So Friday said you wanted to talk to me,” he said.

“Subtle.” Bucky joked. “But yeah, I do. I want to go with you and Peter to the compound today.”

Tony paused, “I don’t know if—”
“I want to check the place out. Plus, I’m curious to see what Steve is like on the job.”

“On the job?”

Bucky nodded. “As the great Captain America. I’m always hearing about him leading and training the Avengers, is it odd that I’d want to check it out?” He huffed a bit.

Tony sighed. “I’d have to sneak you in,” he said, rubbing his temples.

“That’s fine.”

“Like hide you in my trunk or something.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time I’ve been shoved in a trunk.”

Tony wanted to question that last statement, but his head was throbbing too much to really let him care.

“Seriously, I’ve been locked up here for months. If shoving me in a trunk is what it’s gonna take to get some fresh air, I am more than willing.”

“Fuck, okay, sure. Why not? Let’s sneak an internationally-wanted fugitive into the Avengers Compound. What’s the worst that could happen?” Tony said, sarcastically.

Bucky smiled. “That’s the spirit!”

Tony grumbled and went back to his omelette.

---

Peter winced getting out of bed. He had been up late the night before patrolling, and had had a rather violent run in with some muggers. Usually it would be a breeze for him to take out a couple of ruffians, but one of the two men had been a big, burly, brick wall of a man that Peter was convinced must have been a mutant of some kind. The man had been able to take Peter’s punches and deliver some of his own that had left the boy bruised and sore everywhere. In the end it was Peter’s fast reflexes that had saved him, though it was a close call.

Peter had been so focused on the big guy that he had, stupidly, forgotten about the little guy. If his spider-senses hadn’t alerted him when they did, he would have ended up with a knife embedded in his spine. As it was, he was able to spin around and mostly dodge the man and his blade—though he wasn’t fast enough to prevent the knife from opening a long gash across his chest.

Peter looked himself over in his mirror. Sure enough, he was littered with bruises at various levels of healing and of various sizes. The long gash across his chest had closed overnight, but the skin where it had been was still red and tender to the touch. Peter wanted to groan—today was another training day, and although he usually lived for training at the compound, he wasn’t looking forward to facing Captain America when he was already so battered. Maybe he could spar with someone else today? A brief memory of how his last encounter with Black Widow had ended flashed through his mind and made him wince. On second thought, he’d rather take on the Captain, any day.

It was tempting to crawl back into bed and text Tony that he’d be late, but Peter knew he’d feel too guilty to sleep if he did. Tony had never cancelled their meetings, and Peter knew how busy the man was. Despite that, Tony had never cancelled on him. It would be disrespectful to wuss out because of some bruising.
Peter dressed as quickly as he could, and went to grab breakfast.

“...the identity of the man who was found has not yet been released; however, the state of the body matches those of Marissa Chang and Adam McLarson, who were found in a similar state—”

May made a disgusted noise and the TV was turned off. Peter frowned.

“What was all that about?” He asked.

“Some psycho is going around cutting people up.” She said, her upper lip curled in distaste.

“Really?” Peter frowned, wondering why he hadn’t heard anything earlier. Based on the newscast, this wasn't the first victim.

May shook her head and placed a plate of bacon and eggs in front of Peter, one hand lifting to smooth down some of his unruly curls.

“Three people in under two months, and the police have no leads.” She sighed. “Maybe I should drive you to Mr. Stark’s—”

“Aww, May, you don’t need to do that. It's broad daylight out, and plus, my commute is through populated areas, I'll be fine. It’s way out of the way from your work, anyway.”

May’s lips were pressed thin when Peter looked up at her, but she sighed and relented. “Okay, but make sure you’re careful, and insist on a ride home.”

“Tony always drives me home, May.” He replied between bites of his breakfast.

“I know, but still.”

“I promise to be careful.” Peter smiled reassuringly at his aunt.

She nodded. “Okay, well I have to get going to work.” May said while gathering her things. Once she was set, she walked back over to Peter and placed a kiss atop his head.

“I love you, have fun today.”

“I will! Love you, too.” Peter said, as May dashed out the door.

---

Peter made it to the tower with ten minutes to spare. Which was good, since he decided to walk through the front door like a normal person this time, in order to avoid another fiasco like what happened with Bucky. Peter didn’t think that there was anyone else currently living at the tower—but then, he hadn’t thought that there was anyone other than Tony there before, either. It was probably a little too soon to judge, but Bucky seemed to be an all right guy. At first, Peter had a nagging feeling that he recognized the name, but forcibly shrugged it off, assuming that maybe he had heard Steve mention him in passing or something. After all, both Bucky and Tony had mentioned that the two men were friends. Nonetheless, Peter would be lying if he said the thought of someone, other than Tony, knowing his identity didn’t set him on edge. There was nothing he could do about it now, though; what's done is done, no use crying over spilt milk, c'est la vie, and all that.

Peter walked out into the main apartment and immediately spotted Bucky and Tony sitting in the lounge. Both were looking at him, no doubt having heard the elevator arrive.
“Morning, Peter.” Tony greeted with a somewhat-wilted looking wave.

Peter quirked an eyebrow at his mentor’s appearance. He hadn’t seen the man ever dressed this casual, outside of workshop days. Then, of course, there were the glasses. Who wore sunglasses inside? ‘Oh my God, is he—?’

“Morning,” Bucky said, interrupting Peter’s train of thought.

“Good morning!” Peter said, knowing he sounded a little too enthusiastic. He had been telling himself to act more than happy to be there, in order to not draw attention to his sore body.

“Ready to head over?” Tony asked.

Peter nodded, “Of course!”

“Good!” Tony said as both he and Bucky stood. “Oh, right, this one's tagging along today.”

Bucky nodded.

“Oh, okay, cool cool cool!”

The three entered the elevator and Tony pressed the button that would take them to his personal carpark. Once there, Tony paused, considering the cars with pursed lips. He turned and looked Bucky up and down, then looked back to his cars.

“Well, the Audi and Bugatti are definitely out.” He said, finally.

“What about that one?” Bucky said, pointing.

“It only has two seats,” Peter said, but the men ignored him.

“Still a tight fit. If the Royce was here it wouldn't be a problem, but it's parked in the mansion.”

“Why is the Audi out? It has enough seats.” Peter said to deaf ears.

“Let’s take a look,” Tony said suddenly, and walked over to get the keys.

Much to Peter's continued confusion, the two men walked over to the Acura NSX and popped open the trunk.

“There’s no way in hell.” Bucky said.

Tony sighed in frustration and rubbed his temples. “It’s your fault for being so muscle-y.”

“What else you got?”

“Hmm, this one might work.” Tony muttered, leading Bucky away to another car.

A good ten minutes later and Peter was watching the two arguing. Honestly, he was getting frustrated by his own confusion; neither Bucky nor Tony had stopped to explain what they were after, and Peter didn’t understand why they couldn't just jump into the nearest sedan.

“Well, I wasn’t exactly given time to plan.” Tony said.

“I know, but I figured you’d have one decently-sized car! You couldn't fit a suitcase in half of these.” Bucky huffed.
“Well, I wasn’t exactly planning on having to hide a body in one of them, now was I?”

‘Wait, WHAT?’ Peter thought, startling to attention. “A body?”

“Well that’s kind of an obvious oversight, now isn’t it?” Bucky said, completely ignoring Peter.

“Shut up, Barnes.” Tony heaved a sigh, then fished his cell phone from his pocket and dialed a number.

“Hey, Happy. Can you pick up the Rolls Royce and bring it around to the tower for me? Uh huh, yep—that’s the one—as soon as possible. Okay, thanks. Oh, and drive it right down into the garage. Yeah, okay—bye.”

He hung up and glared at Bucky.

Forty minutes later, Peter watched as a Rolls Royce Phantom drove into the car park. Happy Hogan exited the vehicle, looking none-too-happy.

“Here she is, Boss.” Happy said. “Need me to drive you anywhere?” He continued, eyeing Bucky suspiciously.

“Nope, this is perfect. Thanks, Hap.” Tony said, catching the keys Happy tossed to him.

“Anything else you need?”

“Nope, this is it, thanks.” Tony said.

Happy nodded and made his way out of the carpark.

Tony and Bucky immediately went to the trunk and opened it up.

“That’s a little better.” Bucky nodded.

“Does it suit you, your majesty?” Tony jabbed.

“We’ll just have to test it out.”

Peter’s confusion morphed into incredulousness as he watched the bulky super-soldier begin to maneuver himself into the trunk.

“What the hell?” He said, quietly.

“Careful of the paint!” Tony barked.

“Yeah, yeah. Don’t get your panties in a twist.”

There was a little more rustling around, then Tony asked, “Good?”

“As I’ll ever—”

Tony slammed the trunk closed.

“Okay, webs. Get in,” he said, waving Peter over.

Peter walked over, but continued to stare at Tony in bewilderment. He had so many questions.

‘Why is Bucky in the trunk when there’s more than enough room in the body? Why are they acting so casual about shoving Bucky into the trunk? Did they have to hide him? If so, why?’
The drive over to the compound was spent mostly in silence. Peter felt like any conversation he tried to start would just be an awkward attempt to avoid talking about the elephant in the room—err—trunk.

He made it all of fifteen minutes, foot bouncing and fingers tapping, before he couldn't contain his curiosity any longer.

"Why are we driving with Bucky in the trunk?"

"Uhhh—" Tony said for entirely too long.

Peter looked at him, unimpressed.

Tony must have been really concentrating on coming up with an excuse, because he totally didn't see the pothole in the road until they rolled over it rather violently. A loud *THUH-THUD* sounded from the trunk, followed by what Peter could only imagine were curses, yelled angrily in a language he didn't know.

"You okay, honey?" Tony called back, loudly, so Bucky could hear.

"Fuck you!" Was the muffled response.

Tony gasped, exaggeratedly. "Language!" He shouted. "There are children on board!"

Peter shook his head, and decided to just settle with his own conclusion that maybe the other two were just a bit unhinged.

---

Peter felt unbelievably nervous as they slowed down at the security checkpoint. Maybe Bucky wasn't allowed in the compound because he wasn't an Avenger or a vigilante or whatever. But that didn't make much sense; Peter had seen people other than the Avengers around the property—men and women in suits and tactical gear milling about. It wasn't often, but it was definitely an occurrence, so that didn't quite explain the need for the smuggling.

Fortunately, the guards didn't seem to find anything out of place, and waved Tony through without so much as a second glance.

Peter let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding, thankful once more for the mask hiding his features. Next to him, Tony chuckled.

"Were you worried there?"

"Well, yeah! We have a man in our trunk!" He said, gesturing as wildly as the confined space allowed.

"I'm sure it wouldn't have been the weirdest thing they found being smuggled in," Tony said.

"That—that does not make me feel better."

Tony smiled crookedly as he drove them down into the garage and to his reserved spot near to the elevator.

"Okay, here we go," he said as he exited, Peter following suit.

Tony went around to the trunk, unlocked it, and began opening it up. Bucky's head popped up a
bit, the man's face looking angry. He looked as if he was about to start bitching, when suddenly the elevator dinged and the sound of the doors sliding open echoed through the garage.

Acting on pure instinct and reflex, Tony slammed the trunk closed once more, then leaned against it for good measure, with the worst poker face Peter had ever seen—which was kind of pathetic, since Tony was wearing sunglasses, which should've made it easy. It could’ve also had something to do with the yell of pain, followed by the screeching expletives that resounded from the trunk; once more spoken in the same language as earlier, which Peter thought sounded as if it might be Russian, now that he was getting a good earful of it.

“Oh, hey, Sam, it’s just you!” Tony said, with a nervous but kind-of-relieved laugh.

Sure enough, Sam was standing just outside the elevator, looking equal parts startled and confused.

‘Same.’ Thought Peter, dryly.

“What in the hell?” Sam questioned, eyeing them cautiously.

“Ahaha, well, you see, the thing here is—” Tony began, while banging on the trunk, as if the noise would cancel out Bucky’s angry cursing.

“Now, y’know what? No. I do not care.” Sam raised his hands in a surrendering manner, and backed away toward the other side of the garage. “Plausible deniability!” He stated, before turning and walking off.

“Bye, Falcon!” Peter called after him.

There was a pause where the silence stretched on, then Tony turned back around and unlatched the trunk once more.

If Peter thought Bucky looked angry before, then the man appeared downright hellish now.

Tony coughed, awkwardly. “Wanna come out?”

“I dunno, are you gonna try and give me another concussion?” Bucky snapped.

“Uhh, I’m—uhh—I’m just gonna—” Peter pointed to the elevator as he backed toward it. “Yeah.”

“Of course! We should head up—as soon as possible—don’t want Peter to be later than he already is!” Tony began, backing off as well, jumping on the opportunity to throw the attention off of himself.

Bucky got out of the trunk and followed them into the elevator, where he glared pointedly at Tony over Peter’s head the whole way up. Tony all but ran out of the elevator once the doors chimed open, and honestly, Peter couldn't blame him in the slightest. Bucky was intimidating. Period. He made up his mind to do his best to never be on the receiving end of that look, ever. Peter was hot on Tony’s heels for escape.

“There you are!” A voice called to them.

Peter looked and saw Steve jogging over, hand raised in greeting.

He waved back. “Sorry we’re late!” Peter said, feeling bad that he had made Captain America, of all people, wait around for them. “It’s just that—well—”

‘Well what? Sorry I’m late, I had to wait for these two to find and pick out a car with a large
enough trunk to fit a grown man inside? Yeah, that doesn't sound dumb at all.’

Luckily, Peter was spared the potentially-awkward conversation, because at exactly that moment, Bucky came out of the elevator and Steve’s sights zeroed in on the man. A huge grin spread over his face as he rushed forward and embraced Bucky in a tight hug.

“Buck! I wasn’t expecting you to come along, what are you doing here?” Steve’s smile faltered slightly. “Wait, what are you doing here?”

“Came here to see you, obviously. See how little Stevie was able to rally the troops.” Bucky smirked.

Steve huffed good-naturedly, his smile returning for a second. “Still, it could be dangerous for you here. If someone outside of the Avengers recognizes you, they could let slip where you are.”

Bucky shrugged. “Don’t worry so much, nobody saw me. Stark smuggled me in.”

“Oh, back to Stark now, huh?” Tony said with an unimpressed look.

“Don’t push your luck, there are a few other things I’d be more than happy to call you right now.”

“Ouch.”

“I’ll consider calling you something nicer once my head stops throbbing.”

Steve frowned slightly in concern, looking between his two friends. “Uh—what’s—?”

“Uhh, right! Shouldn’t we head down to the arena?” Peter said, before that conversation topic could really begin.

Steve blinked and smiled sheepishly. “Sorry, of course. Let’s head down now.”

---

Peter stretched at the side of the sparring mat, being careful not to upset his sore muscles too badly.

“Ready?” Steve asked, taking his shield from his back.

‘No.’ Thought Peter. ‘Yes!’ He said.

“Okay—get ready and—” Steve threw his shield, aiming for Peter's legs, but Peter jumped out of the way with only a slight twinge to his thighs.

Peter heard the shield ricochet, and performed a rolling dodge to get out of the way once again. Steve was already running to catch it on its current course. Before Peter could react, Steve was in front of him. Peter blocked the man’s punches and jumped over the kicks, but his reflexes were delayed as his body strained a bit.

‘Come on, Peter.’

Steve tripped him and Peter landed on his back with a thump and a wince. He barely paused to recover before he was back into it. He was growing more and more frustrated with himself and his performance. The aches throughout his body were making him second-guess his next move, and that was all Steve needed—that half-second pause to spot an opening.
“Come on, Spider-Man, concentrate!” Steve demanded.

Peter winced. Yep, it was as noticeable as it felt.

The back-and-forth continued for some time, Peter purely on the defensive, his poor reaction times not giving him a chance to switch things around.

During one particular airborne flip, Peter just happened to twist the wrong way, causing shocks of pain to travel through his chest. The muscles throughout his body were in spasms, which threw off his landing. His balance now completely off, he wasn't able to brace himself against Steve ramming into him, full-body. Peter felt himself thrown backwards hard, and he landed onto his side harder. A pained yelp forced its way from his throat as his body flared up in pain.

“What the actual HELL, Steven!”

Peter raised his head, surprised at the sudden shout, and saw Bucky storming across the arena toward them.

Steve had already run over to Peter's side to check on him, but now his attention was redirected toward the man storming over to them in a fury.

“Jesus, could you not see he was struggling to keep up?”

“Listen, Buck—it was an off day, usually Spider-Man is more than capable of keeping up with that level of—”

“Do I look like I give a shit?”

Peter was half-sitting now, looking at Bucky in shock. “I—I’m okay now,” he tried, and winced at how his voice cracked a bit.

Tony was next to him now, crouched down and handing him a bottle of cool water.

“Hush, just rest a minute.” Bucky told him, surprisingly gently, and then rounded on Steve again in the next second.

“Also—!”

Steve, for his part, seemed to have gotten over his initial shock and was now looking thoroughly unimpressed. He sighed.

“Okay, Buck, who’s the kid?” He asked, matter-of-fact.

Bucky stopped short, blinked, and then said, “I don’t have a clue,” coolly.

“Oh, please! Buck, you know you can’t lie to me.”

Bucky raised a brow. Steve raised two. Bucky shifted on his feet. Steve held his ground.

“C’mon, Buck. The last time you got this overprotective was when we were kids and I was a small, scrappy thing.”

Bucky huffed. “That doesn't mean anything.”

“Uh huh.”
Bucky growled. “I mean, just *look* at him! He’s like less than half your size!”

“He’s also extraordinarily capable, when his mind’s in the game.”

“For Christ’s sake! You fucking *body-checked* a fifteen-year-old kid into next year!”

“Fifteen?” Steve said sharply, looking at Peter now.

Bucky’s mouth snapped shut.

“*Fifteen?* ” Steve asked again, looking at Tony accusingly, close to angry. “What in—”

Peter forced himself to stand, and inserted himself between Steve and Tony. He took off his mask.

“All right, listen—”

Steve’s eyes widened. “Jesus, *Tony—!*”

“Don’t get mad at him, he hasn’t done anything wrong!” Peter cut Steve off.

Tony was standing behind Peter and placed a hand on his shoulder, trying to herd him to the side.

“Peter, maybe you should leave the room for a—”

“No! You haven’t done anything but help me!”

Steve sighed, collecting himself. “Listen—Peter, was it? You don’t have to panic, I just want to understand how *this*—” he gestured vaguely at him and Tony, “—happened.”

Peter stood, resolute. “I—I was already Spider-Man before Tony found me.”

Steve raised his eyebrows. “Who was working with you?”

“No one.”

That made Steve frown again. “You mean you were off gallivanting, on your own, without any combat training.”

“Well…” Peter said, suddenly nervous again.

“He was interrupting a bank-heist when I caught up with him,” Tony added, helpfully.

Steve’s face twisted and Peter couldn’t tell if he looked concerned or angry. Not to mention Bucky, who had spun to face Peter as well, looking at him incredulously.

“You were going after *armed* thugs alone with no—” Bucky began, but cut himself off with a shake of his head, “What is *with* small people and their complete lack of self-preservation?” He muttered, angrily.

“Did he at least have good armor?” Steve fretted.

Tony smirked.

Peter groaned. He had a feeling he was going to be stuck here for a while.

Chapter End Notes
Wow so definitely the longest chapter I've ever written! I'm really excited about it though and I hope you lovelies enjoyed reading it <3

The fic rating did go up, mostly due to the slightly heavier themes and language—plus it was going to go up eventually anyway!
As always please review and let me know your thoughts :)
Enjoy the rest of your weekend and have a happy Thanksgiving (or whatever celebrations may be going on in your lives) :D
Chapter Eleven

Chapter Notes

First of all I'd like to thank all of you for the amazing response to my last chapter! It was absolutely incredible to see all the amazing feedback I was given, so thank you all times a million!

Also a huge thank you to my beta reader and all the hard work she goes to to make these chapters legible <3 <3

Without further ado, I hope you all enjoy this next installment <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Steve watched as Tony led Peter, who had put his mask back on, out of the room. Steve sighed and shook his head. Fifteen.

“Jesus, Buck.”

“Yeah.”

Steve frowned. “How did you find out before me?”

“Kid walked—uh—climbed into the tower and took his mask off, I was there. It was an accident.” Bucky shrugged.

“Kid must’ve loved that.”

“I thought he was gonna piss himself.”

Steve snorted. “He did look pretty panicked just now. I can see why he’s trying to keep it a secret. Lord, fifteen.”

“I can’t believe he was out there on his own.”

Steve gasped. “What about his parents, do they know?”

Bucky rolled his eyes. “Well, at least one does—he walked out with him!”

“Tony doesn’t have a kid! …Oh my god, does Tony have a kid? Why didn't I know?”

“Not biologically, Steve.”

“Oh. Oh. Yeah. I mean, I’ve never seen them interact outside of the compound, but Tony does have a protective streak for the kid.”

“I live at the tower. The kid has ‘training days’ and ‘Tony days.’ ‘Training days,’ he comes here, ‘Tony days,’ he stays at the tower and Tony shows him all his science-y shit, and then they just hang out.” Bucky says.

“Huh, Tony lets him into the workshop?”
“Yeah, I know.”

“Okay, so he spends two days a week with Tony, but what about the other five days? He must have actual legal guardians.”

“He mentions an aunt now and again, but never a mom or dad.” Bucky shrugged.

“Maybe she doesn’t know. Keeping his identity secret seems to be important to Peter, maybe that’s why.” Steve mused.

“Possibly, especially if he doesn't have any other relatives.”

Steve sighed. “I hope Tony knows what he's doing.”

Bucky groaned. “You've known him longer than I have, pal.”

“Tony is brilliant, but—” Steve shook his head, his lips twitching upwards. “He can be frustratingly rash.”

“He cares about that kid, Steve.”

“I have no doubt, it's just that—well—Tony is already so overworked. I’m not saying he shouldn't be working with Peter, I think that kid needs all the support he can get, but I'm just worried about what will happen when he finally hits that wall and all that exhaustion catches up.” Steve frowned off into the direction Peter and Tony had disappeared.

Bucky studied Steve closely. “You care about him a lot,” he said.

Steve’s gaze shot back to Bucky. “Of—of course I do. He’s my friend.”

Bucky’s eyes narrowed at the light dusting of pink that raised over his friend’s cheeks. A sharp twinge of something he didn't want to study too closely shot through his chest. Ignoring it, he smiled. “Uh huh. Sure, Stevie.”

Steve shot him a look. “Wipe that look off your face, Buck. I don’t know what you're thinking, but it’s wrong.”

“And how do you know that if you don't know what I’m thinking?” Bucky said, smile growing.

Steve huffed in irritation. “Because I know you. I know that look.” He said.

“I don't have any idea what you're referring to.”

“Oh huh. Sure.”

The two stared each other down. Steve broke his gaze first with a shake of his head.

“Fine, be like that.” He said, followed by, “So how have you been?”

Bucky decided to go along with Steve’s abrupt change of topic and shrugged. His thoughts immediately went to the terrors that gripped him in the night. “Pretty good, settling in.”

“Good, that’s good.” Steve replied while still eyeing him.

It didn't go unnoticed by Bucky, who in turn sighed and gave in, “I have—dreams, sometimes—visions—memories—I don't know what, but they come at night.”
“From the war, or—or from Hydra?”

“It changes night-to-night. At first, I was mostly remembering stuff from before, like you, and The Howling Commandos, and us as kids. I think I’ve pieced together a lot of it, most of it, maybe—enough to remember who Bucky Barnes used to be, anyway.” Bucky shifted uncomfortably. “A lot of the stuff now is Hydra stuff—Winter Soldier stuff.”

Steve was frowning in concern now. Bucky hated when Steve was worried.

“I’m handling it,” he tried to assure his friend, though he knew it probably didn't come across as very believable, considering his sight was stuck on his shoes.

“You don’t have to handle it alone. I—I know I’m not as close by as I’d like to be, but—if you want to talk, you know you can call me—anytime, night or day.” Steve said, then watched as Bucky looked up at him. Steve thought that he looked older then, and so very tired.

“Thanks, Stevie.”

---

Tony led Peter to a lounge area and told the teen to sit tight, before disappearing back through the door. Peter felt worn out, sore, anxious, and just grumpy. He couldn't stop his leg from bouncing as he waited for Tony to return. Peter had been annoyed when Tony jumped at the opportunity to redirect the heat from himself onto Peter, however, his upset at the man couldn't linger, since Tony also stepped in the moment he noticed Peter’s discomfort turning into anxiety.

Peter didn’t know how Tony was able to tell, but he was grateful that he could. Still, he didn't like being alone; he wondered when Tony would be back. He felt dumb, but Tony’s presence always seemed to make him feel better, safer. His anxiety didn’t always disappear, but it did tend to lessen.

Just when Peter graduated to foot and finger tapping, Tony sauntered into the room brandishing a large tub of ice cream and two spoons.

Tony sat down next to him and passed over a spoon.

“We have…” he paused to the label, “…Rocky Road.”

“Awesome.” Peter said.

Tony peeled off the lid, and then held out the container in Peter's direction. Peter dug a large chunk of ice cream out with his spoon and popped it into his mouth with a satisfied hum. After a few minutes of the two eating, Peter heard a sharp intake of breath next to him, followed by a hiss.

He looked over and saw Tony rubbing his head, eyes squeezed shut in pain.

“Brain-freeze?” Peter sniggered.

“Laugh it up, I’m sure you'll be next. You're taking way bigger spoonfuls than I am.”

“Sorry to disappoint, but it's not gonna happen.”

“And why's that?”

“I haven't gotten a brain-freeze since, like, I got my powers. I could chug a slushy and be completely fine.”
Tony’s eyes narrowed. “Now that's just unfair.”

Peter smiled. “It's fantastic.”

Tony rolled his eyes, and passed over the ice cream so that Peter could hold it.

“So, you okay, kid?”

Peter looked up at Tony, and then back down into the tub of ice cream.

“I’m—nervous, I guess.”

Tony nodded. “I know that this wasn't your ideal situation, but you can trust Steve. He won't tell anyone if you ask him not to.”

Peter nodded. “Okay,” he said, meekly.

“Is there something else bothering you?”

“What—what if he thinks less of me?”

Tony frowned. “Cap said it himself, you’re very capable. Sure, he might get a little more overbearing, but it definitely won't be because he thinks less of you. It'll be because circumstances have changed, he’ll just want to—y’know—look out for you and junk.”

It may not have been the most eloquent reassurance, but Peter couldn't help the small smile that formed on his face at the words. Especially when a warm weight settled over his shoulders and Tony pulled him just a little closer.

“Now, are you going to keep eating that, or should I put it away?” He asked.

Peter quickly went back to eating.

---

A little while later, Steve, who had been looking for Tony and Peter, came across them in the lounge. Tony was slouched on the sofa with his head tilted backwards, snoring softly, one arm draped over Peter, who was laid completely horizontally with his head resting in Tony's lap. Steve had to hold back a laugh at Peter, whose mask was still rolled partway up to uncover his mouth. A tub of half-melted ice cream sat on the coffee table, forgotten.

Steve couldn't imagine it was comfortable sleeping with a mask on, and had to fight the urge to remove it. Doing so would violate Peter’s want of anonymity. Instead, Steve picked up a blanket off the other sofa, and as quietly and gently as he could manage, shook it out and placed it over Peter’s prone form. He paused to look at Tony and a warm feeling burst in his chest. Steve wondered if the man’s hair was as soft as it looked. Without taking the time to consider it, he reached out and lightly carded his fingers through it. Oh, it was.

“Steve?” Tony, voice thick with sleep, asked.

“Shh, go back to sleep,” Steve whispered softly, blushing at being caught.

“'Kay,” Tony mumbled in response, already drifting off again.

Steve sighed and removed his hand, then walked over to the coffee table and gathered the dirty spoons and ice cream and brought them to the kitchen. While washing the spoons, he groaned,
thinking back to his conversation with Bucky.

Well, more like what Bucky had been alluding to. Was he really that much of an open book? Okay, so he had noticed Stark’s gorgeous, dark hair, which shone a chocolatey shade when the sunlight touched it—and his brown eyes, dark like the Earth after showers of life-giving rain, with flecks of honey shining beneath—and his mind, holy Christ, his mind; the way he would pick apart any problem, any complication, and suit it to his will—he was a creator, an innovator of the new world which Steve had awoken to.

Without a single doubt, Steve could easily find himself praising Tony’s absolute brilliance with his final breaths.

“I’m pretty sure it’s clean.”

Steve startled, and water hit the bowl of the spoon in such a way that it shot up the front of his shirt and soaked it. He jumped back from the sink with a yelp, then turned in the direction of laughter.

“What?”

“You were staring out into space, cleaning that one spoon.” Bucky said, and pushed himself off the wall he was leaning against, walking over to Steve.

“Oh—uh, yeah, my mind wandered.” Steve dried the spoon and placed it in its proper drawer, then started on the next one.

“And where did it wander to?” Bucky asked.

Steve spared him a glance and shook his head in the negative. “Nowhere you’d find particularly interesting.” He lied.

Bucky cocked a brow, looking unconvinced.

Steve continued to scrub the spoon, a sense of conflict settling in his gut. Bucky was—Bucky. His best friend, one of the most important people in his entire life. He would, and had, fought through armies for the man. For as far back as Steve’s memory could stretch, there was Bucky. The thought of what had happened to his friend—what he had let happen—filled him with such unbelievable horror and sickness that it often kept him up at night. Bucky had spent a majority of their time together protecting Steve, when he was too sick and weak to do so himself, and then, the one time Bucky needed him most, Steve had failed him. If Steve wasn’t able to protect someone as precious to him as Bucky, then what good was he? Did he even deserve the enhancements the serum provided?

He glanced over to the man who stood next to him. With each passing day, Bucky regained more and more of his memories. Every time Bucky would mention something that they had done together as kids, warmth and excitement shot through him. He would think that, maybe, his Bucky was really back, and for a small moment in time, he could pretend that Bucky had never fallen off the train, never been taken by Hydra. Those delusions were always short-lived.

As much as Bucky would remember and regain bits and pieces of his old life, he was still changed. Steve saw it in the way Bucky would search the shadows, looking for escape routes when entering rooms, twitching at unexpected noises. He saw it in the hesitation Bucky would exhibit when accepting food or drink from others, as if wondering for a split second if it had been drugged or poisoned. He saw it in those moments when Bucky would get that far-off look on his face, and his
eyes would glaze over, and his face would subconsciously twist into something sad and tired.

Steve hated it, he hated the pain and the darkness and he hated himself more for not being able to prevent it.

“Wow, what’d that spoon do to you?”

Steve snapped back to reality, looking down to see that he had bent the poor utensil in half. He sighed and bent it approximately back into shape, before drying it and putting it away, avoiding Bucky’s gaze.

“What’s up with you?”

Steve shook his head, determined not to voice the thoughts that ran circles in his mind. “Thinking about Spid—Peter. He wasn’t on his A-game today.” It wasn’t a total lie; Peter’s lackluster performance did have him concerned. Especially since he had noticed the stiffness and flinches the teen tried to hide during stretches.

“You mentioned that he’s usually better.”

Steve nodded. “His quick reflexes and recovery times are usually some of his best points. That routine shouldn't have been too much for him, but he was moving stiffly and awkwardly. I’m worried he may be hiding an injury.”

That got Bucky’s attention. “You think he’s hurt?”

“It’s a possibility. Maybe he's just tired. Regardless, it looks like both he and Tony had a rough night, respectively.” Said Steve.

“Picked up on that too, did you?”

Steve scoffed. “You don’t have to be Natasha to notice Tony is fighting a hangover. For crying out loud, it's overcast today and he came in wearing sunglasses.”

Bucky studied Steve, but found the man to be more concerned than anything else.

“Yeah, he had a rough night.” Bucky said.

“How much did he drink?”

“Less than he wanted to, more than he should’ve,” Bucky replied, cryptically.

“Less than he wanted to?” Steve asked.

Bucky shrugged. “I thought he’d had enough.”

Steve nodded, understanding Bucky’s reluctance to elaborate on the previous night. Tony’s issues weren't Bucky’s to talk about, and frankly, Steve was—well, not happy—but comforted that Tony had someone looking out for him.

It wasn’t very surprising, though; Bucky had always had a protective streak a mile long. Yet another reason, among the thousands, why Hydra’s experiments caused Steve’s stomach to churn and his heart to ache.

“You look like you could use some extra sleep as well,” Bucky interrupted his thoughts again. He must’ve seen Tony and Peter in the lounge, Steve realized with a smile.
“I had half a mind to snap a picture of the two of them,” Steve admitted.

“You didn’t?”

Steve shook his head.

Bucky scoffed. “Well, that makes one of us,” he said, bringing up the picture on his phone to show off.

Steve let out a laugh. “Of course you did.”

Bucky shrugged and pocketed his phone without shame. “Shake your head all you want, Stevie—I now have blackmail against not one, but two people.”

“Tony might act horrified if he saw that, but I’m willing to bet he’d save a copy of the photo if given the chance.”

Bucky grinned. “Probably.”

A small smile stayed upon Steve’s lips and his heart fluttered. No matter how much he may roll his eyes at Bucky’s antics, Steve had always loved his mischievous nature.

His teasing nature and knack for falling into trouble had gotten them in some hot spots before, as kids. However, what Steve had always secretly delighted in was Bucky’s infuriating ability to charm his way out of said trouble. Yeah, maybe he also suffered from a bit of hero-worship as a kid, but who could blame him? Bucky was fun, and charming, and handsome, and teasing, and—

And there was the conflict.

His thoughts drifted to Tony, and his genius, and generosity, and low self-esteem he hid behind the facade of a massive ego. The man was a bit of a contradiction, but that only made him all the more interesting. Steve had come to care about Tony, a lot. In a way that made him want to second-guess everything he said or did in front of the man. And yet, at the very same time—he was still pining over a ninety-year-old, unrequited crush.

“So what do you plan to do tonight, then?” Steve asked.

Bucky shrugged. “Might watch a movie. Peter added some movies to the list Tony gave me.”

“Oh, really?” Steve asked in amusement. “Does Tony approve of the upgrade?”

“He scoffed and rolled his eyes at about half of the titles, and groaned at a few others, but didn’t actually say anything against them, so I assume they’re safe enough.” Bucky said.

Steve held back a laugh.

“What?” Bucky asked.

“Do you remember what ones Tony didn’t like?”

“Yeah?”

“We should make him sit down and watch them,” Steve said.

“Oh, he’d hate that,” Bucky said with a smile. “Let’s do it.”
“But how will we make him actually sit through them and not disappear into his shop?”

“Get Peter in on it. If he asks Tony to sit through the movies, he will.” Bucky said.

“Sneaky, yet effective.”

Bucky smirked.

“What’cha chatting about?” A new voice asked.

Steve and Bucky turned to see Peter pad sleepily into the kitchen.

“Oh, we were just talking about maybe having a movie-binge with you and Tony tonight.” Bucky said.

“Movie night? Oh, that actually sounds like a lot of fun!” Peter said, perking up instantly. “Let me go ask Tony!” He said, and ran back out into the lounge.

Steve and Bucky followed and watched in amusement as Peter bounced on the couch next to Tony.

“Tony, Tony, wake up! We’re going to have a movie night!”

Tony groaned and blinked blearily. “A what, now?” He asked, mind still clouded with sleep.

Peter sighed and backtracked. “Steve and Bucky want to have a movie night! We can, can’t we?”

Tony was sitting up straighter now. “Oh, uhh, yeah, of course, but I think we should go back to the tower if we’re planning on that. That way it won't be as long of a drive to drop you off at home later. Is that okay with you two?” Tony asked, addressing Bucky and Steve now.

Both nodded their assent.

“Yeah,” Bucky said.

“Of course,” said Steve.

“All right, well, we might as well head out now, then. Will any of the others be joining?”

“Natasha and Clint are on a mission, Wanda and Vision said they had plans after practice earlier, and Sam has to run his therapy group tonight.” Steve said.

Three heads turned to look at Steve.

“What?” He asked.

“Do you always know what everyone is doing?” Tony asked.

Bucky sniggered. “Do you—do you carry around a little day planner and journal the Avengers’ daily lives?”

Bucky and Tony shared a look which got the both of them devolving into sniggering laughter.

“As team leader, it's my responsibility to keep tabs on the team in case an emergency ever arises —” Steve frowned.

“All the Avengers are alerted of the call to assemble automatically, thanks to my tech.” Tony said, smiling.
“There are other kinds of emergencies,” Steve huffed, crossing his arms, though it wasn’t in any real irritation—in fact, it was nice to see his two friends getting along, even if it was at his own expense.

“C’mon guys, let’s get going before it gets too late! You can pick on Steve later!” Peter said, interrupting before Tony or Bucky could start back in.

“Okay, okay! Let’s get you back in the trunk.” Tony said, patting Bucky on the shoulder, who in turn groaned.

“Watch out for potholes this time, okay?” Bucky huffed.

“Sure, sure!”

“Stark.”

“I will, yeesh!”

---

“Okay, so what movie should we watch first?” Peter asked in excitement, throwing himself onto one of the cushy armchairs Tony kept in the living room of his penthouse suite.

“Well, Bucky was saying you had some additions to our list earlier, so why don’t you choose, Peter?” Steve said, kindly.

Bucky smiled at Tony’s resulting groan.

“Yeah, why don’t you choose, webs?”

“Really? Cool! Okay, how about—you haven’t seen The Dark Knight trilogy, right?”

“Dark Night? No, can’t say we have.” Bucky spoke over Tony’s louder groan.

“What’s wrong with Batman?” Peter demanded, glaring at his mentor.

“Oh, please, those movies are so—” Tony began.

“So awesome!” Peter finished.

Tony rolled his eyes and waved at the TV. “Fine, whatever you want.”

“I’ll go get some snacks ready,” Steve said.

“I’ll help!” Peter offered, following him into the kitchen.

Peter shuffled, nervously. It occurred to him that he hadn’t ever been in a room alone with Steve before. He tried to keep occupied by pouring chips into bowls while Steve made popcorn.

“Thanks, Peter. Why don’t you take these to the living room?”

“Sure!” Peter said, picking up the bowls, but pausing before leaving the room. He took a deep breath, trying to calm his nerves. “Hey—hey, Steve?”

Steve turned to look at Peter, hearing his restlessness. “What is it?” He asked, gently.

“Uhm, about earlier—I’m really sorry, I mean, first we were late to training, and then—and then I
know I didn’t—didn’t do my best, and—"

“Peter—”

“And I just don’t want you to think you’re wasting your time, or—or that I’m not taking this—this seriously, or that—”

“Peter.” Steve said, a little louder, in an authoritative tone.

Peter’s mouth snapped shut.

“Peter, listen,” Steve began again, less harshly. “I don’t think, even for a moment, that you aren’t taking your training seriously. I know what this means to you—anyone with eyes can see what this means to you. I definitely don’t think I’m ‘wasting my time,’” He said, using his fingers as air-quotes. “If you’re worried I’m going to take offense over today, then you can relax. Even the best of us have off days, but listen—if you need to take it easy for a day, let me know, especially if it’s because of an injury.”

“What—how—?”

Steve sighed. “Pushing yourself when your body is trying to heal could end up causing more damage. Not only that, but it’s important to me, as your trainer, to know when you’re not well so that I can make adjustments for you. The last thing I want is for you to wind up being badly injured under my watch, just because I didn’t have all the information, okay?”

Peter nodded. “O-okay.”

“How badly are you hurt?”

“I’m not, really.”

“Peter.”

“Just some bruising—I swear! The cuts have already healed.”

Peter shuffled uncomfortably under Steve’s gaze. He hated being scrutinized so closely. Finally, Steve nodded.

“Okay, go take those chips out before those two start complaining.” Steve gestured toward the living room.

Peter nodded. “Okay—and thanks, Steve.”

“Anytime, kid. Just remember to tell me next time.”

---

“So he dresses like a bat because he’s afraid of them, and assumes other people will be, too?” Bucky asked between handfuls of popcorn.

“See, I told you it was dumb!” Tony exclaimed. “Completely unrealistic.”

“It’s not dumb! He dresses as Batman in order to harness his own fear, but yeah, also to cause fear, ‘cause, I mean, look at him—emerging from the darkness, then whap-bang-whoosh—gone!”

“Yeah, Tony, a man uses his abundant wealth and homemade tech in order to be a superhero. So
unrealistic.” Bucky said.

Steve almost choked on his pop and Peter full-on laughed.

“I have no idea what you’re implying.” Tony said with a sniff.

“Of course not.” Bucky nodded along.

“Plus, look at half this crap! I could make something twice as efficient and better looking! Ha! I mean, what’s Batman have? Glider-suit? Iron Man can fly.”

“Yeah, but like—the Batmobile!” Peter said.

Tony’s jaw dropped in offense. “What, do you think the Bat’s dumb car is better than my suits?”

Peter raised his hands in surrender. “I’m just saying!”

Tony glared and crossed his arms with a huff. Bucky grinned widely, and thought it was the closest a grown man could get to pouting. He also wished that Tony had taken up the couch with him and Steve—he had the urge to wrap an arm around the man, y’know, just to let him know his teasing was just that—teasing.

Sighing quietly, Bucky readjusted so he was sitting lengthwise on the couch, feet dangling over the armrest, back leaning against Steve, who huffed and threw his arm around him. Bucky looked up and smiled. Steve rolled his eyes, but smiled back.

---

Tony looked over as light snores caught his attention. Peter was draped awkwardly in the other armchair, one hand in the chip bowl. Tony chuckled. “Guess that’s it for Spider-Kid.”

“He’s not the only one,” Steve said, causing Tony to look over to see Bucky was passed out against Steve.

“Are you actually interested?” Tony asked, gesturing to the TV.

“I want to see what happens with this Joker guy, now that they have him in custody.”

Tony sighed and got up. “Okay, I’m going to make a call.” He said, heading out of the room.

Taking out his phone, he quickly breezed through his contacts and pressed call.

“Hello?”

“Hi, May, this is Tony—Tony Stark.”

“Oh! Hi, is everything okay?”

“Oh, yeah, not to worry—everything’s fine! Peter and I were just watching a movie, and the kid passed out cold. Now, I completely understand if you don’t feel comfortable, but I have a spare room here he could sleep in for the night, if it’s okay with you. He seemed pretty tired all day, and I figured I wouldn’t wake him if I didn’t have to.”

Tony waited, foot tapping, for the woman’s response.

After a moment’s delay, where May seemed to consider her answer, she spoke.
“I knew he was having trouble sleeping! Okay, that’s fine. I’m going to be at work all day tomorrow, so bring him home when you can. Just make sure he doesn’t sleep all day tomorrow, Sunday is usually when he gets most of his homework done. He has an English paper due this week that I know he hasn't started yet, as well as a Spanish test he needs to study for. He's a smart boy and I don’t want to see his grades dip again like they did before!”

Tony blinked, genuinely surprised.

“Did you get that, Tony?”

“Yeah! Sorry—English and Spanish, got it!”

“All right, good. I’m heading to bed now, myself. Take care of him, and if he wakes up, tell him I said goodnight,” May said.

“Of course!”

“Okay, goodnight, Tony.”

“Oh, uhh, goodnight.” Tony said.

Tony walked back into the living room, pocketing his phone as he went.

“So the kid’s staying with us?” Bucky asked sleepily, looking like he’d just woken up.

Tony nodded. “Yeah, I, uhh—I have a room set up for him here.”

Steve nodded and stood. “Here, I’ll get him, just show me where his room is.” Steve said as he walked over to where Peter slept.

As gently as he could manage, Steve picked Peter up and lifted him in his arms, then looked to Tony expectantly.

“Oh, uhh—yeah—right—it’s this way. Uhm, down the hall from my room, here.” Tony said, and began leading Steve down said hallway.

Tony opened up a door that Steve couldn’t remember seeing before—not that he had spent a lot of time in Tony’s penthouse. The room was relatively large and furnished comfortably, with several shelves lining the walls.

“I was wondering what you were constructing up here,” Bucky said, causing Tony to start.

“Uhm, well, I thought it would be a good idea in case he ever needed—needed somewhere to crash, like now—or recover. It’s pretty empty, workers just finished on it earlier this week…”

Tony trailed off with a shake of his head. He walked over to the large cozy bed and pulled back the blankets.

“Here,” he said.

Steve gently placed Peter on the bed, who mumbled something and immediately buried himself in the pillows and blankets.

“Thanks, Steve.” Tony said quietly, as he shut the door behind them.

“No problem, Tony.” Steve smiled. “You don’t mind if I spend the night here, do you?”
“Of course not—your floor is still open to you whenever, Steve. Just because we have the compound now doesn't mean you have to live there.”

Steve nodded, smiling wide. “Thanks, Tony.”

“Yeah, stay as long as you want, but—uhh—if you'll excuse me, I have some work that needs to be—”

“Oh, no. No way, Tony, it’s nearly—” Steve looked at his watch. “Nearly ten o’clock.”

“Which is early, still.”

Steve fixed him with a look, but Bucky beat him to a response.

“Stevie’s right, Tony. It’s getting late, and if you start on a project now, then you’ll be in there all night. Why don't you catch up on some sleep tonight and get up early tomorrow?”

Tony sighed and looked between Steve and Bucky. “Okay, okay—you win. I’ll try and get some sleep.”

The two soldiers nodded, almost in unison, making Tony smirk.

“Yeesh. Being overruled in my own home.”

“Goodnight, Tony.” Steve said to the retreating man.

“G’night, Cap, Bucko.”

Bucky and Steve shared a look.

“So, do you wanna see how that movie ends?” Steve asked once Tony had retreated.

“Sure, I guess. Can we rewind it a bit, though?”

“Sure.”

---

Bucky sighed in contentment as he relaxed back onto the couch, and immediately leaned against Steve the moment the other joined him.

He had a small smile gracing his lips as he watched the movie unfold. Honestly, it might not have been the most relaxing movie, but Bucky found it hard to be stressed like this, snuggled up to Steve. These small moments of happiness were more than he believed he deserved, but damn if he wasn't going to appreciate every last second. Bucky couldn't help but feel secure around Steve. How could he not? This was his best friend; the man who had put aside everything to find him, the man who had fought countless evils to save him.

Bucky tried to imagine what would have happened to him without Steve—or if Steve had rejected him somehow, and the visualization was too horrible to bear. Steve was his rock. Without him—

“Buck?” Steve said, softly.

Bucky turned his head to find Steve looking at him, a light crease etched between his brows. He looked away again.
“You looked a little lost there, for a minute.” The blonde continued.

“No, I’m good.”

“You sure?”

Bucky nodded and looked back to him again. “You’re here,” he said, looking Steve in the eye.

Steve held his gaze, and Bucky was suddenly aware of just how close they were, mere inches apart. Bucky’s breath caught as movement brought his gaze down to Steve’s mouth. Steve’s tongue peeked out to dampen his lips, and it was like an invisible switch had been flipped, thickening the air with tension.

His eyes jumped back to meet Steve’s in silent question as his heart beat wildly in his chest.

Steve felt it, too, he had to, and—was he closer?

He could feel Steve’s breath, warm against him, and suddenly his hand was there, brushing lightly over his stubble, and then cupping his cheek—drawing him in closer. Bucky was looking at those lips again, and he felt himself lick at his own, teeth catching on his bottom lip in want.

Oh, goddammit, how he wanted.

Steve was closing the gap between them confidently.

Holy. Shit.

Steve was kissing him.

Stevie was kissing him.

Bucky’s eyes fluttered closed. He brought up his hands, one latching onto Steve’s shoulder, the other running through his hair, and good lord, he kissed back.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading!
My muse kind of swept me away once more in this chapter so I hope you all enjoyed :)  
I love reading you comments and reviews!

As always I hope you all enjoy the rest of the weekend <3
Chapter Twelve

Chapter Notes

Surprise early chapter update!

My wonderful beta finished editing early and since I'm going to be working all day tomorrow I decided that I would just upload this early!

Now with all the Bucky!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The trees made the perfect cover for the soldier to lie in wait. The wind was cold, but he remained resolute. His target was scheduled to pass through here in only a few minutes' time. His fingers brushed against the hilt of his gun—his handlers wanted it to look like an accident. He removed his fingers. That hardly complicated things; he was their greatest weapon, he was the one they sent when others had failed. Failure would not be tolerated. His muscles tensed at the sounds of night around him, as he listened for the telltale sound of a car engine. He waited. The scene melted away around him, and the dark closed in.

The room was dark—there were hands restraining him—leading him. He wanted to fight against them, to run, but he knew that it wouldn't matter. He knew that whatever they did to him for not complying would be worse than the agony of the chair. Something was different this time, though; there was something there, in his mind, something he was remembering. He never remembered things. It was always just Hydra, his handlers, and the people they wanted dead. There was no ‘before’—but now—

“The man on the bridge—” he tried to say.

It wasn’t his place to speak—his only job was to listen, to comply, but— “Who was he?”

He needed to know.

Why wouldn’t they just tell him?

“He knew me.”

There had been nothing to hold onto, before—nothing to make him think there even was a ‘before,’ but that man had known him, and there was something insistent and terrifying that scratched at the back of his mind; something that told him that he knew who the man was, too.

His handlers didn't care. He was tied down and his breathing picked up in anticipation of the agony he knew was coming, and from knowing that, in that moment, it didn't matter if the man knew him. He was a weapon, and in a few moments, he wouldn’t remember—he wouldn’t—

He woke gasping, skin damp with sweat, tear-tracks trailing from his eyes. Phantom pains blossomed through his limbs as his head pounded. He fought, kicking against his bedsheets, and looked around the room he was in, desperately. This wasn’t one of the safe-houses. Panic clawed at his chest, alighting it in cold flames. Had he been captured? Surely not. The room was too nice. Transported by his handlers? Possible, but still, the room was nicer than any other they’d bothered
to set up for him before. Why couldn’t he remember? His mind was thick with fog. He jumped up, taking the knife he found under his pillow and went to the door. Locked. He hissed and checked the rest of the room. The windows were useless, since he seemed to be in a skyscraper of some sort. Vent? Too small. He growled and began to pace. Something was clawing at the back of his mind. He was supposed to remember. What was he supposed to remember?

He stopped, deciding to gather his thoughts.

He worked on controlling his breathing. He remembered the pain, he remembered—a man? He frowned and rubbed his head—flashes, like pictures, flashed through his mind—memories? His anxiety grew.

“Hello. Please do not be alarmed.”

He was very alarmed. He looked around for the woman he heard speak, and found himself still alone.

“You are going through regression. Please remain calm so I can help.”

He swallowed thickly. He wanted to get away, but the door was still locked. Backing himself against the far corner of the room so that he could see everything, he nodded. What else could he do but go along with the voice?

“O-okay.” God, his throat hurt.

“Thank you. First of all, know that you are safe here. Your name is James Buchanan Barnes. Your friends call you Bucky. You are in your personal apartment, where you have been living for two months’ time.”

Bucky—Bucky—Bucky… that was familiar.

“My name is Friday. I am an AI created by Mr. Stark to assist him and those who stay in this building.”

“If this is my apartment, then why is the door locked?”

“I have locked the door at your request.”

“I—I don’t remember that,” Bucky said, frowning. He was growing frustrated.

“After you first arrived here, you asked that I keep you confined to your room if you ever showed signs of reverting back into the Winter Soldier’s mindset.”

His head was throbbing horrendously, but small bits of memory were still coming to him, enough for him to know that this—computer, or AI, was at least speaking the partial truth.

He closed his eyes and focused on the flashes of memory until the fogginess in his brain began to alleviate.

“Bucky. My name is Bucky. I live—here, at—at the tower, with—with Tony!” His eyes snapped open. Things were becoming familiar again.

“Yes. Good morning, Mr. Barnes. Would you like me to call Captain Rogers or Mr. Stark for you? They may be able to help,” Friday said.

The excited flare he felt diminished, instantly.
“Why does this keep happening?” He whispered to himself. “No—no, I don’t want to cause any more trouble.”

“I do not believe they would feel that way.”

“Doesn’t change my answer,” he grumbled.

“Very well.” Bucky heard the click of a lock. “I’ve unlocked your door so that you may proceed with your day however you like.”

“Thanks.”

He lied back down on his bed with a tired sigh. He always got the worst kind of migraines on days like these. There were longer periods between each of his episodes now, compared to when he was first freed from Hydra’s influence, but the aftermath wasn’t ever any easier. He dug through his night table until he found his bottle of painkillers and quickly swallowed three dry, then picked up his phone. He had a few unread messages—the first being from none other than Natasha.

**Natasha:** Hey, Clint and I just got back from our mission. What are you doing tomorrow?

**Natasha:** Video Attachment: Clint got Sam good!

Bucky clicked on the video and watched as Sam staggered into the kitchen, obviously having just woken up. Yawning hugely, the man walked to the fridge and opened the door, only to be greeted by a series of loud bangs. Bucky barked a laugh as he watched Sam screech, flail, and fall straight on his ass. The camera shook and he could hear Clint’s hysterical laughing. The video cut out just as Sam got up and began marching angrily towards the camera, and Clint muttered, “Oh shit!”

**Bucky:** That was great!

He texted back, still smirking.

**Natasha:** Ikr?

**Natasha:** So what r u doing tomorrow?

**Bucky:** idk yet, might try to overthrow the government for the commies. Could also just stay in and watch HBO. Depends on my mood.

**Natasha:** Never a dull moment. Well, I totally understand if you want to trash the government, but counter idea—we order in and binge Game of Thrones.

**Bucky:** tempting

**Natasha:** I can pick up some of those Russian pastries I brought last time.

**Bucky:** Deal.

**Natasha:** Don’t start the revolution without me, Barnes.

**Bucky:** Wouldn’t dream of it.

Bucky went back to his main messages screen, and noticed he had some from Steve, as well.

**Stevie:** I can’t stop thinking about kissing you.

Bucky frowned. “Kissing?” He said, confused.
Stevie: *I still feel bad that Tony saw us like that, though.*

Bucky’s eyes widened, the events of the night before rushing back to him.

---

The night had been going so damn perfectly. Steven Grant Rogers, his Stevie, who he had, just maybe, fantasized about (many times), had actually kissed him. Dear lord, it had been perfect, too, if unexpected. It was so much better than anything he could have envisioned. Steve’s stubborn domination over the kiss had taken him a bit off guard, but honestly, Bucky thought he could get used to it. The way Steve had pressed against him, how he had nibbled and licked at his lips, asking for entrance, and lord, the way he ran a hand through his hair and pulled, when Bucky had tried to battle him in return, instead of submitting to him, was just so, so good. For the first time in recent memory, his mind had been clear; all his focus was on Steve, moving with him, against him, feeling him. He forgot about everything else. Then he had heard it, barely there, the creak of footsteps. Bucky pulled back sharply, gasped for breath, and turned, seeking out the source of the noise when he heard a light gasp. His eyes widened.

‘Tony.’

Bucky felt his breath hitch. Tony stood, staring at them with eyes wide and lips parted in surprise. Bucky watched as Tony’s expression morphed—flickered—as something akin to agony flashed over the man’s face, so quickly most people would have missed it. Then there had been a grin sliding into place, one that made Bucky’s stomach drop at the sight—the same kind of smile that Tony would use in front of cameras, the kind that looked perfect to all those who didn’t know the man, the kind that didn’t reach his eyes.

“Jeez, do I need to post a ‘house rules’ bulletin? You can sully up your bedrooms or personal floors as much as you want, but my living room is off limits.” He had said, attempting a light-hearted tone of voice that Bucky just thought sounded strained.

“Anyway, yeah, I—uhh—needed to grab something, down—but—never mind, night!” Tony said, before all but running back down the hall toward his room.

Bucky and Steve had been left to stare after the other man in dumb silence, which was broken by Bucky releasing the breath caught in his chest, and Steve swearing.

“Shit!” Steve said.

Bucky turned and looked and saw the desperate, panicked look on the other’s face, and his chest knotted even more. He felt the panic rising in that moment, despite how terribly he was trying to force it down. His breathing came too quickly, which caused his chest to erupt in a cold fire, burning down into his right arm, and causing the flesh and joint around his left shoulder to ache fiercely.

“Steve—fuck, Steve, I’m so—I’m so sorry!” Bucky said, between gasps of air.

Steve had turned to him, finally breaking his gaze from the hallway, expression startled.

“Bucky—no, God, no, Buck, why are you apologizing? Please don’t—shit, this is all my fault—I’m so selfish—I just—I wanted to do that for so, so long, and I didn’t even think about—about how you felt about Tony, and now, just—”

“Wait, wait, wait!” Bucky interrupted. “I—I thought that you had feelings for Tony? I mean, you’re always going on about him.”
“Bucky, I—I do, but—” The blonde groaned. “It’s gotten all complicated.”

“Why would you kiss me if you have feelings for Tony?” Bucky demanded.

“Because I like you, too! Christ! Buck, I know you won’t understand, and I know it’s messed up, and selfish, and wrong, but I just—I can’t help it.” He looked up, earnestly. “I wasn’t lying to you, I swear—I’ve wanted to kiss you like that since—since before I went into the ice, since before I went into the ice, since before the serum, even—but things were different back then, and—and I never had the chance, because I was a coward, and then you fell.

Then I woke up, all these years later, and I met Tony, and—okay, yeah, it wasn’t the best first impression, for either of us—but then, I actually got to know him, and how incredible, and brave, and generous he is, too. And—and then—” Bucky watched as Steve face twisted, and oh god, those were not tears.

“And then DC happened, and I found out you were alive.” Steve reached over and took Bucky’s hand.

“I knew I couldn’t rest until I brought you home, and then all those feelings from before came rushing back.”

To say Bucky had been shocked would’ve been a grand understatement. He stared in disbelief as Steve poured his heart out before him. It didn’t seem possible that Steve had been struggling with the same bullshit he had been trying to sort out. He felt his panic lessen and his breathing return to normal.

“...Bucky, I’m sorry, I understand if you can’t forgive—” Steve was cut off, as Bucky pressed their lips back together.

“Sorry, Stevie, but you were really working yourself up there.”

“But—"

“No. My turn, so shush.” Bucky said, followed by a sigh. “I do understand.”

“What?” Steve asked, confused.

“You said you knew I wouldn’t understand, but you’re wrong, because I do understand. I get it. Frankly, I like Tony, too.”

Steve seemed to deflate. “Yeah, I know, I—I’m not blind, I’ve seen the way you look at him.”

Bucky rolled his eyes at Steve’s dejected posture.

“Half-blind, then, if you’ve been missing the way I’ve been checking you out, too.” He said.

“Yeah, I know, I—I’m not blind, I’ve seen the way you look at him.”

Bucky paused. “So what are we going to do?”

Bucky grimaced, remembering the look the other wore on his face before retreating. ”No, but, he wasn’t happy.” Bucky paused. “So what are we going to do?”
Steve frowned. “Well, we’ve established that we like each other, and we both also have a thing for Tony, too, so—”

“Do you think we could make that work?” Bucky asked, feeling his anxieties start to climb again. “Something between the three of us, I mean.”

Steve squared his shoulders and nodded. “If it’s what we all want, then I can’t see why not.” He had that stubborn tone to his voice that Bucky had been so used to hearing, all those years ago. It made a smile creep back onto his face, though it faded quickly.

“Like I said, he looked pretty upset.”

“We—we will just have to show him that we care about him.” Steve said, matter-of-factly.


“No exactly—I mean, I don’t know how ‘proper’ any of this is, but—Tony isn’t always good at listening, so maybe if we show him how we feel, then he’ll be more open to it?”

“It’s worth a shot. I—I don’t want to end up scaring him off because of a misunderstanding,” Bucky said, quietly.

Steve nodded in agreement and released a sigh. He gently tugged Bucky’s arm, pulling the other toward him. “Come here,” he said, wrapping Bucky up in a hug.

Bucky smiled and let himself relax into the embrace. He soaked up the sensations, closing his eyes and breathing in deep, taking in Steve’s scent, and touch, and just existing. Steve was his rock, his safety and reassurance; Steve helped him feel like Bucky Barnes again, and not just a mindless assassin. He reminded Bucky who he was, never let him forget that he was good once, and still could be. Steve supported him in a way that no one else could.

Bucky’s smile faded, even as he felt Steve place a kiss to his head. He worried about Tony, he hated seeing him look the way he did. If Steve was Bucky’s rock, then Tony had become his buoy; he gave Bucky something to hold onto when he felt like he was drowning. He gave Bucky something to look forward to in his new life, so that he didn’t get too trapped glancing behind, at what once was. He challenged Bucky, as well; it was so easy to get lost in the banter they could start between them. The thought of Tony hurting, and Bucky being partially responsible for said hurt, caused him great unrest.

“Should we go check on him?” Bucky asked.

“Friday, is Tony awake?”

“No, Captain Rogers.” The AI replied, after a brief pause.

“Hmm, I guess he did seem pretty tired all day. We shouldn’t disturb him now,” Steve said.

Bucky didn’t feel convinced, but he also wasn’t about to storm the man’s bedroom, especially if he was actually asleep.

“Let’s do something nice for him tomorrow,” Steve said.

---

Anxiety threatened to sink its claws into him again, but he forced it from his mind. Tony had looked so damn upset. He shook his head—there was no point focusing on what had gone wrong. They were going to fix it, make it up to Tony, and hopefully, if things went right…

Bucky sighed again. How the hell had he gotten into this situation? He went back to reading his messages.

Stevie: Definitely shocked him. I think I’m going to make him a nice breakfast tomorrow morning. Stevie: Do you have any ideas for things you want to do for him?

Bucky had ideas on what he wanted to do to him.

Stevie: Sorry, you’re probably trying to sleep. Let’s talk about it more tomorrow. Plus, I’d love another chance to kiss you again.

Bucky felt his cheeks heat up. Yeah. Yeah, he could go for that again, too.

Stevie: Sorry Buck… got a call from Natasha, they need me back at HQ to go over mission details. :( 

Bucky felt a swell of disappointment rise in him, followed by irritation. He quickly flipped back to Natasha’s message screen and began typing, ‘You’re a fucking cockblock, Tasha’ but then erased it, realizing how much shit he would have to try and explain to the woman if he sent it.

Not that she wouldn’t be finding out one way or another, but he didn’t know if he wanted to get into it right away—especially when the situation with Tony was up in the air. Bucky felt a heavy weight sink into his gut at the thought of his relapse earlier. How the hell was he supposed to impress and court not one, but two of the most incredible people he had ever met, when he was so completely broken? All those nice thoughts of waking up next to either—to both of them were gone in a flurry. Half the time he woke up screaming, and on really bad days, without a fucking clue as to where or who he was. What if he hurt one of them? The thought made him feel physically ill.

His phone began buzzing loudly and repeatedly, breaking him out of his spiralling thoughts.

Natasha: I’M SO MAD AT YOU  
Natasha: I thought we were FRIENDS, Barnes  
Natasha: We were literally JUST talking.  
Natasha: No pastries for you!

Bucky: wtf are you talking about

Natasha: YOU AND ROGERS?

Well, that was faster than he anticipated.

Natasha: I can’t BELIEVE you didn’t tell me!

Bucky sighed. What was he supposed to say? That he didn’t tell her because he literally didn’t remember it happening until after he read Steve’s messages? Who gets the best kiss of their fucking life and promptly forgets it even happened? Jesus, he was such a mess.

Bucky: Fuck, take it easy. Okay, so, Steve and I kissed. It’s no big deal.
It was such a big deal.

**Natasha:** *It’s such a big deal.*

See?

**Bucky:** *So who all knows?*

**Natasha:** *Only me. Steve was walking around with a dumb smile on his face all morning. I was the only one who made him crack and spill though, so no worries if you’re trying to keep it under wraps.*

**Natasha:** *I know it’s still new. Though, Steve is as subtle as a train wreck, so good luck.*

**Natasha:** *I’m not going to tell anyone btw. So stop frowning.*

**Bucky:** *I’m not frowning.*

**Natasha:** *You’re always frowning. Try to relax.*

**Bucky:** *That’s rich, coming from you.*

Bucky felt a pang of regret at that last text, and he hoped she mistook his snappish tone for banter or sarcasm.

**Natasha:** *Okay, point across, I’ll back off. For now. Do not try to leave me out of the loop again!*

**Bucky:** *Okay, okay!*

**Natasha:** *Seriously, Barnes.*

**Bucky:** *This is you backing off?*

**Natasha:** *Touchy*

**Bucky:** *Sorry*

**Natasha:** *Don’t be*

**Natasha:** *Congrats btw. It took you two long enough.*

**Bucky:** *Thanks*

**Bucky:** *I think.*

Bucky rolled out of bed with a sigh, and picked out some loose-fitting clothing to throw on. He still felt restless and irritable, as he did on almost all days like today. Opening his closet, he picked out one of his favourite knife sets, and brought them down with him to the gym. The tower’s gym was built for the Avengers and included a section built for target practice—no doubt with Clint and Natasha in mind, and Bucky was going to take full advantage.

“Friday, can you activate the moving targets?” Bucky asked, once he had entered the ‘shooting range,’ as Clint called it.

“Of course, Mr. Barnes, would you like to continue on advanced settings?” Was the automatic reply.

“Yeah, with a short warm up period to start.”
There was the sound of machinery coming to life, before the area shifted before his eyes. Free-flying targets emerged from the walls and ceiling, in the form of small bots that zipped around the room. He took a few grounding breaths, gripped his knives, and then jumped into action.

It felt good to get his blood pumping again, get his adrenaline pumping in a way that was actually enjoyable. He didn’t know how long he’d been in the gym, but time always had a way of slipping away from him down here. It was possibly one of his favourite places in the tower. He found it to be very meditative to put himself through the paces. His mind would hone in, and focus on the area before him, on his target, and everything else would just disappear. He tossed another knife and ran toward the little robot that fell from the air so he could collect his blade.

His breath came out steady, but heavy, and the amount of sweat he was releasing told him that he’d been at it for a while now. He became aware, slowly, of how thirsty he felt.

“Pause!” He called out, and the bots immediately froze in place. Bucky huffed and stretched, then gathered up his last thrown knife.

He turned to leave the room, but paused in surprise. Through the windows that overlooked the rest of the gym, Bucky could see Peter staring, star-eyed. Bucky snorted a laugh at the kid’s huge smile.

Peter waved at him through the glass, and Bucky made sure to return the gesture.

“Terminate routine, Friday.”

The bots jumped into motion again, though this time more slowly, and disappeared back into their housing units. Bucky grabbed his water bottle and left the room.

“That was so cool!” Peter practically shouted. “You hit, like, every one! It was insane! How do you do that?”

Bucky smiled at the teen’s enthusiasm.

“Lots of practice.”

“Can you show me?”

“You wanna learn how to throw knives?” Bucky asked. “Don’t you have you web-shooting things?”

“Well, yeah, but knife-throwing is so cool!”

Bucky shook his head, but found himself saying, “Yeah, okay, sure. I’ll give you a few pointers.”

“All right!” Peter crowed in excitement.

“Ah, ah, ah! Ground rules.”

“Aww.”

Bucky smirked. “First off, these are not toys—they are weapons. You do not want me catching you playing with these. Understood?”

Peter gulped nervously under Bucky’s glare, but nodded.

“Second, to avoid injury, you listen to what I say, word for word. I don’t need Tony tossing me
from his balcony ‘cause I let you get hurt.”

Peter laughed at the mental image. “Yeah, okay, deal.”

Bucky nodded. “Good.”

“Okay, when do we start!”

“Hold your horses, kid.”

Bucky looked around the gym, then gestured for Peter to follow him over to a bench, where he put down his bag and pulled out a small towel, which he threw around his neck, and his water bottle which he took a deep gulp from. Next, he grabbed a disinfectant wipe from the closest dispenser, and went about rubbing down the knives. Once done, he laid the knives out on the bench in front of them.

“Okay, so, there are many different kinds of knives out there. Some work better for throwing than others. These,” he said, gesturing to the set, “are made specially to be thrown. You can tell because they lack the normal handle, or grip, that you’d usually see on one. Instead, they’re just made from a singular piece of metal. Having anything around the handle would throw off the balance of the blade, and make it harder to throw. Got it?”

Peter, who had been listening intently and nodding along to everything Bucky said, nodded affirmatively.

“Okay, so you’re not going to want to grip these in your palms, like you would with a close combat knife. The point is to maintain a loose grip. So instead, you want to hold it like this, with these fingers by the blade, while the handle rests here.” Bucky picked up the knife, and shuffled next to Peter so that he could show how he was holding the knife from a better angle.

“Got it? Okay, now you try holding it, and for God’s sake, don’t cut yourself.” He said as he handed the boy one of his knives.

Bucky watched intently as Peter adjusted the knife in his hand, and then reached over to gently move the knife into the exact right position.

“Now hold it like that, get used to the way it feels. Think you’ve got it?”

“I think so.”

“Okay, then put it down and pick it up again.”

Bucky had Peter repeat that until his hold seemed less clumsy and his speed picked up. Once he felt satisfied, he told him to leave the knives and began to demonstrate the wrist movement needed.

When Bucky was sure that Peter wasn’t going to stab himself in the leg, or something equally as dumb, he led him into the practice range.

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“Friday, bring up some targets—stationary.”

Three large bullseye-painted boards emerged from the back wall, and then sat motionless before them.

“Okay, now, since you seem to like to dance around everywhere and bounce off the walls, I’m going to teach you the spinning throw first.”
“What’s that?”

“What’s that?”

“Like the one you see in all those movies, where the blade rotates in the air.”

“Cool!”

“Okay, so, being able to judge position, distance, and force are all equally important. If the knife hits the target like this—” he held the blade pointing downwards, “then it means you’re too far away. However, if it hits the target like this, and bounces off—” he turned the blade pointing up, “then you’re too close, and the blade hasn’t made a full rotation.”

“Okay, got it.”

“All right, now, without throwing the knife, practice the form you use to throw.”

Bucky watched until he was once again satisfied that Peter wouldn’t kill himself, and then agreed to let the kid start actually throwing the knives. Peter practically vibrated in excitement as he lined up his shot. Sure enough, Peter’s first throw was way off.

“You need to concentrate more. Stuff down your emotions and clear your head. If you’re so worked up that you’re shaking, then your aim is going to be off.”

Peter nodded and relaxed his stance, taking a moment to try and calm his breathing, the same way Tony had mentioned trying to do once, when he was anxious.

Peter felt a lot more grounded on his next try, and though the knife didn’t stick, it hit within the rings on the target.

Bucky and Peter continued to train until Peter’s stomach let out an unhappy rumble. Bucky laughed hearing it.

“Hungry?”

“A bit,” Peter said, feeling a little embarrassed.

Okay, let’s pack up and go grab something to eat.”

After packing up, Bucky grabbed his phone from his bag and headed into the elevator, Peter in tow.

‘No wonder we’re hungry—it’s past 1:00 already.’

Bucky also had a few more unread text messages from Steve.

**Stevie:** So Natasha may have found out about last night.

**Stevie:** About us kissing, I mean.

**Stevie:** Is that okay, Buck? I realize we didn’t talk about how open you wanted us to be about it.

**Stevie:** She figured it out on her own though, I swear.

**Stevie:** Bucky?

**Bucky:** Don’t get all twisted up now. Don’t worry, I know she knows.

Bucky took screenshots of his conversation with Natasha, and attached them to his next message.

**Bucky:** I’m not surprised she figured it out, since apparently your poker face hasn’t improved
Stevie: Natasha wrote those?

Bucky: Yes?

Stevie: Our Natasha?

Bucky: Romanoff? Yes?

Stevie: Wow, no kidding
Stevie: I’ve never seen her texts sound so... carefree? Or girly?

Bucky: What can I say? I just have that effect on people

Stevie: Always were a charmer :)

Bucky: :)

Bucky smiled, and pocketed his phone as the elevator doors opened.

“So what do you want to eat, kid?”

“Uhm… a sandwich?” Peter replied, remembering Tony and Bucky's food argument the other day.

Bucky shook his head. “All right then, and—oh, Tony!” Bucky startled, his nerves fluttering to life.

“Oh, uhh, hi,” Tony replied, “I was just about to go looking for Peter here.”

“I was just about to make us some lunch.” Bucky put on a winning smile, “How about it, doll, you hungry?”

“No, I’m fine. I was just coming to see if Peter had started his homework.” Tony turned to look at Peter now.

Bucky’s smile faded a bit—it was rare for Tony to ever turn down his cooking. Maybe he already had lunch?

“Oh, uhh, well—” Peter stuttered.

Tony sighed. “After lunch, meet me in the workshop. If you need supervision to get your homework done, then that's what it’ll be.” Tony turned and left.

“He seemed a little grouchy,” Peter said. Bucky hummed in agreement.

“Well, let’s get you something to eat, regardless.”

---

Later that night, Bucky hovered in the kitchen, determined to make the perfect burger. Tony had left to drop Peter back off at home, and Bucky expected him back any moment. Bucky was hoping he could improve the other’s mood with good ole’ food. Lord knows a good meal always put him in better spirits.

“Mr. Stark will be arriving home in approximately five minutes,” Friday said.
“Okay!” Bucky jumped into action, placing the cheese on the patty so it could melt, and buttering the bun, then placing it on the stove to warm.

His fingers tapped against the counter as he waited. He hated the restlessness he was feeling. Things had been awkward earlier, and he wanted to get that out of the way ASAP. He texted a quick picture of the meal to Steve, more as something to occupy himself with, as he listened to the sizzling of the frying pan.

“Mr. Stark has entered the elevator and will arrive shortly.”

“Thanks, Friday,” Bucky said, then rushed to put everything together.

He plated the food quickly, and placed the dish in front of Tony’s usual seat at the kitchen island, just as he heard the doors of the elevator open in the next room. Quick as could be, Bucky rushed into the room to catch Tony before he retreated.

“Hey!”

Tony turned to look at Bucky. “Hey, yourself.” The man said.

Bucky couldn’t help but notice how tired he looked, and felt concern settle in his gut.

“I made dinner.” He said.

“Really?” Tony looked a bit surprised.

“Yeah, c’mon.” Bucky turned and went back into the kitchen, trusting that Tony would follow.

Bucky dished himself up some extra potatoes, before noticing that Tony wasn’t with him. He felt a jolt of anxiety, and frowned as it turned into irritation. He made fucking dinner. How dare—?

Tony walked into the room with an amber-coloured drink, and Bucky’s ire disappeared as quickly as it rose.

“This for me?” Tony asked, gesturing to the burger.

“It’s in front of your spot, ain’t it?”

A small smile tugged at Tony’s lips. “Thanks.” He sat down as he took a small sip of the alcohol. “Smells great.”

Bucky nodded, and leaned against the counter as he continued to snack on the potatoes. He shifted and felt a flush sneak up on him as Tony bit into the burger, moaning appreciatively.

“Shit, that’s good.” The man gasped out between bites.

“Glad you like it.” Bucky swallowed, thickly.

Tony frowned at Bucky. “Didn’t you make yourself anything?”

“I ate earlier,” Bucky said. It wasn’t a lie, either.

Originally, the plan had been to wait and eat with Tony, but the man had been locked in his workshop most of the afternoon and evening with Peter, only emerging to drive the teen home. Bucky decided not to starve himself, and simply make Tony his own special dinner for when he got back. Luckily, Tony seemed to be very happy with the surprise meal.
“You didn’t have to go to all this trouble, then.”

“I know. I wanted to.” Came the easy reply.

A soft smile graced Tony’s features, which left Bucky feeling warm and content. The smile faded though, and a different spectrum of emotions played over Tony’s face. Bucky took it in, a frown pulling at his own brows.

The way Tony’s smile seemed to fade away, as a tightness appeared around his eyes and mouth, like a quick grimace, was so quickly replaced by a stiff smirk that it would have been easy to miss.

“You’re going to make your boyfriend jealous, spoiling me like this.”

Bucky appraised him for a moment, before forcing himself to shrug in a manner that exuded ease.

“Probably,” he said. “He’d much rather spoil you himself.”

The reaction was pretty instantaneous, and Tony choked against the drink he had taken immediately before. Bucky had a hard time hiding his smile at that, so decided not to bother and grinned unashamedly.

“Jerk,” Tony muttered, but Bucky couldn’t take it to heart with the red dusting on the other’s cheeks.

Tony finished the last bite of his food with a look of deep contemplation.

“I’m hoping you won’t have to stay locked up here much longer.” He finally said.

“Oh?” Bucky frowned, Tony hadn’t mentioned anything about clearing his name since he had first admitted to being on the case.

Tony nodded, slowly. “It’s taken time to gather the necessary documents, but I think Friday has been able to sift through the helpful stuff. Now I just have to build the case, and let me tell you, I have some great lawyers. The only snag I can possibly see is that a judge may not want to try an— an absent party.” Tony looked uncomfortable.

“You’ll have to bring me in.” Bucky said.

“Maybe,” Tony admitted. “But, I won’t do that unless there’s no other choice, and unless I’m one hundred and ten percent sure that we can win the case.”

Bucky found himself shaking his head. “Tony... I appreciate what you’re doing for me, but—” he sighed. “I’ve done a lot of shit. There’s a lot of blood on my hands, and I find it hard to believe you could find a judge crazy enough to simply brush that aside.”

“No. There’s a lot of blood on Hydra’s hands.” Tony said, stubbornly.

Bucky sighed again. It was an old conversation, and probably one of the few things Steve and Tony could agree on without question.

“I’ll make you a free man again, there’s no question about that. It’s just the time it takes.” Tony looked uncomfortable. “And I am sorry it’s taken so long already, but I’ve had to split my resources between your case and the Accords.”

‘And being Iron Man, and Stark Industries, and funding the Avengers...’ Bucky carried on, silently.
No wonder Stevie was always worried. This really wasn’t healthy.

“Don’t worry so much. You shouldn’t worry about me until you have the Accords sorted out.” Bucky said.

Tony fixed him with an unimpressed look.

“Just saying!” Bucky said, raising his hands pacifyingly.

“Don’t worry your pretty little head there, Bucko. I got this.”

It was Bucky’s turn to fix Tony with an unimpressed expression.

“Never call me that again.”

Chapter End Notes

Hope you all enjoyed this new installment!
This chapter was a bit different -being all from Bucky's POV but I hope you all found it interesting at least ;)
I always enjoy hearing crit and feedback :D

I hope you all have a lovely weekend <3
Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Notes

New week, new chapter!

Thanks again for all the awesome feedback on the last chapter- it's all really appreciated! <3

Please enjoy this new installment :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony finished off the scotch in his tumbler and poured himself another. Honestly, this—this was good. The situation wasn’t ideal by any means, but it was necessary. This was the best version of the Accords he had read, and there was a spark of excitement that had him straightening up, despite his exhaustion. There’d been many times where he had almost thrown up his hands and quit, but after months of full-on diplomacy (read: arguing), Tony could say that he was satisfied with this outcome. This could be it; the copy that was sign-able. He wasn’t fool enough to think that amendments wouldn’t need to be signed in the future—but for now? This was good. No wonder Ross seemed more pissy than usual over the phone. Tony smiled.

“Friday, upload these documents onto the StarkPads.”

“Of course, Boss. Should I arrange a meeting with the Avengers, Sir?”

“You got it! Is Brucie back in the country?” Tony asked.

“Yes, the Black Widow was able to collect him after the last mission. Though, I am unaware if Dr. Banner will be available for the meeting later.”

Tony frowned at that. “Is he okay?”

“I believe so, Boss. Dr. Banner simply seems to be suffering from exhaustion.”

Tony sighed and nodded. He hated hearing that his science buddy was having a rough time. He made up his mind to hunt down the man himself sometime soon; it had been much too long since their last science session.

Plus, he knew Bruce fell under the category of... uncomfortable with the Accords. Originally, he had been very supportive of them; however, after seeing Ross’s name attached, well—Tony hadn’t faulted him for taking a step back.

Though Tony believed the documents to be acceptable, he knew that there may be pieces that targeted specific Avengers unfairly, and though he worked hard to avoid that, there may be hidden nooses that the others could see that he couldn’t. Plus, he wanted everyone to understand just what it was that they needed to sign, thus knowing their new playground rules and the consequences for not following them.

“How are you doing breaking the decryption codes on those Hydra docs?”
“I have successfully released another two documents pertaining to the Winter Soldier.”

“Anything we can use?”

A holo-screen came to life before Tony. On it was a list of compiled documents, pictures, and videos. Tony had gone through some of those in his mission to find evidence that would prove Bucky was a victim of Hydra. ‘Disturbing’ didn’t even begin to cover it; just looking at the files brought a sick feeling to his gut, and Tony grimaced. He took a sip from his glass.

“All right, let’s see what we’ve got.”

“This one in particular I believe will be helpful in clearing Mr. Barnes’s name,” Friday said, as she selected a document to appear.

Tony scanned it over, his eyes widening. This was gold. Documents recording Bucky’s initial capture before Steve went into the ice, followed closely by his rediscovery, and plans for his ‘re-education.’

“Shit,” Tony swore quietly, and took a deeper gulp of scotch. “Add this to the folder.”

“Yes, Boss. It will take more time to decrypt the whole file.”

Tony nodded in understanding.

“Bring up Peter’s algorithms, then.”

The screens changed immediately. Instead of files, they now showed lines of code.

“How’s it looking?”

“I’ve highlighted the problematic areas,” Friday replied, changing the screens once more.

“Okay, don’t correct the code itself, but make notes on how to correct it, then send it to Peter.” Tony said.

“Very well, though I don’t believe that his current computer is equipped to run the necessary programs.”

Tony frowned. “Bring up the specs.”

Another holo-screen appeared and Tony visibly grimaced. “Yikes. I thought I told him to ask if he needed anything—this thing is ancient!”

“It does appear to be outdated.”

“Okay, let’s build him something better,” Tony sighed.

“I am obligated to remind you that it’s now been thirty hours since you last slept.”

Tony waved her off. “I’m not tired. Too much to do!”

“Will the computer be Mr. Parker’s birthday gift, Boss?”

“Huh? Oh, no—he needs this right away. I haven’t decided what to get for him yet, but I have time.”
“I feel inclined to remind you that it is now May 27th.”

Tony froze.

“No. No way in—” He brought up his calendar and gulped. “It’s May 27th.”

“Yes, Boss.”

“It’s less than a week until Peter’s birthday. IT’S LESS THAN A WEEK UNTIL PETER’S BIRTHDAY!”

Tony’s gazed darted helplessly around his workshop, as if it would hold the solution to his problem.

“What am I going to do? I have to get him something! I haven’t even begun to plan! I—I—need to throw him a party, and—fuck, I don’t have enough time!” Tony ran a hand through his already messy hair, as if he could brush away the sudden panic and stress.

“Captain Rogers is requesting access to—”

“Yes, okay, whatever—Friday, we need to plan!”

“Tony?”

Tony spun around, coming face-to-face with Steve, who was carrying a plate with what looked like one of his omelettes on it. Tony tensed in surprise—he hadn’t meant to let him in—dammit. Honestly, things had been a little forced lately—and by lately, he meant since he’d caught Steve and Bucky trying to devour each other on his couch. In retrospect, it really shouldn’t have surprised him, but, he’d just thought—thought what?

It was really his fault; he had been so consumed in trying to figure out his own feelings for the two men, that he had completely missed his chance with either of them. He gritted his teeth. It didn’t make it any less of a blow when he had seen them together. Man, had they looked good together, though.

‘So, so good—yeesh! Down, boy.’

“Tony, have you slept?” Steve asked, breaking Tony from his thoughts.

Steve placed the dish down on the nearest desk and walked up to Tony.

‘Too close, too close, too close—’

Steve placed one hand on his shoulder, and then pressed his other to Tony’s forehead.

‘TOO CLOSE!’

“I’m fine!” Tony swatted his hand away and stepped back, shooting him a look, to which Steve only returned with a smile.

That was the other thing that was driving Tony nuts. Ever since he had caught them together, Steve and Bucky seemed to make it their mission to absolutely torment him. He didn’t get it. They were his friends, and he was trying to be happy for them, despite his own wounded emotions, but they were making it extremely difficult to try and move on. All the little gestures and acts and quips that Tony had taken for flirting before only seemed to have been revved up. Was he really that transparent? Were they mocking him? No, they wouldn’t do that. So why?

“You can’t fault me for being concerned, you look a little... frayed.” That concerned look was
Tony had the flitting thought that Steve should try and trademark it. He really had it down pat. Mr. Goddamn Perfect. He had to stomp down on the contented fluttering in his chest at the thought of Steve caring about him.

‘Not like that,’ he reminded himself, painfully.

Steve was stepping up close to him again, his face looking a little alarmed.

“Tony, are you okay?”

Tony realized he was rubbing at the spot his reactor used to sit, and immediately lowered his hand and took a step back.

“I’m fine,” he said, firmly. Steve’s frown deepened, but he remained where he was, rather than follow again.

Tony felt a smidge bad at the look. In his defense, it had been thirty hours since he last slept. He was cranky.

“Shit, Peter!” Tony exclaimed, remembering his sudden panic.

Steve’s head whipped around, as if looking for the teen.

“What? What about Peter?”

“Birthday! It’s his birthday on the first!”

Steve seemed to relax and huffed a quiet laugh. “Yep, sure is.”

“I haven’t even gotten him a present yet!”

Steve picked up the plate he had brought down.

“Well, before you do anything else, you need to eat and sleep.”

“I don’t have time to sleep!” Tony said, but grabbed the plate and dug in with the fork provided. It was criminal to turn down one of Cap’s omelettes.

“You have days to think of something—and you will, because you’re Tony Stark, and you always think of something.”

Tony wasn’t convinced. This was more important than his sleep schedule. This was the first birthday Tony would celebrate with Peter, which meant he had to make it extra good, for all the ones he missed—and no, it didn’t matter that he was completely unaware of the kid for all those other birthdays. On top of that, he was turning sixteen—that was, like, important, right?

“Tony, calm down!” Steve said, voice thick with amusement.

“What?”

Steve rolled his eyes—and how the hell did he make even that look attractive? Asshole.

“You were thinking out loud. Well, panicking out loud. It’ll be fine, Tony.”
Tony huffed and put down his plate, so he could cross his arms defensively.

“Don’t tell me it’ll be ‘fine,’ Cap,” Tony said, annoyed. “This is important!”

Steve’s features gentled, but his voice was firm. “I know, I’m not saying it isn’t. But you’re just going to run yourself into the ground, thinking up some half-baked ideas in this state, then pass out for two or three days, wake up to look over your jotted notes and such, and then panic even more when you decide they’re all terrible ideas.”

Tony gaped for a moment, then snapped his mouth shut. “You don’t know that,” he said, stubbornly.

“Tony... go upstairs and lay down for an hour or two. If you can’t fall asleep, then you can come back down here and panic all you like.”

Tony frowned as he finished off the rest of his food.

“You won’t come down here and bitch if I don’t end up sleeping?”

Steve shot him an unimpressed look. “As long as you actually try, first.”

“Fine,” he grumbled.

Steve’s face lit up with a smile. “Come on, let’s get you into bed.”

Tony’s mind dove straight down, deep, deep into the gutter. His cheeks flushed.

“Pretty sure I can find my way there myself, thanks!

---

Tony was asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow.

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Steve checked his phone again. Only another hour before the meeting. He could feel the tension rising in his body. He clenched his fists and began to wale on the punching bag again. He really didn’t like anything about these so-called Accords, but he understood, at least partially, where they were coming from. He wanted to be stubborn as all hell about the whole thing, but he really couldn’t stop thinking about how Tony had opened up to him about it. He couldn’t stomp his feet about this. At the very least, he had to try and look at the situation objectively—for Tony’s sake.

He’d been concerned after seeing the state Tony had been in earlier. Hell, he was still concerned. The man had looked particularly manic, and Steve got a headache just from trying to theorize about the events and level of stress that brought the man to that state. Seriously, could he not take care of himself at all?

An instinctual part of Steve’s brain whined at that. Steve had always been a caretaker, a defender. It was just in his nature to want to stand up for others, to look out for others—especially when it came to personal relationships. Those instincts went practically haywire around Tony.

“Did Tony get any sleep?” Steve suddenly addressed Friday.

“Mr. Stark was asleep almost as soon as he made it to bed.”

“Maybe we should change the meeting to tomorrow, instead. He needs his rest,” Steve said.
“He has already been woken up and is preparing for the meeting now. However, I can run the suggestion by him if you would like, Captain.”

Steve nodded, but already knew the answer he would get before Friday said, “Mr. Stark wishes to go over things as soon as possible.”

“Has anyone else shown up?”

“Not yet.”

Steve nodded. It was still early, yet.

“Steve?”

Steve turned and smiled as Bucky approached.

“Hey, Buck.” He said, and brought the other in for a hug.

There were those instincts again. Jesus, Tony wasn’t the only one they flared up for. Luckily, Bucky seemed all too happy with the affection.

“You seem stressed,” Bucky said, voice slightly muffled against Steve’s shoulder.

Steve hummed, but didn’t otherwise reply.

“Is it the meeting tonight?” Bucky pushed.

“Maybe partly,” Steve sighed, as he released Bucky from his embrace (however regretfully). “Tony was looking a little... frazzled, this morning. I think he was in his workshop all night again.”

Bucky huffed. “He’s probably trying to get all of this Accords shit wrapped up.”

Steve nodded. “Will you be joining us at the meeting today?”

Bucky shrugged. “Might as well. Never know when you might need damage control.”

Steve snorted. “I doubt it’ll come to that.”

Bucky raised an eyebrow, obviously thinking about the first couple of meetings.

“Okay—I may have been a little defensive before, but—I’m willing to listen and try and work this out, Buck.”

Bucky nodded. “Good. Like you said, Tony’s stressed out enough.”

Steve grimaced. He really didn’t want to add to that at the moment.

“I promise to be on my best behavior.”

Bucky nodded. “Good.” He paused. “Did you have a chance to talk with him this morning?”

“Yes, but not about us,” Steve sighed. “He was kind of—manic. He needed sleep. It wasn’t a good time.”

Bucky seemed to consider his words. “Maybe tonight, if the meeting goes well? Or tomorrow, after he gets some more sleep.”
Steve groaned. “I don’t know if he will sleep anymore. It’s Peter’s birthday on the first, and Tony is an absolute mess about it.”

“Peter’s birthday is on the first?” Bucky exclaimed.

“Yes. Yes it is.”

“Shit!” Bucky said. “What am I gonna get him? I literally have no money.”

“Why don’t you just make him dinner, or a cake or something?” Steve shrugged.

“Cake isn’t a sandwich, Steve. I guess I could make dinner, though, or some party snacks.” He said, considering.

“See? Perfect!” Steve smiled.

Bucky sighed. “Doesn’t feel like enough, though.”

“Buck, Peter’s a great kid. He would be thrilled with even just a card. No matter what you give him, he will love it.”

“But that’s why I wanna give Spider-Kid something good!” Bucky ran a hand through his hair. “He makes it easy to like him—on top of that, though, he’s all but Tony’s kid, at this point. If we want to be involved with Tony, then we gotta be on good terms with Peter, too. They’re like a packaged deal.”

Steve smiled and tried to stifle his laughter.

“What the hell is so funny?” Bucky said, shoving him lightly.

Steve’s miserable attempt at holding in his laughter crumbled. Bucky glared daggers at the man before him.

“I’m—I’m sorry!” He said, between laughs. “But you have nothing to worry about! Peter already likes you! Like I said, he’s the sweetest kid, Buck. I’m sure everything will be fine.”

Bucky sighed. “You’re not the least bit concerned?”

“Nope,” Steve said, emphasizing the ‘p.’

Bucky’s eyes narrowed in suspicion at the small smirk that had crawled onto the blonde’s face.

“After all,” Steve continued, “I already got Peter the perfect gift.”


Steve was outright grinning now. “You remember a couple of days ago? Peter was talking about how his school is starting a photography class next year, and how excited he is for it? Weeell…”

“You got him a fucking camera, didn’t you? You are the absolute worst, Steven Grant Rogers.”

Steve’s smile spread impossibly wider, but whatever his reply was going to be was lost as Friday interrupted.

“I apologize for interrupting, however, the other Avengers have begun to arrive on the premises, and are congregating in the lounge on the common floor.”
“Okay. Thanks, Friday,” Steve said.

“Wipe that damn smile off your face,” Bucky muttered, grumpily.

“Oh, don’t be so sore, Buck.”

Bucky pointedly ignored him, as they headed to the elevator—which only seemed to heighten Steve’s feelings of amusement.

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Tony sighed as he looked himself over in the mirror. He had showered to rid himself of the grime that had built up during his binge in his workshop, but the dark circles under his eyes were more stubborn than even his greasy hair had been.

He hated that the tired haggardness seemed to stick to him, no matter what he did with himself lately. No amount of expensive clothes or fancy products were enough to give him back the energy he was looking for.

‘Damn, you’re getting old.’ He glared into the mirror.

“Boss, the Avengers have all arrived, minus Colonel Rhodes, and of course Dr. Banner.”

“What? I thought Rhodey was finally coming home today?” Tony frowned. Definitely not pouting.

“The Iron Patriot will be returning to U.S. soil tomorrow evening, due to mission delays.”

“Okay. Thanks, Friday,” Tony said, listlessly. He had really been hoping he could rope his buddy into going for drinks after. Oh well.

He sighed and, casting himself one last withering look, squared his shoulders and headed back into his bedroom. He grabbed the StarkPads from his dresser top, and entered the elevator.

“Let them know I’m on my way down,” he said.

“Yes, Sir.”

Tony found it hard to keep his anxiety in check as the elevator moved down. He just didn't want to fight anymore, not with his team. He was too damn tired. He knew that it was an impossible notion—that his best hope was to convince those who opposed him, and that that would take some arguing.

He rubbed at his tired eyes with his free hand and groaned. He was starting to regret not postponing, like Steve had suggested earlier.

“We’ve arrived on the communal floor. Would you like to wait a few moments?” Friday said, interrupting his thoughts.

“No, let’s get this over with.”

“As you say, Boss,” The AI said, before opening the elevator doors.

“I come bearing gifts!” Tony said in false cheer, as he entered the lounge.

Heads turned to look his way with varying expressions. Tony held up the StarkPads he was holding.
“Come on, kiddos!” He said, waving them a bit. “Everyone gets a StarkPad!”

“Cool, free shit!” Clint said, jumping up and grabbing one from Tony’s hands.

It didn’t take long to pass the others out, after that.

“Okay, now, for those of us less tech-savvy, the power button is located—” Tony began teasingly, but was cut off by Steve saying, “I know how to turn on a tablet, Tony,” at the same time as Bucky flipped him off.

Tony smiled widely, before forcing himself to focus.

“Okay, okay, but seriously—all of you turn on the StarkPads, now. With the exception of Bucky here, you’ll notice on your home screen that there’s a documents icon labeled ‘Accords.’ Please click on it,” he said.


Tony continued to speak, ignoring the archer completely. “Yes, all of these have copies of the current, most up-to-date version of the Accords—”

“How come you don’t have to go through this?” Sam asked Bucky, with a hint of jealousy.

“I’m not an Avenger. I don’t gotta sign shit, yet.”

“So what does your StarkPad have on it, then?”

Bucky flipped his tablet around so that he could show Sam a game of Tetris that was loading.

“That is so not cool.”

Tony cleared his throat, loudly. “You done chit-chatting over there?”

“I still don’t like this,” Clint interrupted, with a sour look on his face.

Tony groaned. There it was.

“Barton—”

“No. Seriously, our job is to protect the world from the bad guys when no one else can. How are we supposed to do that if we’re bogged down by a bunch of damned red tape?”

“Funny thing, the nice little document there in your hand will probably hold a lot of the answers to that—” Tony started, in a slightly sarcastic tone.

“The guys we are fighting don’t have these kinds of limitations,” Wanda said, though she sounded more nervous than anything.

“Exactly!” Clint exclaimed.

“Clint—” Natasha began, reproachfully.

“I just don’t feel comfortable being weighed down by a bunch of hidden agendas!”

“Maybe we should actually read it before—” Natasha started.

“I don’t want to.” Clint finished.
“I find the documents quite acceptable,” Vision said.

“Well colour me shocked.” Sam rolled his eyes.

Tony rubbed at his forehead, feeling the stress and anxiety climbing once more. He focused on keeping his breathing under control so he didn’t totally lose it in front of the team. Lord, wouldn’t that be the perfect end to the night?

“...Tony? Tony, are you listening?” Steve’s voice broke through his veil of concentration.

“Oh, sorry, I have trouble hearing with all the stupidity clouding the room,” he snapped automatically.

Steve immediately sent him a warning look.

“Tony—” Steve began, but Tony wasn’t listening to him at the moment.

“—Plus all those supervillains and aliens and God-knows-what aren’t going to be playing by the Accords. Why should we limit ourselves? Why should we create a disadvantage for ourselves?” Clint ranted.

“Because, if we can’t accept limitations, then we’re no better than the bad guys!” Tony snapped.

The room quieted. Tony took a breath. He was far from finished.

“Listen, I get it, this isn’t ideal, but it’s happening. We have been allowed to do whatever the hell we please for a lot longer than many other powerful groups have been—but the free ride is over now. Now, we have to play by the same rules as the rest of the people of this world and follow the law. Does that mean we can no longer do our jobs? No, I’ve fought long and hard to make sure of that. But yes, there will be some changes, due course. Changes that we will accept, and limitations we will fight within. Because these limitations? They are what’s going to stop us from going too far, stop us from making a bad call. When we make decisions, there are a lot of lives on the line—a lot of innocent lives, and that level of responsibility isn’t something that should be handled privately, it is a governmental affair.

Yeah, it’s less convenient now, and that sucks, but you are all going to suck it up, because these are the cards that we are being dealt—and for good reason. We can’t fight for justice while we simultaneously ignore its laws. We are one—just one—bad call away from turning into the villains we are fighting to stop. Why work within limitations? Because, we shouldn’t lower ourselves to the level of our enemies—we should raise ourselves to be the example.”

Tony took a few deep breaths, trying to pull himself back together.

“Read the document. Learn your new playbook. If there’s something you don’t understand or that bothers you—let me know. Seriously, I have a team of lawyers at my beck and call, not to mention my own intellect. Keep in mind that documents can be amended, even after being signed. If something isn’t working out, we can take it back to the drawing board.”

“We’ll read the Accords, Tony,” Steve said, before he turned to face the room. “We all will.”

There were a couple of sighs and grumbles, but no one felt like protesting. Tony nodded, tiredly. Lord, he wanted to go back to bed, or pour himself a drink. Hard yes to the drink.

Tony turned to scour his bar when the elevator chimed.
“Hey, Tony? Friday said it was okay to come up. I tried to call a couple of times, but—” Peter stopped, mid-sentence, as he looked around the room.

The Avengers looked back. Tony could see the panic strewn all over the teen’s face.

‘Shit. Play it cool, kid.’

“Oh, hey, Peter! Sorry about that, I had my phone on silent. We were just finishing up a meeting here.”

“Oh—oh, yeah?” Peter replied, in a much too squeaky voice.

‘Not playing it cool, Parker.’

“Yes.” He turned back to his team, who all wore a range of expressions, most of which leaning toward uncomfortable.

“You’ll have to forgive my intern here, Mr. Parker is a little star-struck!” Tony forced a laugh, while walking over to Peter and giving his stiff shoulder a pat.

Peter made a bunch of garbled up noises that Tony was only seventy-percent sure were supposed to be words. He had to fight the overwhelming urge to smack himself in the face.

Peter was stiff, sweaty, and the complete opposite of someone who had nothing to hide.

Tony made a mental note to never teach the kid poker.

“Well hey, it’s nice to meet you, kid! Intern, huh? I didn’t know shellhead took interns!” Clint said, walking up.

Natasha stopped everything with an exaggerated groan, followed by, “Okay, hands up—who all knows who Mr. Parker is?”

One by one, and then all at once, the Avengers’ hands all rose into the air. Except for Clint. Natasha shot him a disbelieving look.

“Wait—what?” The archer said, in obvious confusion, but was ignored as Peter gasped.

“Wha—what, but—how?” The kid fumbled over his words, wringing his hands anxiously. Tony stood completely stiff next to him.

“Relax, kid!” Sam said. “We aren’t going to spread it around. Seriously, it stays between us.”

“But how do you know?” Peter asked, sounding a little desperate.

“Well... I can’t speak for everyone, but, uhh—for myself? I walked into the gym and saw your face. Left before any of y’all noticed.”

“I have the ability to see into one’s mind. I knew you the moment I met you,” Wanda said.

“It doesn’t really matter how we know, just that we do.” Natasha said.


“Of—of course it matters!” Peter said, loudly. “No one was supposed to know!”
“Hey, hey, hey, calm down, Peter, it’s okay!” Tony said, wrapping his arm fully around Peter’s shoulders.

Steve nodded. “Peter, I realize this isn’t what you wanted, but maybe it’s for the best. No one here will betray your want for secrecy. By the sounds of it, some of us have known for a while now, and nothing bad has happened, has it?”

“I—I guess not.”

“Of course not. Peter, we look after each other, you don’t have to worry.” Natasha chimed in, calmly.

Peter nodded, though he still seemed tense and unsure.

Steve looked around at the other Avengers. “All right, maybe it’s time we call it a night,” he said, pulling everyone’s attention to himself, instead of Peter.

The others seemed to nod in agreement—except for Clint, who was still looking at the faces around him in blatant confusion.

Natasha threw him another dirty look. “I literally cannot believe you,” she grumbled, as they made their way toward the elevator.

“Believe what? Seriously, who’s the kid?”

“I hate you,” Natasha muttered.

Clint’s reply was cut off as Sam, Vision, and Wanda filed in after them. Wanda stopped to give Peter’s hand a reassuring squeeze before leaving.

Bucky let out a long, low whistle once the room was empty of everyone except Steve, Peter, Tony, and of course, himself.

“Well, that took a turn,” he said, brows raised.

Peter groaned. “I just wanted to pick up my textbook,” he said, mournfully.

“Textbook?” Tony asked.

“I forgot one of my books for English here yesterday,” Peter explained.

“Do you remember where you left it?”

Peter nodded. “Yeah, it’s on my desk—uhh, I mean, the desk I’ve been using, upstairs—I just didn’t want to go up to the penthouse without talking to you first, so...”

“Kid, you can go up whenever, but it’s nice of you to stop and say hi,” Tony laughed.

Peter shuffled his feet, nervously. “I hadn’t realized you guys were busy. Sorry.”

“You don’t need to apologize, Peter,” Steve said with a smile.

“Yeah, kid, we were just wrapping up when you came in, anyway.” Bucky said.

“You heard them!” Tony said, when Peter looked to him in a questioning manner. “You didn’t interrupt, so stop worrying.”
Peter nodded, hesitantly. “Okay.”

“It’s already six o’clock, why don’t you stay for dinner tonight?” Steve offered.

“Aww, I can’t, May’s making dinner and I promised I would eat with her tonight.” The teen explained, sounding only a little bit regretful.

“Ah, that’s okay—another time, then.” Steve replied, easily. “Are you excited for your birthday?” He then continued, ignoring the dirty look Bucky shot him.

“Well, you know, I guess,” Peter said, though it was easy to tell by the large grin he was fighting that he actually was.

“I have to go!” Tony suddenly exclaimed, and hurried toward the elevator.

“Oh—okay—bye?” Peter called after the man, in obvious confusion.

Bucky rolled his eyes and Steve shrugged.

“He’s been very busy lately,” the blonde said.

“Oh, okay.” Peter said, then continued after a brief pause, “Is he okay though? He looked tired.”

Steve nodded again. “He has a bunch of big projects right now. He will be okay, though.”

“Yeah, don’t worry about it, kid. I’ll personally drag him to bed if he tries to pull another all-nighter,” Bucky chimed in.

Steve rolled his eyes.

“Oh, okay.”

“Why don’t you go find that book of yours, and then I can give you a ride home?” Steve said.

“Oh! You don't have to do that!” Peter exclaimed, quickly.

“Nonsense, it's no trouble.”

“Just let him drive you, webs. He won't take no for an answer,” Bucky said.

Peter nodded. “Oh, uhm, okay, then—thanks!”

“No problem. Now, do you need a hand looking for your book?”

“Oh, no—like I said, I know where it is. I’ll go up and get it, then meet you back here?”

“Sounds good.”

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Tony paced back and forth, wringing his hands together, only stopping intermittently to jot down a passing idea onto a scrap piece of paper sitting on his workbench.

“I could rent out a hotel for the party.”

“Is so much space necessary?” Friday questioned.
“Well, I’ll need space to—to set up and everything!”

“Set up what?”

“I don't know yet!” Tony voiced, shrilly.

“Everything okay in here?”

Tony spun around to see Steve and Bucky poking their heads in. He was taken off guard for only a moment, before he resumed pacing.

“Nothing is all right.”

“Yeesh, I didn’t think the meeting went that bad,” Bucky said.

“What? Oh, no!” Tony waved him away. “Peter! Birthday! Sixteen, remember?” He snapped, before turning and seeing the teasing smile on the man’s face.

He rolled his eyes.

“Keep doing that and your eyes will stick back there, doll.”

“Fine. It's the only expression I need when dealing with you,” Tony said, tone snarky.

Steve and Bucky both laughed, Steve shaking his head.

“Okay, so, back to the point, I’m assuming you're making yourself sick with worry over trying to plan something for the kid’s birthday,” Steve said, eying Tony.

“I STILL DON’T HAVE A GIFT! And yes, he needs a party, but I’m almost out of time!”

Bucky picked up the piece of paper Tony had been scribbling on and glanced over it. The man let out a snort of laughter that evolved into full-on cackling as he read.

“Gimme that!” Tony said, snatching it from his metal hand, “What's so damn funny?” He demanded, as he maneuvered away from Steve’s grabby hands and prying eyes.

“Tony, he’s gonna be sixteen—not six, he doesn't need a clown!”

“I don’t know! I don't know what a kid’s birthday party should be like!” Tony exclaimed, throwing his hands up.

“Well, what about you? You must've had loads of parties,” Bucky said, as Steve was nodding along.

Tony froze. His whole demeanor seemed to shift, and the man went from anxiously panicking to subdued in but a second. He shrugged.

“I actually never really had my own birthday parties growing up.”

Both Bucky and Steve balked at the idea. “What?” They asked, in unison.

Tony chuckled, but it didn't seem to hold much humor.

“I mean, there was always a party, it just wasn't ever really for me. Dad always threw a big dinner or cocktail event, but it was more about him networking and brown-nosing with other suits. It was
always just a big room with strangers and drinks I was too young to properly enjoy. Honestly, I was only usually allowed to attend the parties long enough to make a round and convince the guests I existed, before I was sent up to my room after dinner.”

Tony shrugged again. “They were never much fun, to be honest. Oh! Except for the time I threw cake at the Secretary of Defense. That was fantastic. Until Dad caught me, but still—worth it.”

Tony turned to look at the other two. The amused grin which had manifested during his story about the cake slipped off his face.

“What?” He questioned, as the two soldiers looked at him sadly.

“That sounds pretty awful,” Steve said.

“Who doesn’t throw their kid a proper fucking birthday?” Bucky muttered.

“Wow, guys. Simmer down, that’s in the past.”

“Still…” Steve began, looking uncomfortable.

“Nuh uh, no way, wipe those stupid looks off your faces. I told you so you’d understand that I’m actually a little out of my depth here, not to start a pity party.”

“Okay, we’ll help out. We’ll give Peter the best birthday he’s ever had!” Steve said, determinedly.

“Uhm, I hate to be that guy, but aren’t you two forgetting something?” Bucky interrupted.

“No?” Tony said, at the same time as Steve asked, “What?”

Bucky huffed. “Lordy, thank God you’re pretty,” he rolled his eyes. “I think you might be forgetting the fact that Peter might already have plans? You know? With his aunt?”

Tony’s eyes widened. “Shit, May—that’s right! I’ll have to call her!” He said, picking up his phone.

“There you go—there’s that genius intellect I’ve heard so much about!”

“Shut up, Barnes!”

Steve watched his boys with a fond smile. Despite the lingering stress from earlier, and his worry for Tony, he was always left with a feeling of contentedness after spending time with his two favourite people.

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Clint shoved more pizza into his mouth as he deftly mashed the buttons on his game controller. The night had taken a weird turn earlier, when Stark’s intern had shown up and everyone kept alluding to knowing him from somewhere—or something to that degree. He couldn’t understand what the big deal was, but Nat had adamantly refused to speak to him since they left the tower, claiming: “You’ve officially dropped below the minimum intellectual requirements needed for me to associate with you,” and then strode off to go continue ignoring him.

Whatever.

He’d roll his eyes, if he didn’t need them plastered to his TV screen. He balanced his controller on his knee and continued to mash buttons single-handed as he reached for another slice. He thought
back on everything that had been said about the kid at the tower, and mulled it over. He must've also met the shrimp, otherwise the others wouldn't have rolled their eyes quite as hard. But where did he know him from?

Clint thought hard, and suddenly little bits and pieces of information began slotting together.

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Clint gasped, and promptly choked on his pizza.

“HOLY FUCK, THAT KID WAS SPIDER-MAN!”

Chapter End Notes

Phew! So things are progressing-
Peter's almost 16!
Also I couldn't find an info on Peter's DOB so I just used Tom Holland's haha :)

As always any comments and kudos give me life and feed the muse <3
crits and reviews are super welcome!

Have an awesome weekend and a safe Happy Halloween~ <3
Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Notes

Thank you all so, so much for your amazing responses to last chapter!
Seeing your reactions gives me life!

I hope you all like long chapters cause this one's the longest yet, holy hell-
Thank you so much to my beta for making it legible 😊

Before you dive in I do feel I should give a bit of a mild warning, there's discussions of some NSFW subject matter briefly later on!

Alright please enjoy the new chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Peter twirled his pen in restless boredom as his history teacher droned on. Honestly, history wasn’t Peter’s best class at the moment. He really couldn’t help it; there seemed to have been an influx of crime lately that kept him out patrolling most nights. He was quickly growing more exhausted every week, and classes that he considered secondary or tertiary were pushed to the side. He felt a little guilty that some of his marks were sliding again, but he was really, genuinely trying. He kept promising himself that he would catch up once things slowed down and he didn’t have to go out as Spider-Man as often, but there always seemed to be something more important.

His foot bounced and he stole anxious glances at the clock. Monday’s were bad enough without trying to sit through a darkened history classroom. His professor was truly a walking stereotype; always wearing tweed jackets and speaking in the most monotone voice possible—it wasn’t a good class for keeping his overtired brain awake. The fact that almost ninety-percent of class was spent in a darkened room looking at the overhead projector didn’t really help, either. It was sort of frustrating, since history wasn’t a boring subject when you had the right teacher (take Steve, for instance—Peter genuinely liked hearing his stories, and found himself very engaged in what was being said to him when the man spoke). Now, however, that couldn’t be further from the case.

“...And, of course, in early November of 1943, we saw the rise of Captain America during what is now considered his first mission, many of the details being classified to the public; however, it is known that he saved the lives of many soldiers trapped behind enemy lines.”

‘How could someone talk about this like it’s boring them?’ Peter thought, feeling a touch of irritation. Captain America shouldn’t be considered boring by anyone.

“Not long after that, The Howling Commandos were formed as a Special Tasks group, lead by Captain America himself, along with his close friend Sergeant James Barnes. The team worked together to take down multiple Hydra bases in France, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, and even a castle in the Danish Straits; however, in January of 1945, Sergeant James Barnes was killed in action during a high priority mission.”

Peter stiffened when his teacher changed to the next slide of the presentation. There was an enlarged photograph of a man, and Peter was struck by how uncannily familiar he seemed. Slowly, he reached for his phone and scrolled through his recent photos until he came across one of him
and the Avengers at the tower. He zoomed in on Bucky.

“Holy shit.” He said.

“Is there a problem, Mr. Parker?” His teacher asked, annoyed.

“No, sorry.” Peter said, quickly hoping to avert any attention away from himself.

His teacher gave him an unimpressed look, but continued on with the lecture. Peter’s mind was reeling. Why hadn’t he connected the dots before? Sure, the man looked different now, with the long hair, scruff, and the metal arm, but hell—even the caption under the picture read ‘James Buchanan “Bucky” Barnes.’

Peter felt like an idiot, and he also had a lot of questions. How come he was being taught Bucky died in 1945, when he was obviously still very much alive? How was Bucky still alive? He thought back to the trunk incident. Was this why Bucky never seemed to leave the tower? Was he in hiding, and if so, from what?

Peter’s head was swimming in confusion. He looked at the clock. Just another forty-five minutes before school was out.

Thank God; Peter had been planning on stopping by the tower after school, anyway. After being slashed the other week, he had tried repairing his suit himself—not wanting to worry Tony, seeing the large slash in the material—however, since then the tear had just kept reopening and even growing larger, and Karen was growing a bit passive aggressive over it.

Instead of the usual greeting of “Hello, Peter,” when he put his mask on, he was immediately met with, “Your suit still appears to be damaged. Would you like me to plot the quickest route to the tower?”

It was starting to get a little old. So now, reluctantly, Peter was willing to go and get everything sorted out.

Final bell couldn’t have rung soon enough.

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“Where’s Bucky, Friday?” Peter asked once he was in the tower’s private elevator.

“On his personal floor.”

“Okay, take me there, please.” Peter said, bouncing in a mix of excitement and nerves.

“Very well,” the AI replied, while putting the elevator in motion.

While he waited to be taken up, Peter tried to organize his thoughts into a less chaotic mess. There were just so many things he was questioning at the moment. Before he could even fully form one question, two more popped up. Peter smirked as a sudden idea came to him. If Bucky was Steve’s childhood friend, then Peter could bet Bucky had some funny stories to tell. Peter shook his head—great, now he was just adding more variables.

The elevator finally came to a stop and the doors began to open.

“Finally!” Peter exclaimed, but Friday’s voice suddenly sounded from the overhead speaker once more.
“I apologize, Peter, but the situation has changed and I no longer believe it to be fully safe.”

The elevator doors began sliding shut. Peter, shocked at the statement, jumped out before they could fully close.

“What’s wrong? Is Bucky in trouble?” He asked, looking around frantically.

“Please re-enter the elevator, Peter.” Friday said, holding open the doors.

Peter ignored her in favor of looking around some more. He didn’t understand what could be wrong. Still, Peter crept as quietly as he could manage into the living room, his senses sharpening as his spider-senses prickled at the back of his mind. Looking around the lounge, he finally spotted Bucky lying on the sofa.

Peter stopped, frowning. The man appeared to be napping, however, Bucky’s brows were furrowed, making his face look anything but peaceful. Even from this distance, Peter could see his eyelids twitching from whatever dreams were playing in the man’s mind. He walked closer, tentatively, and when he was only a few feet away, his sensitive ears began picking up the sound of Bucky’s rapid heartbeat.

‘Nightmare,’ Peter deduced, wincing sympathetically.

“Peter, it is unwise to disturb Mr. Barnes at this time. Please return to the elevator.” The AI spoke, voice low, as if making sure not to wake Bucky.

Peter glared at the closest camera and didn't bother with a reply. He wasn’t a stranger to night terrors. Witnessing Ben’s death had taken a toll on his mind and had left him with horrible dreams for a long time afterwards. Then, more recently, his fight against the Vulture, the plane, and being trapped under all that concrete. Yeah, he still woke up shivering and gasping some nights.

Peter hesitated for a moment, suddenly feeling like he was intruding on something he shouldn’t be, but at the same time, it didn’t feel right to just leave. Making up his mind, Peter leaned down and moved to gently shake Bucky awake. The moment his hand met the man’s shoulder, his spider-senses exploded in warning. Peter barely had time to gasp, because in the next millisecond, Bucky’s eyes flew open and he was being grabbed roughly with a metal hand.

Bucky moved so fast that Peter’s eyes hadn’t even been able to track the movement. All he knew was that, one moment, he was leaning over Bucky to try and wake him, and the next, he was on his back, pinned to the floor, the wind fully knocked out of him. He coughed, and was sure he was blinking stupidly, his chest tightened in anxiety, when he looked up.

Bucky was hovering over him, keeping him pinned and looking down at him with an expression he hadn’t seen before. His eyes were hard, unblinking, and filled with cold fire; there didn’t seem to be an ounce of recognition on his face.

“B-Bucky?” Peter tried.

Bucky’s eyes narrowed and his grip tightened, making the teen wince.

“It’s—it’s me—it’s Peter. Can—can you let me up? It’s just me—just Peter,” he said, knowing how squeaky his voice sounded in his anxiety.

Peter watched anxiously as Bucky’s face changed. He finally blinked, and broke his gaze away from the teen as his eyes flickered around, then became unfocused, and a look of confusion fell over him.
“You’re at the tower. I think you were having a nightmare.”

Bucky blinked rapidly, before shooting his gaze back to Peter.

“Peter?”

Peter let out a relieved breath. “He—hey.” He tried to smile.

Bucky’s eyes widened, and he was suddenly moving again, pulling Peter up right off the ground. Peter flailed a moment, not having expected to be manhandled. Bucky put him down on the couch and knelt in front of him.

“Oh shit—oh, fuck, Peter—Peter, I’m so sorry—did I hurt you? Oh God—” Bucky was rambling in a panic, eyes a little too wide, breath coming quickly.

“I’m okay! I’m—I’m okay!” Peter tried to reassure him, but Bucky just kept muttering and swearing under his breath.

“Listen, please—please don’t feel bad—I don’t really know what happened, but—but you didn’t hurt me, I’m okay. It’s—it’s my fault, Friday tried to warn me, but I—uhh—I didn’t listen, and—”

“Shit, kid,” Bucky let out a big huff and bowed his head, both hands resting gently on Peter’s shoulders. “You’re sure you’re not hurt?” The man demanded.

Peter nodded. “Yeah, totally—totally cool! I’m Spider-Man, remember? I don’t hurt as easy as the average person.”

Bucky nodded slowly, but he still looked unsure, and Peter could read the heavy guilt on the man’s expression, before he was bowing his head again, and his hair was obscuring his view.

Peter sighed, then smiled and nudged Bucky’s knee with his foot to get his attention, with an accompanying, “Hey.”

Bucky looked up, questioningly.

“You should, uhh—you should totally show me how you did that take down.” Peter laughed. “It was kind of really cool!”

Bucky groaned. “Of course that’s what you’re taking away from this.”

“Uhm—yeah?”

Bucky sighed. Peter smiled.

“So you gonna show me?”

Bucky rolled his eyes. “Might as well. Lord knows you won’t stop asking until I do.”

“All right!” Peter hopped up on the sofa with a bounce.

“Don’t jump on the furniture—what are you, six?” Bucky said as he stood.

“Sixteen! Well—almost!” Peter said, but hopped down so that he stood on the floor.

Bucky looked him up and down once more in concern, then grabbed his one arm gently and began running over it with his flesh hand, squeezing gently.
“You’re sure I didn’t hurt you?” He asked. “I know I wasn’t—” He cut himself off when Peter winced slightly at a tender spot.

“I’m okay!” The teen quickly defended.

“Peter…”

“Okay, so, I might have a bruise—big whoop—it was an accident! Plus, it’ll be gone in like, maybe thirty minutes. Super healing, remember?”

Suddenly, Peter was being pulled into a warm hug.

“You shouldn’t have to heal because I hurt you. I’m so sorry.”

Peter frowned at how upset Bucky sounded, but wrapped his arms around the other and hugged him back.

“It’s okay.”

“It’s really not.”

Peter didn’t really know how to respond. He honestly wasn’t holding it against Bucky—obviously there was something bigger going on that he wasn’t privy to, but it was clear that he hadn’t meant to do him any real harm, once he’d come back to himself. He hugged him a little tighter.

“Show me how to do that cool take down and we’ll call it even.”

Bucky groaned and released Peter from his arms, shooting the kid an annoyed look.

“Knew you wouldn’t shut up about that.”

Peter just grinned.

That’s when Steve walked in, dressed in his workout clothes. “Everything okay up here?” He asked, looking between Bucky and Peter.

Bucky was about to respond, but Peter beat him to it, nodding.

“Yeah, Bucky’s gonna show me some of his cool ninja moves!” He said enthusiastically.

Bucky sent the kid a long, suffering look. “I’m not a ninja.”

“That’s exactly what a ninja would say,” Peter said, voice thick with false suspicion.

Bucky rolled his eyes, looking to Steve. The blonde shrugged, looking amused.

“You’re no help.” Bucky muttered.

“Well, I’m heading down to the gym to train, if you two would like to join.”

“Definitely!” Peter said, but then paused, remembering his original reason for coming to the tower. “Oh, right! I need to drop my suit off with Tony.”

“You’re still coming by tomorrow, right?” Steve asked suddenly.

“Of course!” Peter scoffed. “As if I’d miss it. Though Aunt May says we can’t stay too late ‘cause it’s a school night.” Peter rolled his eyes.
Steve nodded. “Good, I know Tony will want you to be there.”

Peter smiled at the warm feeling that burst in his chest at that. “Does he know?”

“I doubt it. I honestly think he’s completely forgotten,” Bucky answered.

Peter shook his head in disbelief as he walked back to the elevator.

“I wish I could say I’m surprised,” Peter said, before saying his goodbyes.

It wasn’t until Peter had left Steve and Bucky on their own, and was on his way to the workshop, that he remembered all the questions he had for Bucky. After weighing the pros and cons, Peter decided to let it go for the time being and stew in his curiosity a little longer. He could always ask later.

---

Tony finished attaching the loose wire in his gauntlet before answering the phone.

“This is Stark,” he said, a little distractedly, as he continued to fiddle with the power source.

“Hi, Tony. It’s May.”

“Oh! Hi, May, how are you?” He asked, more attentively, while putting down his screwdriver.

“Oh, I’m fine! How are you?”

“Good—busy—the usual,” he said.

“Did I catch you at a bad time?”

“Oh no! I didn't mean it like that,” he reassured her quickly.

“Oh, good, okay. Is everything set for Saturday, then?” She asked.

“Just about!” Tony said. “Bring him over around ten, and then I’ll take him out while the others finish setting everything up.”

“Okay, perfect! Thank you for doing this for him.”

“There’s no need to thank me, May—I wanted to do something special for him. He deserves to have nice things. Throwing my kid a birthday party is the least I can do.” Tony paused as a spark of anxiety blossomed in his chest at his slip up. “I, uhh, I mean—uhm—”

May snorted a laugh.

“That reminds me, I want a chance to talk in person about something.” She said, cutting off his embarrassed stuttering.

Tony cleared his throat, trying to rid himself of the awkward feeling.

“Something good...? Something bad...?”

“Good, I would hope, just something I feel would be better discussed face-to-face.”

“Okay, I’m sure we’ll be able to find a moment alone on Saturday.”

“Sounds good, though there’s another reason I called.”
“Oh?”

“I understand if you're going to be too busy, but I’m trying to find someone who can look after Peter for a week. I have this training seminar out of state I was invited to, but I don't want to leave Peter alone for that long.”

“Of course he can stay here!” Tony said without hesitation.

“Really? Oh, good! I can always ask Ned's mother as well, but I thought, since Peter's been spending so much time there already…” May let the sentence trail off.

“May, Peter always has a place here with me, whenever he needs it.”

Tony could hear the smile in the woman’s voice when she finally replied.

“Thank you, Tony.”

The sound of his workshop door opening grabbed his attention. “And speak of the little devil.”

“Is Peter there?”

“Yep, just walked in—hey, Pete!”

“Hey.” Peter smiled.

“Well, if he's going to spend his evening there, make sure he does his homework.” May said.

“Don’t worry, I will,” he turned to Peter. “Careful, the soldering iron is hot.”

Peter nodded and pulled up another chair next to Tony.

“Would you like to talk to him?” Tony said into the phone.

“Okay, might as well,” she conceded.

Tony passed the phone to Peter, who looked at him, confused, before putting it up to his ear.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Peter.”

“Oh! Hi, May!”

“Listen, remember to get your homework done at a decent hour tonight. I have book club tonight and might not be home until later on.”

“Okay, I will.”

“All right, have fun. Love you.”

“Okay, love you too!”

Tony took the phone back and hung up after saying his goodbyes. He raised an eyebrow at Peter, who was giving him a strange look.

“What?”

“I didn’t realize you and May, like, talked.”
Tony rolled his eyes. “Of course we talk, Peter. She’s your legal guardian. She loves you and wants to know you’re okay.”

“Well, I mean, I guess. I just never really thought about it before,” Peter said.

Tony huffed an amused laugh and shook his head. “Pass me the soldering iron, but be careful—”

“—it’s hot. Yeah, I know.”

“Don't be so sassy,” Tony said, though his smirk totally negated any serious tone.

“Sorry,” said Peter with a large grin, not sounding sorry in the least.

“So, just felt like stopping by?” Tony prompted.

“Uhh, well—actually, my suit needs some repairs.”

Tony finished soldering and put down the gauntlet. “Okay, let’s see it,” he said.

Peter quickly unzipped his backpack and dug to the bottom. Tony rolled his eyes as Peter pulled out the crumpled suit. Tony shook it out, and his eyebrows shot up. He immediately fixed Peter with a rather severe look.

“What happened?” He demanded.

“It looks worse than it was.”

“Uh huh, because it looks like you were filleted.”

“It was just a couple of muggers that pulled a knife—”

“You were stabbed?” Tony snapped, voice raising.

“No! Slashed! It wasn’t that bad!”

“Let me see!” Tony demanded, pointing at Peter.

“It’s already gone.”

Tony’s eyes narrowed. “And when did you say this happened?”

“Uhh... I—I didn’t?”

Tony sighed heavily, placing the suit on his workbench.

“Peter…”

“Okay, I know I should’ve told you right away, but I didn’t think that it was a big deal!”

Tony groaned. “Peter, you’ve been running around not only injured, but with a compromised suit. If your suit is damaged, then I need to know so that I can fix it. If it’s not fixed, it’s not safe, and if there’s something that can pierce through this material, then I need to know about it so I can improve it twice over.” Tony said, matter-of-factly.

“I’m sorry.” Peter said, quietly.

Tony nodded. “I want you to promise me that this doesn’t happen again, okay?”
Peter nodded.

“Say it.”

“I promise.”

Tony nodded. “Okay, good. You’re sure we don’t need to take care of any injuries?”

“Yes, I swear, I’m okay. No injuries to report!”

Tony studied him, but nodded after a moment. “Okay, then. Why don’t you get started on your homework while I work on this?”

“Can’t I help?” Peter begged.

“No—shoo! Consider it punishment for not telling me sooner.”

Peter groaned. “Fine.”

---

Tony drove Peter home after spending dinner together, and though he didn’t let Peter work on the suit with him, they had done a bit of work on Peter’s robot, which the teen seemed happy about. Tony kept the suit; not as a punishment, he honestly wanted to make some upgrades. It bothered him that a knife had been able to pierce the fabric he had re-enforced. He was going to make sure that did not happen again.

He sighed as he made it back up to the common floor. He needed coffee, and maybe a couple extra spoonfuls of ice-cream from the freezer.

“Oh, Tony!” Steve entered the kitchen with a smile. “Bucky and I were about to watch a movie, come join us?”

This was another thing; not only had Steve all but moved back into the tower, not only did Tony have to watch Steve and Bucky become increasingly disgusting (okay, maybe that’s the not-jealousy talking), but now there was also this thing—this thing where Steve and Bucky were constantly inviting Tony to spend time with them. It seemed whenever they planned to do something together, they made a point of trying to include Tony. Now, Tony liked Steve and he liked Bucky, he liked spending time with them—but, he couldn’t understand why they had the need to make him a third wheel.

When two people went on dates and did couple-y things, usually it was done between them, alone, together. Not Steve and Bucky, apparently. Nope, apparently, they needed Tony.

Tony kept telling himself that it was a good thing that his friends were trying to include him in their lives, but with his own feelings (yuck) involved, it made the whole thing frustrating. He didn’t want to be that guy, you know—he didn’t want to be someone that couldn’t enjoy the happiness people found in others. Just ‘cause he was as good at relationships as he was to showing up to meetings didn’t give him the right to be an asshole about them. He wanted Steve and Bucky to be happy, they deserved it. They deserved to be able to cuddle up on the couch, and laugh, and touch, and kiss, and just enjoy each other's company. But more and more, Tony felt something ugly ache in his chest when confronted by his friends’ budding relationship. He hated that he hated it.

“Think I’m going to pass, tonight. Thanks, though.”
Steve frowned in what looked like disappointment, but he nodded nonetheless.

“All right. Feel free to join us later if you change your mind.”

Tony retreated back to the elevator and pulled out his phone.

“Hey, Rhodey!” Tony cheered when his friend answered.

“Hey, Tones.”

“So listen—how fast can you get to New York? I know your mission’s done and I’m thinking you, me, and like, every bar on the sector—don’t leave me hanging, I’m going through Rhodey withdrawals.”

“You know those missions are supposed to be classified, right?”

Tony snorted a laugh.

“I’ll be there in forty minutes.”

Tony narrowed his eyes, a grin forming. “Rhodey, were you already on your way over?”

Tony could almost hear his best friend rolling his eyes.

“Yeah, can’t think of a reason why I’d be on my way over.” Rhodey sounded sarcastic.

“Aww, you do love me.”

“Someone has to,” Rhodey said dryly.

Tony barked out a laugh. “All right, all right, see you soon!”

“Yeah, see you in a bit.” Rhodey said, voice thick with amusement.

---

Tony cheered when he saw Rhodey and immediately went in for a hug. Rhodey smiled and clapped him on the back.

“What’s up, man?” Rhodey said. “Been awhile since you wanted to go bar-hopping.”

“Ah, I needed a change of scenery. Let’s just get going!” Tony replied enthusiastically.

Rhodey rolled his eyes. He knew that something had come up and was bothering his friend, but he also knew forcing Tony Stark to do anything he didn’t want to usually didn’t end well, so he didn’t push. Plus, Tony would spill all once he had a few drinks in him. It’s how this always went.

“All right man, let’s go!”

They were at bar number three when Tony finally slammed his glass down on the table, clumsily, and glared.

“It’s just so dumb!” He whined.

Rhodey raised a brow. “Oh?”

“Stupid Steve and his dumb face,” Tony grumbled.
“Wait, I thought you and Steve were friends now?” Rhodey said, frowning.

God, he hoped Rogers hadn’t gone and done something stupid. He really didn’t want to have to punch Captain America in the face.

“We are friends! He’s the best and I hate him!”

“Wow, yeah, man. Captain America is the worst.” Rhodey said, dryly, feeling lost now.

“Right?”

“What about Barnes? He’s still hiding out at your place, right?”

Tony groaned, loudly. “He’s worse than Steve!”

Rhodey rolled his eyes as Tony let his head fall onto the table.

“Okay, so, remind me again why they’re the worst?”

“They’re adorable and it’s disgusting and I’m a hundred-percent not jealous.”

“What?”

“How dare they be perfect together?”

“Wait, who?”

“Bucky and Steve! Ever—ever since they got together, they’ve had—had the balls to go around acting all cute and—God, hot as fuck—around my tower.”

“When the fuck did this happen?”

“I dunno, like—like a month or so ago?” Said Tony, raising his head off the table.

“Oh, my God. This is why you were so mopey before I left!”

“I wasn’t mopey!”

“Jeez, man, that's some tough luck.” Rhodey said, sympathetically.

“It’s not tough luck! I’m happy for them!”

“Which is why, naturally, you’re getting trashed in a bar, moaning about it.”

“I just—I—” Tony huffed, angrily. “It’s not their fault that I’m screwed up. The worst part is, I don’t even know who to be jealous of, ‘cause I like both of them!”

Rhodey shot him a surprised look. “I didn't know you had a thing for Barnes.”

Tony glanced at him, incredulously. “Uhm, hello, have you seen him? Of course I do!”

“So, let me get this straight. You have a big gay crush on Captain America, then he finds his long-lost friend, you get another big gay crush on him, and then before you can figure out your own shit, they get together.”

“Yes!”
“Shit, man.”

“I know! And it’s horrible, ‘cause now I’m acting like an asshole half the time around them, and—and it’s just shitty.”

“You just need to take some time, man. You can’t help how you’re feeling. You just need to distance yourself a bit, y’know? To help get over them.”

“That’s the worst part! They won’t let me!”

“What?”

“It’s so weird, Rhodey! It’s like they don’t wanna do anything alone together!”

“How do you mean?” Rhodey asked, genuinely curious.

Tony huffed. “Every time they make plans to do things together, they go out of their way to invite me. I don’t know if they, like, pity me, or are mocking me, or what, but—well, I don’t know!”

“Just say no!”

“I try! I mean, I did tonight.”

“You turned them down tonight?”

“Yeah, they wanted to watch movies together.”

“Okay, so just keep doing that.”

“But it’s so hard! They get these—these sad, kicked-puppy looks on their dumb faces!” Tony whined.

“Wait, just—just out of curiosity, here—how do they act around you?”

Tony rolled his eyes, dramatically. “They are so clingy. Usually I wouldn’t mind in the least, but—”

“Clingy how?”

Tony frowned at his drink, thinking it over.

“Well, before they got together, I thought maybe my feelings weren't one-sided.” He muttered, sounding dejected. “And now, it’s like before, but—more? Like, we still—I don't know—flirt, I guess, and it seems like every chance to touch, they’re right there.”

“Give me an example.”

“Fucking hell. Last week, they sandwiched me between the two of them for another movie night. I can’t even remember what fucking movie it was, ‘cause Steve spent the whole friggin’ time running his fingers through my hair. And Bucky, that asshole, had his hand on my leg the entire time—”

“Okay, okay, okay,” Rhodey said, cutting him off. “So, they keep asking you out, on what sound like dates, and then act like they’re on a date with you when you go.”

“Exactly!”
“Have you maybe considered that they're trying to get with you, you dumbass?”

Tony blinked. “BUT THEY’RE ALREADY TOGETHER!”

“They ask you out, together, in front of one another. When you say yes, they spend the whole time flirting with you, and acting like they’re trying to pick you up.”

“Yeah, but—”

“Tony. You’re my brother, and I love you, but holy hell, I don’t care what TIME Magazine says, you’re a fucking idiot.”

“Well, if—and that’s a big if—then why?” Tony said in frustration.

“Hell if I know, man. I’m not batting for y’all’s team.” Rhodey shrugged.

Tony groaned again. “Doesn’t matter anyway, ’cause you’re wrong.”

“Bet you I’m right.”

Tony rolled his eyes.

“And I’m going to prove it,” Rhodey said, taking out his phone.

Tony looked at him sharply. “What the hell are you doing?” He asked, watching as Rhodey pushed a few buttons.

“Calling Steve,” he answered, putting the phone to his ear.

Tony’s eyes widened and he dove at Rhodey, trying to grapple the phone away. “ARE YOU INSANE?”

“No—I’m helping!” Rhodey grunted, while pushing Tony away.

Rhodey forcefully pushed Tony back as the call was answered.

“Hi, listen, whoever this is—Steve can’t come to the phone right now.” Bucky answered, his voice had a raspy lilt to it.

“Why the hell not?” He demanded.

“He’s taken a patriotic knee and currently has my dick in his mou—OW!”

Rhodey pulled the phone away from his ear, looking somewhat horrified. That—that was not a mental image he ever wanted to have. Through the speaker, he could hear what sounded like a scuffle. He hung up.

Tony was looking at him in a mix of confusion and nerves.

“Sorry, Tones—I tried, but there are some things that I am simply unequipped to handle.”

Tony froze, looking at Rhodey in horror.

“What happened? Oh God, what did he say?”

Rhodey was saved having to tell Tony anything by his phone going off on the table. Rhodey shot it an untrusting look, but sighed and picked it up, before Tony could break out of his shock and steal
“This is Rhodes.”

“Oh my God, Colonel Rhodes! I am so sorry! Is everything okay? It’s 2 A.M. and you never call me—oh God, is Tony okay?! Has something happened?” Steve’s voice filtered through, sounding a bit panicked.

“Calm down, Tony is fine,” he shot his best friend a look, “all things considered. I just have a couple questions I need you to answer right fucking quick.”

The terrified look was back on Tony’s face.

“Oh!” Steve sounded a mix of relieved and confused. “Okay, how can I help?”

“Why the fuck are you and your scary boyfriend hitting on my best friend?”

“Rhodey!” Tony whispered sharply, face paling.

“Shh! I’m fixing this!” Rhodey snapped at Tony, before focusing completely on Steve's response, which had better be damn good.

“Uhh…” the super-soldier began, smartly.

“Better have a better answer than that.” Rhodey ignored Tony’s pitiful groan from across the table.

“No, sorry, of course! I just wasn't expecting—never mind. Bucky and I share some pretty intense feelings for Tony, and, if he’s willing—though I realize it’s a little unconventional—we’d like to have a more meaningful relationship with him.”

“And you didn’t just come out and tell him that because…?” Rhodey hedged. Steve laughed, a little nervous and a little awkward.

“Uhm,” he stuttered, clearly embarrassed. “We were trying to be cute…? We wanted to, uhh, court him, I guess.”

Rhodey nodded, though he knew Steve couldn’t see it.

“So y’all ain’t just picking on him or trying have some weird gay orgy, then?”

“Oooh my Gooood,” Tony groaned into the table.

“Uhh, no. Nope, definitely not.” Steve confirmed.

“Okay, cool. In that case, you can come pick his dumb ass up. I’ll text you the address.”

“Oh—is Tony okay?”

“Oh yeah, he's fine, he just can't drive right now.”

“Okay, we’ll be there as soon as we can.”

“All right. Thanks.” With that, Rhodey hung up, and sent Tony a smug look.

Of course, Tony had long since buried his head in his arms and couldn’t see it. Rhodey poked him.

“You've ruined my life,” Tony moaned.
“No, actually, you dramatic shithead, I just gave you the best birthday gift ever!”

Tony looked up. “What?”

“I was totally right. They are so into you, and they’re on their way right now to pick you up.”

Tony was gaping at him.

“I know, I’m the best.”

“I can’t believe you just fucking did that.”

“No need to thank me.”

“Wait...” said Tony. “Birthday?”

Rhodey fixed him with a look.

“Yeah. Birthday. Yours, as of—” he checked the time on his phone, “two hours ago!”

Tony blinked.

“Holy shit, you actually forgot—again! I knew you were wrapped up in planning Peter’s birthday, but hell, man!”

“Well, shit.”

Rhodey started laughing. “What am I gonna do with you, man?”

“Sell me out to hot super-soldiers, apparently.”

Rhodey scoffed. “You're welcome.”

---

Steve made it to the bar in what must have been record time. He circled the block, before finding a parking space that wasn't too far from their pickup location.

“Okay, so remember, just keep your head down, don’t engage with anyone, and—”

“And I got it!” Bucky said next to him.

Steve had tried to convince him to wait at the tower, but the man absolutely refused, too excited at the prospect that Tony was interested in them.

“I’m being serious, Buck, if you're recognized—”

“Steve, I have my arm covered, and I'm wearing this dumb hat you gave me, plus, we are going into a room full of drunks, not FBI. It'll be fine.”

Steve nodded stiffly.

“C’mon, let's go get our boy!” Bucky said, opening the car door and smiling.

Steve shook his head, but couldn’t wipe away the smile that lit up his own face. So his boyfriend’s enthusiasm was a bit infectious, but who could blame them?
The bar was loud, dark, and smelly. Steve sighed, taking it in with a grimace. This had never been Steve’s idea of a good time, he never quite saw the fun others saw in it. Others like—

“Bucky!” Steve grabbed his shoulder before he could get lost in the crowd.

“What? I’m just taking a look around.”

“We’re here to pick up Tony. Stay close.”

Bucky rolled his eyes. “Exactly. We’re not on an Avengers’ mission, we’re picking up our boyfriend. Relax, Steve.”

Steve shot him an unimpressed look, but was distracted from replying when he caught sight of Rhodes.

“Look, I think that's the Colonel over there,” he said, pointing.

“Let’s go then!” Bucky said, already moving.

Steve was pulled along as Bucky shoved his way passed the bar patrons, with nothing in mind but making it to where Steve had pointed out Rhodes. Steve tried to mutter apologies to those they disrupted, but Bucky pulled him along at a constant rate, unconcerned with Steve’s attempts at having manners.

“Well hey! You showed up!” Rhodey said, standing from the table.

Steve could tell, though not yet drunk, the man had been drinking.

“Of course we di—”

“Where’s Tony?” Bucky demanded.

Steve rolled his eyes and sighed. He set a heavy hand on Bucky’s shoulder.

“Buck…”

Bucky sighed impatiently, but quieted.

“Sorry.” Steve apologized.

“No problem.”

Steve was relieved to see that Rhodes seemed to find the exchange amusing.

“Tony’s hiding.” The man continued, smiling ruefully and nodding to the lump next to him.

Steve raised an eyebrow as Rhodes moved his coat, revealing Tony's head lying face-down on the table.

“Hey, wake up!” Rhodes kicked the man, making him start back to wakefulness.

“M’not sleeping!” Tony denied, unconvincingly.

Next to Steve, Bucky was cackling.

Tony looked at Bucky, frowning, before his eyes widened and his head snapped to look at Rhodes so fast that Steve was surprised he didn't snap his own neck.
“I—I thought it was a dream—a nightmare. You actually—you actually called them! Rhodey, why?” Tony groaned.

“Told you, I was helping.”

“Aww, don’t look so down, doll.” Bucky said, smile still wide.

Tony chanced a look at them, expression guarded.

Steve smiled in what he hoped was a reassuring manner.

“C’mon, Tony,” Steve offered his hand. “Let’s go home.”

Tony stared at him for a moment, but eventually sighed and moved to stand. Steve felt the nervous knot in his chest ease a bit.

Bucky inserted himself quickly, wrapping an arm around Tony when he staggered drunkenly. “I got you,” he said with a wink.

“All right, thanks for calling us, we’ll get him home safe. Do you need a ride, too?” Steve said.

“No, I’m good. I’m gonna cab it back to my hotel room soon.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I’m good, I’m good! But—uhh—quick word here, Captain.”

Steve nodded. “Hey Buck, can you get Tony to the car?” He said, passing over the keys.

Bucky nodded. “No problem.”

Steve turned back to Rhodes, who was now fixing him with a serious expression on his face.

“Listen,” he said, standing. “I’ve known Tony a long time, he’s my best friend, he deserves to be happy, and maybe you can help him with that, but—you hurt him, I hurt you. Got that?”

Steve nodded. “Got it.”

---

Steve got into the car, and Bucky immediately passed the keys up to him from where he sat in the backseat with Tony. Steve was relieved to see that Tony was acting a bit more confident, chatting animatedly with Bucky.

“Steve! Steevee!”

“What is it, Tony?”

“Bucky says you like me!”

Steve held back a laugh. “Yep, sure do.”

“Not complaining, but why?”

Steve stole a glance from the rearview mirror. “Lots of reasons. You’re smart, resourceful, funny, generous—”
“—have an amazing ass,” Bucky added.

Steve groaned and Tony cackled.

“I know, right?” He said, smirking proudly.

“We can talk more in depth about it at home, after you get some sleep.” Steve said.

When he didn’t hear a reply, he looked back through the mirror again and his breath caught in his throat. Tony had crawled over, all but situating himself in Bucky’s lap, and was kissing him hungrily.

“For fuck’s sake,” Steve whispered, swallowing thickly at the attractive scene.

Mental images of the three of them together played like a mantra, and it took every last fiber of Steve’s self-restraint to concentrate on the road.

“Hey!” He snapped at them, trying his best to sound commanding.

The two broke apart and Bucky, at least, had the decency to look a little sheepish.

“Whoops.” He said.

“Aww, c’mon, Steve.” Tony said. “Just having fun!”

“Yeah, plus, you know how long I’ve been wanting to do that.” Bucky added.

“Yes, but he’s drunk, and you know better.” Steve said firmly.

“But it’s my birthday!” Tony said.

Bucky mock gasped. “But Steve, it’s his birthday!”

“You. Don’t think for one second that I’ve forgotten that stunt you pulled with my phone earlier!” Steve snapped.

Bucky immediately broke his gaze and tried to look properly chastised; however, the effect was lost by the way he had to bite down on his bottom lip to stop from laughing.

“So enough with the sass, ‘cause you are on a one-way trip to finding yourself over my bloody knee.” Steve warned.

Tony’s breath hitched a bit, and Bucky turned to glance at him, a predatory smile taking over his features.

‘Like a damn shark scented blood in the water,’ Steve thought, exasperated.

“I think he likes that idea, Stevie.” Bucky said, then turned back to Tony. “Would you like that, doll? Would you like to see Steve pin me down? Would you like to watch? Or, maybe you want feel it—feel Steve hold you down over his lap and strike that pretty ass of yours red. Oh, I bet you’d moan so pretty for it, Anthony.”

Bucky’s smile widened as Tony released an involuntary whimper.

“Bucky!” Steve snapped again, his knuckles white against the steering wheel as he turned into the garage.
“But Steve—”

“No.”


Tony whined. Bucky nodded in agreement.

“Come on.” Steve said, climbing out of the car.

Bucky and Tony followed suit, Tony much more clumsily. Steve shot Bucky an ‘I told you so’ look that had the other sighing.

Steve walked over to Tony and offered him a hand, righting himself up.

“Oh, let’s get you to bed.” He said.

“Yes please, Captain.” Tony said, winking.

“To sleep.” Steve said, firmly.

Tony sighed, sounding disappointed, but as tempting as it was to want to whisk Tony upstairs into his and Bucky’s room, this wasn’t something Steve was going to budge on. They needed to talk first and foremost, and he definitely wasn’t going to take Tony into his bedroom when he couldn’t walk in a straight line.

Steve pressed the buttons for his floor, and then the penthouse, once the three of them were in the elevator.

“You,” he said, looking at Bucky, “are going to go wait for me in our room while I put him to bed.”

Bucky didn’t even bother trying to argue, Steve’s tone left no room for it.

Bucky did as he was told and got off on his floor, but not before giving Tony a final goodnight kiss, which Tony of course tried to extend, and pouted when Bucky pulled away gently.

“I’ll see you tomorrow. Happy Birthday, Anthony.” Bucky said with a wink, before the doors of the elevator closed on them.

When Steve looked down, Tony was smiling.

The expression made warm affection bloom in his chest. It was a look which Steve could definitely get used to seeing on the other’s face. Tony looked up at him and Steve noticed some of that hesitation was back.

“What’s wrong?” Steve asked, pitching his voice soft.

“I—” Tony stopped himself, and seemed to be thinking over his words. “This is something you want?”

Steve smiled. “Very much—you and Bucky? You mean the world to me. I want to give us a shot.”

“I’m difficult.” Tony said, as if that was unknown knowledge. “I’m argumentative, and rash, and—Lord—horrible at remembering anything important, and—”
“And kind, and brave, and selfless, and intelligent, and innovative, and so, so passionate—Tony, none of us are perfect, and for every bad thing you can think about yourself, I can think up even more good ones.”

“I’ll drive you crazy.”

“Oh, I have no doubt,” Steve smiled in amusement. “I’ll still want to keep you.”

Tony huffed, but his cheeks colored a bit at the statement.

The elevator doors opened onto Tony’s penthouse, and Tony sighed.

“Home sweet home.” He said.

“Come on,” Steve said, leading him into the kitchen, “I want you to drink some water before you pass out tonight.”

“Fine. You sure I can’t convince you to stay and call Bucky up here?”

Steve fixed him with a pointed look.

“Worth a shot.” Tony shrugged.

After Steve felt Tony had drunk enough, he had him take a couple of painkillers and helped him into bed.

“Get some rest.” He said, brushing his hand through Tony’s hair.

“Kiss me?” Tony asked.

Honestly, Steve couldn’t think of a good reason not to.

---

“HAPPY BIRTHDAY!”

Tony jolted, nearly dropping his tablet at the sudden burst of voices. He looked around the room, blinking in surprise. The communal living room had been changed; some of the couches had been taken away and were replaced with a long table, which had an assortment of food and snacks, balloons, and what looked to be a hand painted banner running above the table. Tony realized he probably looked like an idiot as he tried to take it all in, but, he really hadn’t been expecting it—any of it. Honestly, he thought that it had been forgotten about—lord knows he had forgotten until Rhodey had reminded him at the bar. And yet, here everyone was, waiting to surprise him, and—

He swallowed the lump that rose in his throat, and smiled so large that it hurt. Then Peter was there, smiling like a loon and wrapping his arms around him in a hug.

And the most startling thing to him was that everyone was there. Peter, May, Rhodey, Pepper, Happy, all of the Avengers—even Bruce was back, smiling at him.

Then Peter was pulling him over toward the rest of the group, showing him all the food and explaining who made what, talking a million miles a minute.

May and Pepper had formed a terrifying duo, and forced Tony to wear a ridiculous party hat that had most of the others cackling at him, until the two women turned on everyone else, brandishing more paper hats.
Then Clint came barging back into the room carrying a huge cake, which Tony took one look at and before he burst out laughing, a horrible rendition of his Iron Man helmet drawn in icing staring back at him. Everyone began to sing, and it was embarrassing, and terrible, and absolutely perfect.

After the cake was cut and the food mostly demolished, and the singing—thankfully—over, Peter stepped up, looking like he was walking the fine line between nervous and excited, holding a beautifully wrapped gift.

“This—is this is for you. We—all of us worked on it, added something, and—and, well—here!” He said, placing it in front of Tony.

Tony smiled at him and began to carefully remove the bow and paper, until Clint told him, “Hurry the hell up, Stark!”

Tony grinned when Bucky smacked the archer over the head, but he listened to him anyway and tore off the paper with a satisfying rip, revealing a book.

Tony frowned curiously at it. It was very large and heavy, and seemed to be bound in a rich, brown leather. He moved his hands over the cover and studied the spine, which also remained blank of information. He glanced up and caught Pepper’s eyes, and she mouthed at him to open it. He returned his gaze to the book, and gently lifted the cover, his breath catching in his throat.

A series of pictures were staring back at him. All the ones on the first page were older, and featured him alone or with his friends. He flipped to the next page and barked a laugh, seeing one where he’d convinced Happy to dress as Fred Flintstone for Halloween. He continued to flip through the pages, and more and more pictures met him. The book seemed to be arranged in a chronological order, and there wasn’t just pictures, but also news articles about Tony’s achievements, or Iron Man, and the Avengers. There was even printed out screenshots of emails or texts between his friends that had been memorable or funny. The further along he went, the better it got, as more and more faces appeared in the book. He smiled widely at a selfie Peter had taken of the two of them together in the workshop, and Christ, when did his eyes go damp?

He released a breathy laugh, and swallowed down the heavy emotion.

“This is—this is—incredible.” For once, Tony couldn't think of any words. There was nothing good enough to describe what exactly this was, what it meant.

He looked back up to the smiling faces surrounding him, and it hit him that, in that moment, it didn’t matter if this was his last good birthday—if every one before and after was complete shit. It Would. Not. Matter.

This day, this moment, right here, was worth a thousand of the bad ones, and it was his. He smiled, so genuinely happy in the knowledge that he had this one perfect moment, and that nothing would ever be able to take from him.

Chapter End Notes

Oh boy a lot happened here!

I really hope all of you found some enjoyment in the newest installment.
Please review, your comments/kudos/bookmarks give me so much life you have no idea <3

And as always have a lovely weekend! <3
Peter woke early Friday morning to the smell of pancakes wafting through the apartment. Despite the early hour, he couldn’t help but smile as he finally sat up from bed, and stretched the stiffness from his limbs. A knock sounded at his door.

“Peter, you awake?” May asked from the other side.

“Yeah, I’m up!” Peter said around a yawn. “Be out in a minute.”

He quickly washed and dressed, and met his aunt in the kitchen, where she was flipping a last couple of pancakes onto a plate.

“Wow, this looks great!”

“Ah, there you are! Happy birthday!” May said as she wrapped him in a hug. “Here, sit!” She all but forced him into one of the old chairs at the table, then she quickly piled another plate high with the fresh cakes, and placed it in front of Peter, along with butter and syrup.

“Thanks, May, this looks awesome!” Peter said, before quickly digging in.

May smiled, and tucked into a much smaller plate.

“So, feel any older?” She asked, in the same excited manner she asked in every year.

Peter shrugged. As a child, he could swear up and down that every year brought a significant feeling of aging. It was a bit different now—he didn't feel very different from yesterday, but when he reflected on everything that had happened this year—well, it was enough to make someone dizzy. A lot had happened. A lot had changed.

“Maybe a bit,” he answered, making May beam at him.

He finished off his plate in record time, and helped himself to seconds before he was running to grab his backpack and throw on his shoes.

“Okay, so remember, I’m going to pick you up from school today!” May reminded him at the door.

Peter nodded. “I’ll remember!”

“Okay, good. Here, one more!” She said, hugging him again. “I love you, have a good day at school. Happy birthday, Peter.”
“Thanks, May. I love you, too.”

---

School was about the same as always, with the exception of his friends’ birthday greetings. Ned had tried to crush him in a hug, and MJ smiled and reminded him that he was still a nerd. She also passed him a homemade card that was decorated with a bunch of drawings—Peter loved it. Not even Flash being a jerk could put a damper on his mood.

At lunch, Ned bought him a brownie at the cafeteria, and Peter’s phone exploded with a myriad of congratulatory text messages from the Avengers. Peter didn’t know how they got his number, but Ned nearly had an aneurysm when he showed him.

All in all, it was a good day.

As promised, May showed up to pick him up at the end of the school day. She also let him choose a restaurant to grab an early dinner from, and Peter made sure to choose one that would get him a free dessert. After they ate, May surprised him with a trip to the movies, where he stuffed himself with popcorn and soda. It hit Peter, as he and May left the theater, laughing over the absurdity of the movie, that it had been a long time since he had spent any time with his aunt. Between trying to balance everything else in his life, it seemed his relationship with May had suffered a bit, and Peter was left feeling a little guilty. He had even been planning on making his excuses when they got home so he could go out as Spider-Man for a bit, but—maybe one night off wouldn’t hurt?

Peter fished his phone from his pocket and turned it on as he and May got back into their rundown car. His phone buzzed, alerting him to a notification. Looking, he could see he had a missed call from Tony.

Peter’s frown must have caught May’s attention, because she asked, “What’s up?”

“Oh—uhh, just missed a call from Tony. I hope it wasn’t something important for the internship,” he mused.

May shot him a funny look. “Peter, it’s your birthday, he was probably just calling to wish you well!”

“May, he’s notoriously bad at remembering dates! He forgot his own birthday, remember?” Peter said.

“I don’t think he forgot about you, Peter, but if you’re so concerned, just call him back.” She had a teasing smile on her face.

Peter narrowed his eyes, studying her in suspicion. She had that classic ‘I know something you don’t’ face.

“Maybe I will.”

“Okay then.” May nodded, amicably.

Peter sighed, clicking on Tony’s number and the call button. It rang only twice before Tony’s voice was filtering through the device.

“Hey, kiddo!”

“Hi, I saw I had a missed call—sorry, May and I were at the movies!” Peter explained.
“No need to apologize, Peter, I was just calling to wish you a happy birthday!”

Peter felt warmth bloom in his chest, and he couldn’t stop the smile that pulled at his lips.

“Thanks!” He said.

Over the line, he heard muffled voices, followed by Tony replying, “Yeah, it’s Peter—no, I’m talking to him—”

Peter’s brows rose at the sound of a yelp, and Tony’s, “Hey, give that back!”

“Hey, Peter. Happy birthday, kid!”

Peter laughed. “Thanks, Bucky. Did you steal Tony’s phone?”

“No, I’m borrowing it.”

“Uh huh. So that’s totally not Tony bi—complaining in the background?”

“Nnnope. So, you having a good birthday so far?”

Peter snorted. “Yeah, it’s been fun!”

“Good to hear—oh, hang on one sec.” There was the sound of the phone being passed over again.

“Hey, Peter, happy birthday!” Steve said.

Peter’s smile grew. “Hey, thanks so much!”

Yeah, this was the best birthday ever.

“So, what did you get up—” Steve was cut off as Tony interrupted from the background.

“Just put him on speaker if you’re going to hog the damn phone,” he heard Tony whine, voice muffled.

Steve sighed. “Sorry, one moment, Peter.” And then, “Okay, what button do I push?”

“Oh my God. Just give it here!”

There was some more shuffling, and then Peter could hear all of them more clearly.

“Happy birthday!” They cheered together, making Peter blush.

“Thanks,” Peter said again, “as long as you don’t start singing—”

There was a heavy silence on the other line.

“Oh, please don’t—” Peter began, but was immediately cut off.

They sang.

Peter groaned, slumping in his seat, while May began cackling next to him.

---

Peter’s alarm blared out, startling him back into the waking world. He groaned, slapping at his
phone in hopes of stifling the horrible racket. Five minutes later, he was being startled back awake by a second alarm. He turned this one off too, but forced himself to sit up and stretch. Last night, after the horrendous Happy Birthday song, Tony had told Peter to make sure he was awake early for pick up. The man hadn’t said what for, but Saturday was his usual day for visiting the compound, so he figured it was for the same stuff as usual—though, just earlier, apparently. Much earlier. Peter let out another large yawn. Maybe he should’ve gone to sleep the first time May suggested it. Peter rolled out of bed and grabbed a set of clothes from his drawers, before he headed for the shower.

The toaster just spat out his pop-tarts when his phone buzzed; a simple text from Tony that just read, ‘Here.’

Peter grabbed his coat and bag and slipped on his shoes, calling out a goodbye to May as he darted out of the apartment. He burst out through the doors on the main floor, and almost tripped on his loose shoes (which he hadn’t put on properly), when a car next to his building honked at him. The car looked nice—new, too—but Peter didn’t recognize it from the collection he was used to seeing in Tony’s garage. The window rolled down and he was waved over, and sure enough, Tony himself was sitting in the driver’s seat.

“Hop in, we’re burning daylight!” Tony said, in lieu of a greeting.

Peter made to do as he was told, securing his seatbelt and finally began munching on his pop-tarts. Tony rolled his eyes at Peter’s choice of breakfast, but didn’t say anything against it, other than a quick, “Be careful of crumbs!” And then they were off.

Forty minutes into the trip, Tony was still remaining tightlipped about where they were going. Peter sighed as he eyed the man driving. He trusted Tony completely, but he was curious—they obviously weren’t heading to HQ. Peter sighed again, making Tony send him a slightly annoyed look.

“I swear to Christ, if you start the ‘are we there yet,’ bullshit, I will be extremely disappointed in you.” Tony said.

Peter smiled. “Are we—”

“Don’t!”

Peter chuckled in amusement. “Sorry, sorry!” He said, disingenuously.

Tony huffed and shook his head, but Peter could read the amusement behind the forcibly-grumpy look the man shot him. Peter contented himself to watching the buildings of the city pass while half-listening to the radio. It wasn’t long after that the traffic began to slow, and the city structures became smaller and smaller, until the area was very much suburban. Tony pulled the car over to the side of a mostly empty road and turned it off. Peter looked around their surroundings, but other than some houses and trees, there didn’t seem to be anything of note. He turned to Tony with a questioning expression.

“So, ever driven before?” Tony asked suddenly.

Peter blinked at him, his mind immediately rushing to the night of homecoming, when he had ‘borrowed’ Flash’s car.

“Once,” he replied, sounding a bit tense.

“Uh huh.” Tony cocked a brow. “Okay, out of the car.” Tony gestured at him to exit.
Peter was quick to do as he was told, and stood awkwardly next to the car until Tony got out, too, and waved him around.

“Okay, get in.” Tony gestured to the driver’s door.

“Really?” Peter said, looking at him with bated breath.

“No, I took us all the way out here for the scenery.” Tony scoffed. “Get in.”

Peter immediately hopped in while Tony circled to the passenger side. Tony couldn’t help but smile at Peter’s sudden enthusiasm. The teen was practically vibrating in his seat.

Peter smiled hugely at the man.

“Okay, let’s do this!”

“Haha, yeah—before this vehicle moves a bloody inch, we are going over everything. So, first off, I want to you name as many of the things in front of you as you can.”

Peter looked at the display and the menagerie of buttons and knobs. He pointed out the few he knew for certain, and guessed at a couple of others. He frowned at the rest. May’s car didn’t have anywhere near this many buttons. Why did a car need this many buttons?

Tony, for his part, didn’t seem overly surprised, and began listing off everything and explaining what each and every one did.

Next, he had Peter adjust the mirrors and seat, and then finally, finally allowed Peter to start driving.

From the moment the engine turned over, Tony seemed tense. He directed Peter on where to drive and what to do, mostly yelling, “Slow down!” Peter thought he was doing great and couldn’t stop grinning. He was taking a strange sort of satisfaction at Tony’s discomfort; the man had graduated from squeezing his knees to clutching onto the ‘holy shit handle’ over the door.

“Peter!” Tony yelped as they went around a corner. “Too fast—Jesus Christ!”

“That was not too fast!” Peter laughed.

“You don’t even have your damn license! You do not get to decide how fast is too fast!”

And, okay, maybe he had taken that turn a little sharply, and maybe he had swerved a bit coming out of said turn, but—

“TREE! PETER, TREE!” Tony shrieked, throwing an arm in front of Peter’s chest, as if it would help him if they crashed.

Peter swerved again to straighten out on the road, and sent Tony a nervous smile. Tony slowly removed his arm and released a shaky, tense breath.

“C-concentrate on the road,” Tony said in a whisper.

“Right—right, sorry.” Peter nodded, sparing a glance at the man next to him.

“What—what did I just say?”

“Sorry!”
Tony sighed and rubbed his face with his free hand, muttering something about an early grave.

After the third time Peter nearly ran off the road, Tony demanded that he stop.

“No, I can do this! I’m getting better already, I didn’t hit that trashcan on the last street!” Peter whined.

“Was that supposed to be comforting? That shouldn’t be brag-worthy. Literally your most important job here is to not hit anything.”

“Well, then I’m doing good!” Peter insisted.

Tony loudly groaned.

“Just—just let me drive us back to the tower!” The boy protested.

“There is no way in hell that’s happening in this—or any possibly conceivable—dimension.”

“I’ll go slow!”

“No.” Tony said, firmly.

“Well, then let me practice just a little bit more—please?” Peter begged.

Tony huffed and shook his head, adamantly refusing.

“Pleeeease? I’ll be super careful!”

Tony looked over at Peter and groaned. Yep, those were puppy eyes.

“Fine.” Tony held up his hand to cut off Peter’s cheer. “But, only for another couple of blocks, and then you’re done. Understood?”

“Yes sir!” Peter said, peeling away from the curb once more.

Peter didn’t know how it happened, but one bad swerve, two trashcans, and three mailboxes later, Tony was back behind the wheel with a white-knuckled grip.

“But we can do this again, right?” Peter asked.

To his credit, Tony didn’t start screaming.

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The closer they got to the tower, the more relaxed the atmosphere became. Peter did honestly feel bad about the ruined property and the without-a-doubt scratched car, but Tony kept waving off his apologies. He seemed much more relaxed now that he was back in control of the vehicle.

More than relaxed, even; Tony seemed to be downright giddy. Peter was only a bit suspicious.

“What’s going on?” He asked, once they were almost back to the tower.

“I don’t know what you mean.” Tony denied with false innocence.

Peter narrowed his eyes, but didn’t push it. If Tony’s good mood meant that he could get away with his poor driving lesson, then so be it. He really hoped this wasn’t a one-time thing—he couldn’t wait to tell Steve and Bucky all about it—well, maybe minus the ending. Peter had a feeling Bucky
would love to hear all about how hilariously tense Tony was during the entire experience.

“All right, come on, kid!” Tony said as he parked in the garage.

It was just after noon now, and Peter was more than happy to hop out. His stomach rumbled angrily at being ignored. Tony sniggered hearing it, and promised him food once they made it up to the penthouse. Peter didn’t need much more motivation than that to get moving.

He looked over at Tony, whose thumbs had been flying over his phone screen since the moment they parked.

“Business stuff?” Peter asked.

“Huh?” Tony said, distractedly.

“If something’s come up, I understand if we need to cut this short. I mean, this morning was pretty great already.”

Tony scoffed. “We’re not cutting the day short.” He said in return, flashing Peter a grin and ruffling his hair. Peter tried to dodge out of the way, but didn’t get very far in the elevator. Tony chuckled and went back to texting.

“Just making sure of a couple things,” he said, cryptically.

“Okay?” Peter said.

Tony nodded, finally pocketing his phone with a growing smile on his face. Peter still shot the man a questioning look as the elevator headed the last bit of the way up. Honestly, Tony was acting the same way Peter did in his excitement; jumpy and smiley with an air of hyperactivity. It was a little bit contagious, and Peter could feel himself growing a bit twitchy, but he was more than happy. Peter liked seeing Tony in a good mood, smiling genuinely rather than forcedly. Peter stepped out of the elevator with a large smile on his face.

“SURPRISE!”

Peter jumped, startled, and gaped. “What?” He said, looking around the room in awe.

Tony clapped him on the back with a laugh.

“Friday, you got his reaction, right?” Tony said, still laughing.

“Yes, Boss.”

“What’s going on?” Peter asked, as if the banners, and balloons, and streamers, and music, and confetti, and—well, everything else—wasn’t explanatory enough.

“This is a birthday party! Your birthday party!” Clint said in excitement.

Peter finally regained some sense and laughed, a smile stretching over his face, almost painfully. He turned accusingly to Tony. “You threw me a surprise party?”

Tony shrugged in a nonchalant manner, but was grinning widely. “It was a team effort.”

Peter beamed as the others came up to greet him properly.

“May?” He asked, surprised to see his aunt. “I thought you were working all day today?”
She snorted in amusement. “Nope, was too busy helping set up your party,” she said, and wrapped him in a big hug.

“Thanks, May.”

“It really was a joint effort,” she said as she released him.

“Yeah! I hung the banner!” Clint said, waving his hand in the air.

Peter looked up at the banner, which was stuck to the wall with a couple of arrows.

“Huh, never would’ve guessed.”

Sam rolled his eyes. “Yeah, well, I was on balloon detail.”

Bucky glared. “I put up more balloons than you did.”

Sam returned the harsh glare. “Like hell you did!”

The two men faced each other, staring the other down angrily.

“My God, you’re both pretty, now cut it out before I make you.” Natasha said as she walked between them to get to Peter. “Happy birthday, Peter.” She said with a smile.

“Thanks, Widow.”

“Hey, we’re on a first name basis now, remember?” She winked.

Peter flushed. “Right—uhh—right.”

Natasha smiled again, and hooked her arm through his to lead him further into the room, where there was a table laden with chips, popcorn, pretzels, cut up fruits and veggies, crackers and cheese, and all other manner of snacks.

“Here, help yourself to some of this, I’m sure you’re hungry.” She said, before looking up and sighing in exasperation. “Excuse me while I go deal with the elevated testosterone.”

Peter watched as she marched over to where Sam and Bucky had gone back to fighting. His attention was stolen when Steve joined him and began loading up a paper plate of goodies.

“Here,” he said, passing it to him. “You should eat.”

“Thanks.” Peter smiled.

“So, how did this morning go?” Steve asked, smiling widely.

“Uhh,” Peter began. “It was a lot of fun!”

“Good!”

“Was it your idea?” Peter suddenly asked.

Steve looked at him, then laughed. “Oh, no! That was all Tony. I encouraged him, though.”

“What was my idea?” Tony asked as he wandered up.

“Driving lessons.” Steve answered.
Tony groaned. “Oh, that was... *something*, all right.”

Peter flushed in embarrassment, as Steve’s brow furrowed in concern.

“I wasn’t too bad,” Peter tried to defend, though it didn’t sound convincing even to his own ears.

“Did something happen?” Steve asked.

“I only thought I was going to die about four times or so.” Tony said, dryly.

Peter rolled his eyes. “You’re exaggerating! I wasn’t *that* bad!”

“You had two jobs: stay on the road, and don’t hit anything.” Tony ticked off on his fingers, while shooting Peter a look.

“Okay, but *other than that*, I did okay!”

“Well, regardless, I’m sure you’ll do better next time!” Steve said confidently.

“Next time?” Peter asked excitedly, at the same time as Tony said, “*Oooh, no,*” shaking his head in denial.

Steve rolled his eyes and smiled. “Tony, Peter’s sixteen now, he’s got to learn how to drive so he can get his license.”

“Did you not hear me, Steve? I almost *died.*” Tony said.

Peter’s eyes darted between the two adults with rapt attention.

“I’m sure it wasn’t *that* bad.”

“Tell that to the mailboxes he murdered,” Tony muttered.

Steve hummed in concern at that statement, and glanced over at Peter, who smiled sheepishly.

“Oops?” Peter said.

“Nevertheless, he still has to learn.”

Tony put up his hands in a surrendering motion. “Then it’s your funeral, ‘cause I’m not getting back into the passenger's seat.”

Steve nodded, considering. “Okay, Peter, let me know when you have some free time, and I’ll put together a curriculum.”

“Uhh, okay.” Peter said, rather disbelievingly. He was going to get driver’s training from Captain America?

“Oh my God—this is a birthday party!” Clint was shouting suddenly. “Let’s do presents!”

Peter looked up in surprise. “Uhh—presents?”

“Of course, presents!” Tony said, suddenly much more enthusiastic. “All right everyone, in the lounge—chop chop—birthday boy is opening up his presents!”

Tony corralled Peter toward the sofas, and sat him down on one of the big recliners that Steve usually sat in. The others quickly gathered around him, holding cards or bags or wrapped boxes,
and Peter couldn’t help but feel a little overwhelmed.

“Mine first,” Tony said, and put a long rectangular box on Peter’s lap.

Peter eyed Tony and the gift, trying to guess its contents, but drawing blanks.

“Hurry and open it!” Clint said.

“Shut it!” Tony tossed back.

Peter grinned and tore off the red and gold paper. He gasped as the box of a brand-new laptop was uncovered.

“No way! Really?” Peter asked, looking back up at Tony.

He grinned. “Naw, that’s actually just the box. I stuffed it full of socks.”

Tony rolled his eyes at Peter’s unsure expression. “Yes, it’s a computer, and yes, it’s now yours.”

He’d actually gotten him a computer. Peter couldn’t believe it. A part of him thought that maybe the gift was too expensive, and that he shouldn’t accept it—but then he thought about his older model back home, that took ten minutes now just to boot up. It also wasn’t like Tony was hurting for cash...

Peter carefully put the box down, before getting up to hug Tony, who looked momentarily surprised, before he returned the gesture.

“Okay, my turn!” Clint said, shoving his gift bag at Peter as soon as he was back in his seat.

Peter laughed. “Thanks,” he said, feeling a little nervous. Peter’s spider-senses weren’t warning him about the bag, so he decided it must be safe enough and dug in. After getting rid of the tissue paper, Peter found the bag was full of a lot of smaller gifts, mostly consisting of joke products, like firecrackers, smoke bombs, stink bombs (which Tony immediately warned against using anywhere near his property), a shock pen, and lots of other such things. At the very bottom of the bag was a card with Spider-Man on the front that said ‘Happy 6th Birthday’ inside, but Clint had altered it by scribbling a 1 before the 6.

Peter thanked Clint with a smile, and the archer patted him on the shoulder while saying, “Make me proud.”

Next was Sam, who gave Peter a new backpack, which had May cackling. Inside the backpack, though, was a brand-new video game for his computer.

Wanda gave Peter a basket of homemade cookies that she made with Vision, and a new board-game that Peter declared they were going to play as soon as possible.

Bruce, sheepishly, handed over a package that ended up being two books Peter had expressed interest in earlier in the month, which Peter instantly began to nerd out about, until Natasha rolled her eyes and marched over with her gift.

She handed Peter a card and a small box. The card was cute, and had a quick ‘happy birthday’ scrawled inside, as well as a couple of gift cards. The box, however, had a small keychain, the centerpiece of which was round and made of a shiny black metal, except for the middle, which showcased the red Black Widow symbol. Natasha quickly snatched it from his hands and dangled it in front of him.
“This is for emergencies.” She said. “See here, on the side? There’s a small button. If you push and hold both this and the symbol in the center down at the same time, I’ll be issued an alert that you need help.”

Natasha went to pass him the keychain again, but lifted it away when Peter reached for it. “Life or death,” she insisted, then finally placed it in his palm.

Peter nodded, meeting her gaze to showcase his understanding. “Life or death. Got it,” he said.

Natasha finally shot him a small smirk. “You got it.”

Rhodey gave Peter tickets to go go-karting, which Tony immediately groaned about. Peter flushed in embarrassment, but neither of them explained to Rhodey why. Peter still thought it sounded like a fun idea though, and was excited to give it a try.

Happy was next, and he passed over a card that held more gift cards, including some for food, which Peter was never going to complain about, like, ever. Peter made sure to give the grumpy driver a huge grin in return. Happy patted him awkwardly on the arm, before taking his seat back down.

Bucky shuffled in front of Peter next and passed him a long, thin, and heavy package while shooting glances—that would appear nervous to Peter, if they weren’t coming from Bucky—at May and Tony.

“Here, thought you might enjoy these, after our last training session in the gym.”

Curiously, Peter ripped off the paper to reveal a plain metal case. Opening it revealed a set of six tactical throwing knives, painted in Spider-Man’s signature red and blue. Peter gaped at them before he reached into the case and gently picked one up, testing its balance and hold.

“These are so cool!” Peter said.

Bucky smirked. “Thought you might like ‘em.”

“But they’re still dangerous, so safety first,” Steve piped in, before Tony or May could protest the gift.

Bucky nodded. “Of course, no using these without supervision.”

Peter sighed, but nodded in agreement. He carefully put the knife he had taken out back into the case and relocked it, then set it down next to his chair, where the other gifts were piled. He was going to try and rope the man into a hug, but he’d already retreated to sit next to Natasha, so Peter let it go for now.

Lastly, Steve came forward with a perfectly wrapped box, topped with ribbons and a bow. Peter almost felt bad tearing off the paper, but when he got a glimpse of what it hid, all reservations were gone—as was the rest of the wrapping. He let his fingers run over the box, his mind still processing the gift.

“I’m not totally up-to-date on which cameras are considered good nowadays,” Steve began, “but the employee at the shop said this one was a good pick. But if it’s not right, I can always—”

“It’s perfect,” Peter said, reverently.

He had been looking at cameras online ever since he decided to pursue that photography class next
year, and had balked at the prices—which is how he knew that the Nikon in his lap had cost Steve more money than Peter could really justify anyone (besides Tony) spending on someone else. Peter still couldn’t wrap his head around it. He gaped at it a bit longer, before he excitedly began to open the packaging to get his hands on the camera itself. Peter had to remind himself, as he looked over the beautiful piece of tech, that it was going to have to charge before he could use it. His new laptop too, probably. Peter looked up at Steve, who was smiling now, and realized he hadn’t really thanked him yet.

Peter jumped up and hugged him. There was no way he wasn’t getting a hug from this.

“Thank you so much!”

“You’re welcome;” Steve said, laughing a bit, “I’m glad you like it.”

“I love it.”

Tony was watching with a huge grin on his face. He loved seeing Peter so happy; the kid really deserved it. He was incredibly proud of this kid, of everything he had accomplished in his short life so far, despite suffering his losses. He knew it might have been a little illogical, since Tony himself hadn’t been a part of Peter’s life for very long, but he couldn’t help it.

A hand on his arm stole his attention away from the scene in front of him. He looked over to see May, smiling at him and nodding her head away from the group. Tony then remembered their conversation a few days prior, and how she had mentioned wanting to talk.

Tony nodded, and led May down the hall to where he had an office set up, while the others were distracted with watching Peter. Quietly, Tony closed the door behind them, before turning and giving May his full attention.

The woman sighed and smiled. “Thank you—for all of this,” she started.

Tony shook his head. “You don’t have to thank me.”

“I do, though. Peter—it’s good to see him happy;” she continued, a little stilted, as she paced.

Tony nodded, but remained silent. Though her words were obviously genuine, it was also clear to him that she was stalling.

May wrung her hands together and took a deep breath. She forced her hands apart and seemed to steel herself. Tony found himself adjusting his own posture automatically; his own hands twitching out of nervous habit. He quickly, but smoothly, tucked them into his pockets to try and hide the nervous tick. He took his own calming breath, much more silently, and braced himself for whatever May was about to throw at him.

Finally, May turned to face him. She reached into the large purse she was carrying and pulled out a large, flat envelope.

Tony gracefully walked over to his desk, as May took a moment to just look at the object in her hands.

“I know Peter has been going through a lot. I also know that I’m not aware of some of it. He has his secrets, and that’s fine to an extent. He’s a teenager, and that’s something I know to expect, but I still worry about him, constantly. He’s lost a lot in his life, Tony. First his parents, and then Ben, and that’s a lot for anyone his age. I know he still struggles with it, especially at night, and I do what I can.” She shrugged, almost minutely, before continuing. “Things were bad for a long time
after Ben. I was so scared that I was going to lose him, too. Things got better slowly, as they do with time, but it wasn’t until you came into the picture that Peter really started to turn around. He’s happy again. Genuinely happy. I know how much you care about Peter too, and I’m so grateful he has you in his life now. He looks up to you the same way he looked up to Ben.”

May opened the envelope in her hands, and pulled out what looked to be a document of some sort. Tony frowned, since he couldn’t get a proper view of what it was from this angle.

“Now, I don’t plan on leaving Peter for anything, and definitely not anytime soon—but, if losing Ben has taught me anything, it’s that sometimes things happen beyond our control. Life is fragile, and precious, and can be gone in the blink of an eye.” She smoothed her hand over the face of the paper.

“I’ve been thinking a lot lately—about Peter, and if anything _were_ to happen to me, what would happen to him. I understand if you’d like some time to think about it—in fact, I’d be surprised if you didn’t, but—” she sighed, and shook her head, before moving to just place the papers in front of Tony. “If you were to accept, this document would give you guardianship over Peter if, for whatever reason, I was no longer fit to look after him.”

Tony looked at the papers in front of him, then looked up at May, brows furrowed, as he tried to make sense of just what the hell was happening.

“Like I said, I don’t expect you to just have an answer right away, and I understand if you decide against it. However, I’ve been going over this decision for a while now, and believe it to be the right one.”

Tony shook his head in disbelief. “You—you would trust me with him?”

May barked a laugh. “I already have been! Oh, c’mon, Tony.” She said, at his startled look. “He spends almost all of his free time here now. Peter _loves_ you. Whenever anything happens, his first response is always ‘I need to tell Tony!’”

Tony couldn’t help the small smile that touched his lips, hearing that.

“More than that, I think you love him, too.” She said, though there wasn’t even a hint of doubt in her voice.

Tony felt himself nodding before his brain had even really caught up.

“This—this is a lot,” he said.

May nodded. “All I’m asking is that you think about it.”

Tony returned her nod. “Yeah. Yeah, I will.”

May smiled. “Good.” She released a breath, and it was like she was releasing some of the built-up tension in her body, as well. “We should get back to the party. I’m sure the others have noticed we’re gone.”

“Sure, you go on ahead. I’ll catch up in a minute.” Tony said.

May nodded and retreated from his office.

All at once, Tony let out a huge breath of his own. He stared at the document sitting innocently in front of him. He frowned deeply at the paper, and suddenly wondered how his desk wasn’t
collapsing under the metaphorical weight of the pages. He knew he should read through it, get to know the document, so that he could gather a full understanding of what May was requesting of him, but—what else was there to understand? She had essentially asked Tony to step up as a parental figure for Peter.

He found himself rubbing at the scar on his chest, and sighed again.

She was right, he did love Peter, immensely. He wanted to give that kid every happiness, but—he was Tony Stark. He was bound to screw it up, the way he screwed up every part of his life. He may be acting as a role model of sorts for Peter now, but this was more than that, this was more permanent—and who, in their right mind, would want to give Tony that kind of responsibility? Even if he did agree, what judge in their right mind would sign off on it? Tony Stark with a kid. It was a disaster waiting to happen.

He suddenly stood. He needed to move, to breathe. The office seemed so much smaller than it had ten minutes ago. He paced over to one of the cabinets, and pulled out a decanter of scotch and a tumbler, and poured himself a glass with shaking hands.

By the time he finished the glass, he still hadn’t built up the courage to read through the papers, but at least the familiar taste brought him some form of comfort.

Chapter End Notes

Peter’s 16!! Wooo!

As always feedback on my work is greatly encouraged!

I hope you all are well and I wish you a great rest of the week! :) <3
Chapter Sixteen

Okay first off a big apology for missing last weeks update.

School and life have just been ridiculously shitty/busy and I had to scramble with a couple of projects and just didn't have the time to put into writing.

The next 3 weeks aren't looking much better so I apologize further if updates are a little inconsistent for awhile!

Anyway better late than never, chapter 16 is finally here!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bucky had been watching the hallway—probably not as discretely as he’d like to think—ever since Tony and May disappeared down it. He knew the woman had something she wanted to talk about, but aside from that, he had no real information. He sighed quietly, only partially aware of the frown pulling at his face, as he waited for them to come back. He ignored Natasha’s subtle tries for his attention until the woman elbowed him in the side, toeing the line of too rough. Bucky turned to send her a withering glare, but it seemed to be completely ineffective against the woman, who just shot him a look that quietly conveyed, ‘Really?’ Bucky huffed and turned to look back down the hall; he was slowly growing antsier as time passed.

“You’re being ridiculous,” Natasha finally whispered to him.

Bucky moved his gaze incrementally to glance at her, before continuing where he left off with his glaring. Logically, he knew she was right. Of course she was. But he couldn’t help the twisting, sinking feeling in his gut at the traitorous thought of Tony together with May. Now, it wasn’t a question of Bucky not trusting Tony, no—he didn’t trust her not to make a move. Who could blame her? Tony was incredible—unbelievably brilliant, innovative, funny, charming and devilishly handsome. Worst of all, though, was the even more prominent voice telling him that maybe Tony would be better off with someone like May. Someone who had their life together. Someone who didn’t have to worry about waking up not knowing where, or even who, they were. Someone he could actually go out on dates with—because as far as Bucky knew, May wasn’t a wanted fugitive.

Further to his right, Steve, who was now sitting on the floor across from Peter reading the manual for the camera, caught his attention and shot him a questioning look.

Bucky sighed, and tried to trample on the thoughts eating away at his already rather damaged mind. This relationship, however new, wasn’t just about him and Tony, it was Steve too—and it wasn’t fair to Steve for Bucky to be stewing in these concerns and thoughts. Especially when it was obvious how much Tony cared for him. Sure, Steve was—well, a goddamn punk is what he was—but he was also Tony’s Mr. Perfect, and that had to count for something.

Bucky was distracted from further spiraling as May reentered the room, looking pleased with herself. Natasha elbowed him again, and Steve seemed to pick up on what was going through his head, too, because he rolled his eyes and sent Bucky a look that wasn’t unlike Natasha’s, albeit a
little more fond. Steve always accused him of having a jealous streak.

He blinked, not knowing how he remembered that. Swallowing thickly, he made a mental note to write down the thought down in his book later.

That was happening more and more lately—disjointed thoughts and facts and feelings that would come to him with such solid tangibility, it sometimes took a moment for him to realize that he didn’t quite know how they fit into his old life—only that they did. His journal helped him make sense of his often-confusing thoughts. Most importantly, it helped him hold onto his memories, which had a tendency to slip away from him. Bucky frowned, worried that this new tidbit might too slip away, and began to search his pockets. Luckily, he had remembered to keep a piece of scrap paper on him, but no—oh, Natasha was holding out a pen with a knowing look. Bucky snatched it, muttering a quick, “Thanks.”

He flattened the paper against his thigh and quickly scrawled, **might be a jealous asshole, ask Steve**, then quickly shoved the paper back into his pocket and returned the pen to Natasha. Bucky tried to relax into the couch, and focus on not being a complete downer at Peter’s birthday party. Luckily, the kid was pretty absorbed in what Steve was reading from the camera’s manual (as if he couldn’t figure it out on his own) and was easily distracted from the rest of the happenings in the room.

Steve caught his eye again a few minutes later, looking concerned. It was then Bucky realized, though May had returned, Tony was still noticeably absent. Bucky shared a look with Steve, before nodding and getting up. He had to track down their wayward Stark.

Bucky knocked on Tony’s office door and waited, to no response. He knocked again, but still nothing. He sighed, wondering briefly if Tony had escaped down to his workshop, before deciding to just try the door. His brows rose in surprise when it opened; usually Tony’s office was kept locked.

“Tony?” He asked as he peeked his head into the room.

He instantly spotted the man, standing in front of a large picturesque window, behind a rather cluttered desk. Tony didn’t acknowledge him in any way, and Bucky wondered if he’d even been heard. He closed the door behind him quietly, and made his way over to him, gently placing a hand on his arm.

Tony startled, turning to face him with a wide-eyed look.

“Sorry, doll, didn’t mean to spook you,” Bucky said, offering a smile.

Tony seemed to relax a bit, once he registered that there wasn’t a threat, though Bucky saw that not all the tension left him. He frowned, taking in Tony’s stiff appearance, as well as the open decanter on the shelf and the tumbler in his hand.

“What’s eatin’ you?” He asked.

Tony shook his head. “It’s nothing, don’t worry about it.”

Bucky cocked a brow. “And yet, you’ve shut yourself away in your office with a bottle of scotch. Sorry if I don’t act convinced while you try and get sauced.”

Tony shot him an irritated look. “I just needed a minute, I’m not getting drunk. Also, no one says ‘sauced’ anymore.”
Bucky shrugged. Tony turned back to the window, but his head was downturned as he studied his now empty glass. Bucky saw Tony glance over to the scotch and frowned. Sighing, he caught Tony’s attention again, and gently pried the glass from his hand, placing it behind them on the desk.

“Bucky…”

“Tell me what’s wrong,” Bucky said.

He wasn’t good at this. Sure, he’d been around Tony awhile now—through some pretty rough patches, too—but this seemed more like a Steve scenario. One where Tony needed to actually talk out his problems, whatever they might be, and that was what Steve was good at—the whole talking thing. This wasn’t his strong suit, but the fact remained that Steve wasn’t here, and he was, and he kind of actually cared about the man in front of him. So even if he wasn’t the best at it, he wanted to at least try.

But you see, the thing about Tony Stark, was that he rarely made things easy for anyone.

“Nothing’s wrong, Bucky. Go back to the party.”

Bucky sighed. “If nothing’s wrong, then come back out with me. Steve—Steve’s distracting the kid by reading the manual for that fancy camera that I still can’t believe he bought him, but as riveting as that is, he’s noticed you’re missing.”

Tony nodded. “Yeah. Yeah, okay.” He took a deep breath in and released it slowly.

Bucky offered him his hand, and Tony took it.

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They were almost to the lounge when a clap of thunder sounded with great reverberation. Tony and Bucky felt the floor of the tower vibrate soon after, as if in impact. They shared a startled look.

“Friday?” Tony asked in alarm.

“There does not appear to be any severe damage to the tower, and structural integrity is still at one-hundred-percent, Boss. It does appear, however, that we have a new visitor.” Friday answered promptly.

The confusion and worry melted off Tony’s face and was replaced by a grin. “And what a time to show up!” He said.

Bucky frowned, still confused and on alert. “Who?” He asked.

“My favorite—come see! Peter’s going to be thrilled!” Tony said, already continuing toward the lounge.

Bucky jogged to catch up, fingers twitching toward the closest weapon he had concealed.

“My friends!” He heard a voice call, loudly.

Bucky watched as a large man came in from the balcony. He wore strange armor and a long red cape, and spoke in a voice that was as loud and boisterous as his entrance had been. Bucky recognized him immediately from the files that Tony had let him read.

“Thor!” Tony greeted, loudly and cheerfully.
“Friend Stark!” Thor smiled widely, and immediately wrapped the smaller man up in a hug that lifted his feet from the floor.

“Hey, big guy! Careful of my puny mortal ribs!” Tony wheezed out.

Thor immediately placed Tony back on the ground with an apology, though the bright grin didn’t leave his features.

The Asgardian continued to greet the rest of the Avengers with an enthusiasm that Bucky found ridiculously impressive. The man brought an energy to the room that would have exhausted him after a split-second—and yet, this Thor made it look effortless. Then again, he wasn’t exactly human, was he?

Thor beamed around the room, then paused as he seemed to take in the decorations, and turned to Tony with a confused look.

“Are we celebrating?” He asked in barely-restrained excitement.

“It’s junior’s birthday.” He nodded to Peter, who had been looking on with a star-struck expression.

Thor blinked at Peter, then turned to Tony, gaping. “Man of Iron! I did not realize you had a son!”

Tony opened his mouth to reply, but was cut off as Thor strode past him to Peter.

“It is of the greatest honor that we may meet this day!” Thor shook one of Peter’s hands in two of his.

“You—you too! I’m—uhh—I’m Peter,” Peter said.

“Peter, a fine name! I am Thor, son of Odin, and I offer my congratulations on this joyous day!”

“Thanks!” Peter said, grinning almost as large as Thor.

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Another hour later, after Thor had regaled them with more tales of his home world Asgard, Tony clapped his hands together and declared that it was time for party games.

“Oh God, Tony, did you do the thing?” Rhodey asked, sounding exasperated, but there was a smile on his face.

Tony nodded. “I definitely did the thing.”

“What thing?” Peter asked.

“Yeah, what thing, Stark?” Clint mimicked.

“All right, everyone follow me!” Tony said.

Peter bounded after Tony, radiating excitement. Though, he managed to cut asking “Where are we going?” to only twice while they were cramped in the elevator.

They exited the elevator into a medium sized room. On one side, there sat a couple of couches facing two large TVs, but the other side was vastly different—hanging on the wall was what looked like armored chest pieces, and under those, on a rack, were guns. Peter immediately recognized the gear for what it was.
“Laser tag?” Peter asked, pointing to the armor, feeling his excitement growing.

Tony grinned hugely. “Laser tag,” he confirmed with a nod, then, “Listen up. Through those doors —” he pointed to the large, blacked-out double doors parallel to them, “—is the best laser tag court money can buy. Those who wanna play are going to separate into teams of two. For those who’d rather watch, the TVs will provide a live feed of the current game in progress.”

Peter was already at the display, picking and choosing what he wanted, and before he knew it, so were many of the others. The teams were split with Peter, Natasha, Sam, Wanda, and Bucky on one, and Steve, Tony, Clint, Rhodey, and Thor on the other.

Bruce, Happy, Vision, and May all opted out of the experience—Happy claiming he had to make an early exit—however May, Bruce, and Vision all sat down to watch.

The result was… chaotic. Both teams were made of superpowered individuals, each with competitive streaks a mile long.

Peter was having the time of his life. The room was mostly dark, and filled with obstacles—the edges of which were lit up by neon lights or black light, which cast what could be seen in strange light. Peter, though, had successfully climbed up onto a partially-hidden platform that was in some sort of fake tree, and was camped out.

There had been an adrenaline-pumping moment where the trapdoor leading onto it had busted open, and Bucky popped up, gun drawn, and Peter almost shot him out of instinct, before remembering they were on the same team. Natasha had appeared right after, and Bucky shook his head.

“No-go, already occupied,” he’d said to her, before turning to address Peter. “Good spot, kid.”

Then the two assassins had disappeared as quickly as they'd shown up, leaving Peter thankful they were on his team.

He kept his eye on a projection on the ceiling that had all the players’ stats shining above. Peter had to admit to being pretty proud to only being hit once during the match so far. Even more memorable was when Thor had crashed around down below, and Peter had gotten a shot in, right against his chest piece.

The god had cried out in a rage, “Who dares shoot the son of Odin?” Before running off in the completely wrong direction.

The scene had left Peter in a fit of mostly-quiet laughter, until a creak from behind him had him spinning around to face none other than Clint, who had his gun pointed directly at Peter’s chest piece.

“How about a surprise?” The man sang, before he began firing.

Peter screeched in a way he wasn’t totally proud of, but had Clint cackling like a madman. It probably said a lot about Peter’s psyche that his first thought was to use his web-shooters on the potential threat, but of course, that only wasted precious time, since he wasn't wearing them (later, he would be thankful for it, when he remembered May was watching the game from outside the room).

Like a fiery angel of retribution, Wanda was suddenly there as well, saving Peter’s last hit point and taking Clint out of the game with two well-aimed shots.
“Are you kidding me?” Clint exclaimed, then huffed, throwing up his hands in defeat.

“You're out, bird,” Wanda said smugly.

Clint huffed again, but conceded and left the tree to return to the main room, where he could watch the rest of the fight. According to the scoreboard, Thor and Sam were also out.

Wanda helped Peter up, and gestured for him to follow.

They moved together smoothly, covering each other's blind spots, but Peter’s heart nearly beat out of his chest when they turned a corner and were face-to-face with Steve and Tony.

Both men immediately jumped into action, shooting at Wanda and Peter. Peter had just enough time to think, ‘Shit—’ before his last hit point disappeared, and his name was erased from the board.

Tony was just about to take Wanda out, when Bucky seemed to materialize in front of her, and with two quick shots, Tony was out of the game, too. Steve got quick revenge by taking out Wanda, and dodged just in time to get clear of Bucky’s next shot.

Steve’s name was suddenly crossed off the board as well, and he turned in surprise to see Natasha, who had flanked him from behind.

Her head snapped around when she heard Bucky curse, and saw that Rhodey had joined the scene as well, and had taken the other man out of the game.

Natasha had already disappeared out of the fray.

Peter, Tony, Wanda, Steve, and Bucky all made their way out of the room. Peter was surprised to see that they had been playing for the better part of an hour; it really hadn’t felt that long at all.

May was waiting for him with a smile and a hug.

“Did awesome!” She cheered.

Peter smiled, a little bashfully. “Thanks,” he laughed.

May's phone began ringing, interrupting any reply she had. Sighing, she excused herself to answer.

Peter kept an eye on her, and an ear trained on the conversation.

“No one call Mary, she’s—” May sighed again. “No, I understand. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

Peter was quick to put away his gear, while pretending he hadn’t been eavesdropping.

“Hey, Peter,” May said as she approached him again, “that was work. I’m really sorry, honey, but I have to go. There’s been some sort of emergency and they need all hands on deck.”

“It’s okay, May, I understand,” Peter said, fighting a feeling of slight disappointment.

May wrapped him in another big hug. “I don’t know what time I’ll be coming home tonight, but if you want to spend the night here, just send me a message to let me know.”

Peter nodded, and the two said goodbye.

Then a cheer from the sofas had Peter running over.
“What happened?”

“We won!” Wanda said happily, pointing to the screen where Natasha was lowering her laser gun after she had gotten Rhodey.

Peter cheered happily himself. “Ha! We beat Iron Man and Captain America!”

“Actually, Bucky and Natasha beat Iron Man and Captain America—speaking of, that’s the last time we let you and Natasha be on the same team,” Tony said to Bucky, who smirked at the statement.

“Seriously, that was a deadly combination.”

Steve shook his head and glanced at Tony, who was sitting next to him. “I kind of saw it coming, to be honest.”

Tony huffed, but nodded in a conceding manner.

Peter and the rest of his team clapped when Natasha strode out of the room. The woman bowed her head in a close approximation of a bow.

Rhodey wasn’t far behind and offered her his hand. “Good game,” he said with a smile.

Natasha returned the gesture easily. “Good game. You did well, Colonel.”

“So did you, obviously. I don’t know how a human can move as fast as you do,” he joked.

Rhodey checked the time on his wristwatch and sighed. ”Looks like I gotta head out. Happy birthday, Peter!” He said, clapping Peter on the shoulder.

“Thanks! See you later!” Peter said.

Tony was vaulting up off the couch in an instant. “No! You just got here!”

Rhodey shot him a dry look. “I’ve been here for days. I have a mission, and don't you dare say I didn't tell you, because I did—multiple times, even.”

“But—but honey-bear!”

“Nope.”

Tony gasped dramatically. “This is a violation of friendship and trust! A complete—”

“Leave me a voicemail I can delete later,” Rhodey said, as he headed into the elevator.

“I will!”

“Goodbye, Tony.”

“Bring me back something nice!”

The doors closed, and Peter watched in amusement as Tony flung himself back onto his old spot on the couch.

“He’ll come back,” Bucky said in mock-consolation, then he stood and stretched. “I’m going to go start on the burgers,” he stated.
“I’ll help,” Peter offered, and began following him.

Bucky shrugged, and they (along with a few of the others) went back into the elevator.

“Jerk could probably sense I wanted to go out tonight,” Tony muttered, though the heat in his words was obviously a farce.

He turned then, changing his features to something more pleasant. “Brucie-bear, science-bro, bestest—”

“I’m not going out with you tonight, Tony,” Bruce said.

“I need a friend date!”

“Tony, you know me. I don’t have the—the temperament to be around large crowds of drunks.”

“Then we’ll stay in. I, uhh—need your advice on something.”

Bruce sighed heavily. Tony grinned.

“I’ll call you up when Peter’s in bed,” he winked.

Bruce shook his head and headed over to the elevator. “I need to check on something in the lab,” he said.

“Don’t disappear for long! Bucky’s burgers are the absolute best thing.”

Bruce nodded, before the elevator doors closed to take him up to his lab.

“I suppose we should join the others,” Vision said.

Wanda nodded in agreement. “Maybe we can play some games while dinner is cooking,” she suggested.

“I’m gonna go see if Barnes really knows how to cook a burger,” Sam said.

“Spoiler alert: he does!” Tony said.

“We’ll see.”

Tony made to follow the others, but was stopped by Steve.

“Hey, do you have a minute?”

He glanced back at the elevators, and waved at the others to continue without them, then redirected his attention back to Steve.

Steve smiled as Tony leaned in with the silent offer of a kiss, and leaned in the rest of the way. Steve ran a hand through Tony’s hair, making him sigh happily. Tony eventually stepped back again. Steve seemed like he was considering his next words, and so Tony’s mind naturally began to drift back to the papers sitting on his desk upstairs, and how completely fucked he was—

“—Tony,” Steve’s voice broke through his spiraling thoughts.

He noticed that Steve's hands were kneading his shoulders lightly, and—yeah, okay. That felt nice.

“Sorry,” Tony said, shooting Steve what he hopped was a convincing smile.
“You’ve been tense today.”

“A lot on my mind.”

Steve hummed, and regretfully pulled his hands away.

“You can tell me if anything’s wrong. I know this”—he gestured between them, “—is still very new, but, I want to be someone you feel you can rely on.”

Tony studied Steve, and saw nothing but sincerity in his words. He knew that, yeah, Steve was right, talking is what people did when they were in relationships—and holy shit, he was still trying to settle that fact in his brain.

Tony was in a relationship again. Hell.

Tony knew how important it was to try and be open with your partner; a lack of communication (on top of all the other shit) was one of the final nails in the coffin that had split him and Pepper apart.

But it was hard. Tony had never been an emotionally open person, he had been raised to be self-reliant, and he had always dealt with things in his own way—on his own. Now his coping methods were, inarguably, not the healthiest—actually, many would argue (read: Rhodey and Pepper) that they were absolute shit, but they’re what got him through (barely) his entire life.

“I was given a lot to consider today, and I’m still not sure how to approach it.” Tony said honestly.

“Is it something I can help you with?”

Tony shook his head. “No. I don’t think so. I just need some time to think.”

Steve nodded. “Okay, but if you need to talk, I’ll listen—Bucky, too.”

“Okay,” Tony agreed, and yeah, it was a start.

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The burgers were amazing. Of course. Even Sam had to, begrudgingly, admit to enjoying the meal. Tony couldn’t help but look at Bucky proudly as the team offered up their compliments—Clint even tried to claim that he was never leaving, just so he could keep eating the food—which Bucky replied to with an eye roll, and stated that he wouldn’t be the archer’s personal chef.

After the plates were cleared away, Tony sneaked away into the kitchen and pulled out the large cake he had purchased for the occasion. He quickly set about finding and ripping open the packages of birthday candles he had ordered along with the cake itself, and began sticking them around the cake in a way he thought looked okay.

Deeming it satisfactory, he quickly lit the candles and picked up the cake using both hands—the last damn thing he needed was to drop the thing.

“Friday, make sure to focus your recording on the table and on Peter, I want every moment of this saved.”

“Of course, Boss.”

“Okay, dim the lights,” he instructed, right before he exited the kitchen, singing, “Happy birthday.”
Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for the continued support!

Please comment and review :D

Have a happy weekend and to any readers in the USA a happy Thanksgiving!
Peter’s birthday weekend was one of the best of his life. It was almost surreal how awesome it was—Friday was spent with May, on Saturday he got driving lessons and a surprise party with the actual Avengers, and Sunday, well—Sunday was shaping up to be just as perfect.

Peter had spent the night at the tower in his room (which he was slowly adding stuff to, to make it his own) and had woken up the next morning to none other than Captain America himself making waffles and eggs.

Bucky and Tony were there, watching Steve work, unhelpfully sipping at identical mugs of coffee. Bucky claimed, since Steve wasn’t making anything sandwich related, that he wouldn’t be useful, and Tony claimed no one would want what would happen if he tried to help cook. So Peter jumped up to offer his assistance. With a grateful smile, Steve asked if he could set the table. An easier job than he was expecting, Peter nodded and set to his task quickly.

In a few short minutes he was done. He turned to ask Steve if he needed anything else done, however, it seemed that everything was taken care of already. Steve was taking the eggs off the stove and the last waffles out of the iron, and placing it all in the center of the table with a large jug of juice, berries, butter, and syrup.

Steve paused after he sat at the table to say a quick prayer over the food—since his eyes were closed, he didn’t catch the way Tony rolled his eyes—though he did wait until Steve finished before he started in on the food.

To Peter’s surprise, Tony ignored his own plate and grabbed Peter’s plate first, and began filling it up.

“Make sure to eat up, you’re going to need that fuel today. Oh, and don’t forget the juice, it’s good for you,” Tony said, passing him his plate, now full of food.

“Uh—thanks!” Peter said, a little surprised.

Across from him, and next to Tony, sat Bucky who was building what looked like a (admittedly delicious) monstrosity: Steve’s omelette scramble stuffed between two waffles with drizzles of syrup. Steve, in turn, looked mildly disgusted as Bucky picked it up with his bare hands and took a huge bite, though Tony only gasped.

“Sandwich!” Tony said.

Bucky shot Tony a smug smile, then held out his creation. Tony leaned in and took a large bite out of the breakfast sandwich. He chewed twice before his eyelids fluttered shut and he groaned appreciatively.
“This is amazing,” he said, followed by, “make me one!”

“Sure thing, doll,” Bucky said, putting down his waffle sandwich to make another.

Steve rolled his eyes, but Peter, curious, popped up with, “Make me one, too!” And shoved his plate in front of Bucky, expectantly.

“Want one too, Stevie?”

“No, I’m going to eat mine like a normal person.” Steve replied, pointedly using his cutlery to start in on his eggs.

“Boring,” Bucky teased.

At the same time, Tony said, “Steve, no one in this room is normal.”

“Yeah, join the dark side!” Peter said, as he excitedly dug into his waffle sandwich.

After a few moments of more teasing, Steve sighed and placed his fork and knife down, and handed his plate over to Bucky.

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After breakfast was cleared away, Peter followed Tony down into the workshop. He could scarcely contain his excitement—their project was almost done. Well, the alpha version (or mark 1, as Tony had labeled it). The body of the robot was now ready to be assembled, and most of the initial programming had been completed, with the exception of some difficult lines he had trouble writing and needed to fix.

Peter felt more confident in his abilities to complete it than any other time in his life, and he knew that having Tony around was a big reason for that. Not just because he was one of the smartest people in the world, who could have written the code with his eyes closed (though that helped immensely), it was also the way Tony taught, encouraged and inspired him. Peter still had his moments of self-doubt, of course, but with Tony Stark vouching for him, how could he not feel a sense of accomplishment?

Peter couldn’t help bouncing on the balls of his feet as he waited for Tony to type in his personal code and open the workshop doors. He caught the amused look Tony sent him, but it did nothing to quell Peter’s abundance of energy.

“How does he look? It’s just—I only saw the partials last time I was—will we be able to upload the program?” Peter gasped. “Will we be able to activate him?”

Tony was laughing quietly. “Calm down, Pete, he looks great. I don’t think we’ll be able to upload the code today, but who knows, it all depends on how quick you are at working out the problems. We can definitely test the electrical connections today after we put him together, to test for shorts in the circuitry.”

Peter nodded along—a lot of putting a robot together was testing and retesting—it could get frustrating, but Peter was hanging onto the hope of satisfaction. No, not the hope, the knowledge of the satisfaction that would come from such an accomplishment.

Peter burst into the workshop as soon as the doors opened, blowing past Tony, who scoffed and shouted out a light-hearted, “Careful!” at the teen.
“Sorry!” Peter said, still smiling. “Where is he?”

“Over here,” Tony waved him over, and began leading Peter to the other side of the shop.

Peter’s smile grew even more when he saw the pieces of the bot sitting neatly on a workbench.

“Can I?” Peter gestured to the robot.

“Of course, you know this, it’s your project. Go nuts, kid.”

Tony watched in amusement as Peter ran over and immediately spun around, looking for and grabbing tools he thought he would need to put everything together.

“I have a couple of things I need to work on, too. Call me if you need help.”

“Yeah, okay,” Peter said distractedly, not looking up from where he was studying the schematics.

After a couple of minutes of listening to Tony’s work playlist, Peter found himself becoming distracted. He kept looking up and watching as Tony worked on something too bare bones for Peter to really identify. He was still excited about the robot in front of him, and he really wanted to put it together, and honestly, he could do it on his own, quite easily in fact, but—

He didn’t want to do it on his own.

Tony had said if he needed help he could ask, but he didn’t need help. This was just something he would prefer not to do alone. Tony had been encouraging him the whole way—had made him take that first step in pursuing the project—it only seemed fitting that he finished it with him, as well.

It felt dumb, Peter felt dumb. Putting the bot together didn’t mark the end of the project by any means; there was still coding to be done, and testing—so much testing. There was something about putting together the robot itself, though, finishing that in itself felt like something worthy of commemoration. Peter snuck a glance behind him at where Tony was hunched over his own project, but he looked up and caught Peter’s eye. Tony raised his brows in question.

“Need a hand?”

Peter shook his head, embarrassed at being caught. He considered playing dumb by pretending that he was stuck on something, but there wasn’t really anything he could pretend to be stuck on that he could get away with lying about. Putting stuff together was what he was good at; it was the programming that he usually got stuck on.

Tony still hadn’t gone back to his work, and Peter was feeling more like an idiot.

“Peter?”

“Oh—uhh—sorry. No, I’m—” Peter paused, then swallowed his pride (and apprehension).

“Actually, uhm—”

“Yeah?” Tony prompted.

“I was just thinking that, maybe, it might be fun if we worked on this together?” Peter said, though his uncertainty made it sound a bit like a question. “I—I mean, I know that you’re busy, and that you have lots of—lots of, uhh, work to do, and—”

“Peter.”
“—and I get it if you don’t have the time to, plus—”

“Peeter,” Tony sing-songed, but Peter wasn’t listening.

“I know that this is—this is something really simple, and it’d probably—probably just end up being boring for you, so—”

“Peeeter.”

“—so, yeah, you know what? Bad idea. Just—just forget—”

“Peter!” Tony snapped.

Peter blinked, finally shutting his mouth, and directed his attention back to Tony.

“Uhm, yeah?”

Tony walked over to Peter’s work station with a smile on his face.

“I’d love to help you finish him up,” he said, and Peter released a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding.

Tony pulled a chair over and sat next to Peter.

“So, where did you leave off?”

“Oh, uhm, I was just attaching the wires to the circuit board here,” said Peter, gesturing to the pieces.

“Okay, I’ll work on this one, then.” Tony decided.

Peter felt elated, and couldn’t help smiling. He suddenly didn’t know why he had been so nervous. Tony hadn’t even let him finish his horrible babbling before he had joined him to help.

They sat together, mostly quiet, but also comfortable. Occasionally, one of them would break the silence to ask for a tool out of reach. Best of all was when Tony would stop and watch Peter work, and then offer small tidbits of advice or knowledge, some of which Peter already knew, but he nodded along with it, anyway. He held on to every word the man told him, cherishing it.

“You know, Peter, if—” Tony spoke up, then paused, as if considering his words, “if there’s ever anything you want my help working on, all you have to do is ask, even if you don’t necessarily need my help for it.”

Peter nodded. “Oh, okay.”

“I don’t want you to feel like you’re bothering me, because you’re not. I do enjoy spending time with you.” Tony laughed a bit. “I wouldn’t invite you here if I didn’t.”

Peter flushed, but felt a rush of happiness settle over him. He knew, logically, that a part of Tony must have enjoyed his company (for whatever reason) after all the man had done for him, but it was always different, hearing it said out loud, and so plainly.

“Thanks,” he said, smiling bashfully.

Tony grinned. “Now let’s finish this up,” he said in response.
As he gazed down at the little bot before them, finally assembled, Peter felt the same sense of accomplishment, which had been teasing him for weeks, finally burst fully into his chest. The feeling morphed and grew stronger when Tony clapped him on the back, and smiled hugely while congratulating him on a job well done. Peter knew they weren’t technically done, but it didn’t matter or dampen the thrill of the moment.

He couldn’t help but think of all the countless hours he had spent pouring over projects with his uncle Ben, and how Ben would smile at him and cheer when they had finally finished one. For the first time since his uncle’s death, those memories no longer brought him pain.

He was only marginally startled when he felt Tony wrap an arm around his shoulders, and ruffle his hair while pulling him close in his loose grasp. Peter let himself lean into Tony with a silent and contented sigh. The warmth of the feelings enveloped him further, and he felt something inside him ease, something that had been dark and heavy and that he hadn’t even been fully aware was still there until that moment. He turned to face Tony fully, and hid his now-damp eyes in the man’s shirt as he turned the side-hug into a real one. Tony only seemed to hesitate for a second before he was returning the gesture whole-heartedly. Despite the dampness in his eyes, Peter couldn’t wipe the smile off his face to save his life.

“You okay, kiddo?”

Peter felt Tony whisper more than he heard him ask. He nodded, not yet ready to relinquish the hug.

“Yeah, thanks,” he said, knowing his voice sounded a bit off.

He sniffled back the emotion that threatened to spill from him. It wasn’t bad, just… a lot. He didn’t know if Tony understood, but Peter thought that maybe he did, when the arms holding him hugged him just a little bit tighter.

---

It was only natural that everything came crashing down on Monday. It was nearly 2 A.M. Monday morning when Peter finally crawled back in through his bedroom window from a night on patrol. The streets had been quiet and calm, and he probably hadn’t needed to spend so many hours out, but after taking a majority of the weekend off, he thought it was something that needed to be done.

Peter had just finished pulling on his pajamas when he heard the front door open and then close, and the lock slipping back into place. Carefully, he peeked down the hall, and saw May taking off her shoes and coat.

At first, Peter had planned to sneak back into his room and pretend to be asleep, but he stopped when he caught sight of his aunt’s face. She looked worn, and somehow frail. Peter had seen her after long shifts at the hospital before—he’d seen her dead on her feet, completely exhausted—but this was somehow different.

“Aunt May?” Peter said tentatively, as he walked from the hall into plain sight, delicately.

“Peter, what are you doing up?” May questioned, though Peter noticed she didn’t have the energy to even sound surprised.

“I heard you come in. Is this the first time you’ve been home since you got called in?”

May nodded tiredly, and sunk into the couch with a heavy sigh.
Peter went into the kitchen to pour her a glass of water, and brought it to May.

“Here,” he said, placing the cool glass in her hands.

“Thank you.”

“Yeah,” Peter said as he sat down next to her.

There was a few moments’ pause, where neither spoke, but May didn’t ask him to leave or send him to bed, so he figured his presence must be okay.

He spared May another glance, and found her staring into the glass of water, though it was obvious her mind was a million miles away.

Peter licked his lips nervously. “So, uh, it was pretty bad then, huh?”

May seemed to startle, as if she had forgotten he was there, but then nodded.

“Yeah. Yeah, it—it was a tough shift.”

“Do… do you wanna talk about it? As much as you can, anyway?”

May sighed, but Peter continued.

“It’s just that, y’know, you always ask me to talk when I’m not feeling all that great either, so, maybe it will help?”

May summoned the energy to smile at him, though it appeared a little watery, and Peter was struck dumb at the somewhat terrifying thought of his aunt crying.

“Was—was there some kind of accident?”

“It was no accident,” May said, and Peter was taken aback at the pure rage that resonated in the woman’s voice.

She shook her head. “I’m—I’m sure it’ll be all over the news soon, especially if the office rumors are right,” she muttered, mostly to herself.

Peter waited patiently for her to make up her mind on whether or not she wanted to tell him. Part of him wanted to just help her relax a bit, but another part of him was wary—he had never seen May this shaken before.

“A boy was brought in,” May finally said.

Peter straightened up and turned to face his aunt.

“God, I could barely believe he was still alive when I saw him—” May cut herself off, biting her lips. She opened her mouth, like she was about to say more, then stopped, as if thinking better of whatever it was she was going to say. “He wasn’t any older than you,” she said instead, then took a shuddering breath.

“Aww, Aunt May,” Peter gently hugged the woman next to him. “I’m sorry that happened.”

May hugged him back tightly, then, almost reluctantly, pushed herself away again.

“Listen, Peter, I know I’ve said it before, but please listen to me, I want you to be very careful,” she
said, looking into his eyes. “I—I don’t want you taking any shortcuts to school, or walking down any quiet streets. If you’re ever unsure, I want you to call me or Tony to come pick you up, okay? I’m going to drive you to and from school as often as I can.” Her tone suggested finality.

Peter felt a dark sense of foreboding settle over him and twist in his guts. He thought back to May’s earlier words about this not being an accident.

“Aunt May, what—what happened?”

“I—rumors at work were suggesting that he—that he was—” May swallowed down the emotion that was threatening to leak out, “—that he was the victim of that psycho that’s been all over the news.” Peter flinched at the way May spat out the word psycho, as if it was something stronger. “I—I don’t know how anyone could do what was done to that young man.”

Peter felt the leaden weight that had been forming in him sink further and further the more he heard. He knew his aunt was holding back, but that didn’t change the fact that—

“And if that’s true—and by the amount of police that were around, I wouldn’t doubt it—then that fucking sicko has started preying on people in Queens.”

Yeah. A serial killer had moved into Queens, and Peter had been too goddamn busy celebrating to notice. The only thought that was going through his head was that Spider-Man might have been able to save that boy. If only he had been there, if only he’d gone out patrolling like he should have. The people of Queens trusted Spider-Man to help protect them, and Peter had failed, more miserably than he ever had.

“Oh, honey, I’m sorry, I—I shouldn’t have said anything.” May was suddenly running a hand through his hair, soothingly, and it was then that Peter realized he was trembling.

“No—no,” he said, forcing his limbs to stop their shaking, “please don’t apologize, May. Thank you for telling me. I promise I’ll be more careful from now on.”

Peter waited until his aunt fell asleep, before he draped a blanket over her prone form, and then donned his suit once more. He had work to do.

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“So—” Tony let his arms fall to his sides with a slap, “—that’s that,” he said.

Bruce was sitting down in one of the comfy recliners, with a throw blanket over his legs and a mug of tea in his hands. He had been watching Tony pace in front of him for the last thirty minutes, listening as his friend ranted on and on about the proposed guardianship. Bruce still had trouble grasping how someone with such a huge ego could simultaneously be so self-deprecating and have such low self-esteem.

Bruce continued to stare at Tony, and Tony continued to stare back. Finally, Bruce released a tired sigh, and took a pointed sip of his tea.

“Oh, what? That’s it?” Tony huffed, and pointed at Bruce’s mug.

“Well, what? What do you want me to say?” Bruce asked, exasperated. “That you’re being a complete moron?”

“Hey!”
Bruce raised his brows, and shot him a look that said, ‘Well?’

Tony rolled his eyes and waved him off. “How am I being a moron?” He demanded.

Bruce rubbed at his eyes with his free hand. He loved Tony, he really, honestly did, but he didn’t have the necessary patience—or, well, people skills—to deal with him when he got this worked up. He took a deep breath and focused on keeping a level head, and a tight leash on the Other Guy. He may not be exactly good at it, but he might as well try; he figured he owed his friend that much, at least.

“You’re being a moron because you’re ignoring one very basic, rudimentary fact,” Bruce said, sounding a touch strained.

“And what’s that?” Tony asked, a little scathingly.

‘Patience, Bruce,’ he thought to himself. ‘That you’re already acting like Peter’s dad!’ He said, maybe a touch too loudly.

That made Tony straighten up, as if he’d been slapped. It took all of Bruce’s self-control not to roll his eyes.

“May is confident in her decision of making you a legal guardian because she’s already spent time watching you act like one. Hell, Tony, when you called me when I was on my way back, all you could talk about was how you were throwing this kid a party! Not to mention the driving lessons. Even right now, can you tell me for a fact that the reason you keep glaring at your phone isn’t because Spider-Man’s out patrolling at 1:30 A.M. on a school night?”

Tony opened his mouth, then promptly closed it.

“You try to include him in just about everything you do, and again, that’s only the stuff I know about. Tony. You literally stopped your self-imposed exile in your workshop this Friday because May sent you a copy of Peter’s report card, and you couldn’t wait to come bounding up to show everyone how good he’s doing in all his classes! You didn’t even notice when Clint took out his hearing aids fifteen minutes into you bragging about how smart your kid is. Thor still thinks he’s your biological son.”

Tony was looking at Bruce with a somewhat shell-shocked expression.

“Tony,” Bruce began, more gently, “I may not be able to relate to this particular situation, but I can understand that this is a big deal, and that maybe it’s even a little terrifying. But maybe you are worrying a bit too much.”

Tony sniffed, moustache twitching in a gesture Bruce recognized Tony did when he was feeling particularly emotional.

“Ha—you, the king of worrying, telling me not to worry so much,” Tony joked, and though it sounded rather stiff, it didn't sound hostile.

Bruce sent him a rather sarcastic smile. Placing his mug to the side, Bruce removed the throw blanket off of himself and stood.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me, it’s nearly two in the morning, and I don’t know how much more I can deal with before the Other Guy decides he needs to redecorate your lovely penthouse—again.”

That got a snort of amusement out of Tony, and a crooked smile.
“Yeah, yeah, get outta here.”

Bruce nodded, heading back toward the elevator.

“Think about what I said, and talk to someone if you’re still feeling overwhelmed—maybe not me at 1:30 A.M.—but someone.”

Tony nodded. “Yeah, all right, will do.”

“Seriously, Tony, don’t overthink this. Go talk it out with one of your boyfriends—you’ve got, like, two of those now, right?”

Tony huffed. “Goodnight, Bruce.”

“Night, Tony,” Bruce said in amusement, as the doors finally closed to take him down to his own level.

Maybe he’d send Steve a message. He didn’t have Barnes’ number, and quite frankly, the man kind of terrified him, anyway.

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The atmosphere of Midtown Technical High School could be summed up in a single word: melancholic.

From the moment Peter stepped foot on campus, all of his senses were on alert. There wasn’t the same sort of noisy buzzing Peter had come to expect from the place. Students were clumped together as per usual, for sure, but they spoke in hushed and despondent voices. Walking through the halls, Peter passed more than a few people openly crying. The deeper he walked into the school, the more unrest he felt, and the heavier the air seemed to cloy with the darkness that had taken over the school grounds.

“Hey.”

Peter jumped, startled by the voice behind him, but relaxed when he saw it was only Ned, looking uncomfortable in the hall.

“Hey, Ned. What’s going on?” Peter asked his friend, though he feared he already knew the answer.

“Oh. So you haven't heard yet, then,” the boy said, in a manner that was unlike his usual, cheerful self.

“I just got here.”

Ned nodded. “Jason Ionello’s dead, dude.”

Peter felt his throat tighten, painfully. “What?”

“Yeah, I’m not too sure what happened. There hasn’t been an announcement yet or anything, but like, it’s already all over the school. I heard a couple of people saying he was murdered, but, I mean, I don’t know if that’s true.”

Peter nodded, stiffly. He hadn’t known Jason all that well, in all honesty. Jason had been one of the more popular kids at school. He’d most often seen him hanging out with Flash or some of the journalism students, and of course, during the school news reports where he had lead the
announcements alongside Betty.

It was a long day. After an announcement and an emergency assembly, classes carried on; however, many students were missing, and no one was really paying attention. As Peter looked around one class and the next, he couldn’t help but feel responsible. If he had just done better—if he had gone out patrolling over the weekend, like he normally did—then maybe Jason would still be alive. Peter's fingers twitched toward his phone as he tried to suppress the sudden urge to call Tony. He felt exhausted and stressed and just genuinely like complete shit. He folded his hands before him, atop his desk, and glared resolutely. He wasn’t going to look for reassurance he did not deserve.

The bell couldn’t have rung soon enough, but as soon as it did, Peter was finding a relatively safe place to suit up. He was going to do what he should have been doing for days: protect the people of New York.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you all enjoyed this new chapter!

Please comment and review to tell me what you think! :D

and I hope the rest of the week goes well for you all <3
Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Notes

Alright so obviously there's been another rating change- mostly cause I'm a depraved fool and couldn't help myself.

This chapter is filled with Stuckony goodness so be prepared.

If for whatever reason you don't feel comfortable reason really explicit material then skip to the next break (or skip this chapter altogether). There are mentions of what happened after that's all- just our boys talking about it. ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony paced as far as his office desk’s phone would allow, before turning and starting in the opposite direction.

“Yes, I understand, Secretary, yes, we will—” Tony made a face as he was cut off.

“I’m making a trip to the compound myself, Stark. You’re going to have to forgive me if I don’t take you at your word that the Avengers are all on board,” Ross drawled.

Tony rolled his eyes in irritation. “Well, considering I’m going to be on this fancy panel too, my opinion is going to have to be one you trust.” He snapped back.

“I’ll be there in three days, Stark,” was the only reply he got, followed by a dial tone.

‘Son of a bitch,’ Tony thought angrily, before slamming down the receiver and sitting at his desk.

A low whistled caught his attention.

“Didn’t seem like a very nice conversation,” Bucky said, leaning against the door frame.

Tony sighed, but his mood was elevated a bit by Bucky’s appearance.

“That was just more Accords nonsense. Old Thaddy Ross doesn’t believe me when I say I have the Avengers on board.”

“Do you?”

Tony huffed. “I’d like to think I’ve alleviated most of their concerns,” he paused, then shrugged as he poured himself a drink from the decanter on his desk, “hopefully enough to sign, when it comes down to it.”

Bucky nodded, closing the door so that it was only open a crack, and walked further into the office, perching on the side of Tony’s desk, facing him.

“Did you get the email?” Bucky asked, smiling crookedly.

Tony paused and took the glass away from his lips, swallowing thickly.
“Yeah—yeah, I did,” he replied.

“Didn’t scare you off, did we?” Bucky joked lightly, though Tony could read a tenseness around his eyes.

“Of course not,” Tony said and smirked, “gave me a lot of wonderful mental images.”

Bucky’s grin stretched and his posture relaxed some.

To be honest, Tony had been surprised when he’d read through the email. When Steve told him he was sending him a list, the last thing he expected it to be of was kink negotiation.

He really had to stop underestimating these two.

“In fact, I was mid-reply when I was so rudely interrupted by that troublesome call,” Tony said.

“Aw, now that is a shame, since I’m rather invested in seeing your response.”

“It was all very polite, for a list dictating all the things you love to do in bed.”

“Or wherever is most convenient. Steve wrote it, of course, after he vetoed my version,” Bucky said with a casual shrug.

Tony’s eyes darted down to where Bucky’s foot brushed teasingly against his leg.

“And what was your version?” He asked, forcing himself to look back up to Bucky’s face.

“Oh, it wasn’t nearly as long or as detailed as Stevie’s version, just me dictating how I couldn’t wait to have you tied up and begging for us. For me—” Bucky leaned down, grasping at Tony’s tie and pulling him forward, “—to make you writhe in pleasure.”

Tony was happily leaning into Bucky’s space now. Bucky lifted a hand to the back of Tony’s neck, cradling his head and teasing his fingers through the short hair.

A cough broke them apart, and Tony looked over to see Steve standing in the doorway.

“Actually,” he said, grinning in amusement, “I vetoed Bucky’s draft because all it said was, and I quote, ‘please let me tie you up and fuck you until your IQ matches the rest of ours.’”

Bucky groaned and leaned back on the desk, glaring at Steve. “Really?” He shot at the man while Tony laughed. “You couldn’t have waited?” Bucky grouched.

“Nah,” Steve shrugged. “Plus, you left the door open.”

Bucky sighed, then shot his glare to Tony, who was still chuckling.

“It’s not that funny.”

“Actually, it definitely is, and I am vastly disappointed you have Steve reining you in.”

“Well, if you’d rather deal with his impulsiveness, then I can certainly ease up a bit,” Steve said in humor.

“Don’t lie to yourself, Stevie,” Bucky said. “You’re too much of a control freak.”

“Watch it, or your ass will be meeting the palm of my hand tonight,” Steve said, though his tone
didn’t carry much weight.

“Case in point,” Bucky muttered to Tony’s amusement.

“What was that?” Steve asked, his posture shifting.

“Promise?” Bucky said louder, with a sickly sweet smile and a fluttering of his eyelashes that had
Tony laughing again.

Steve's back straightened and, without breaking eye contact, he pushed the office door closed and
flicked the lock with a deliberate click.

“Yes,” he said as he began to slowly, in a mockingly casual fashion, walk toward Bucky.

Tony felt his breath hitch as Steve made a show of rolling up his sleeves.

Bucky, on the other hand, had lost all signs of his playful demeanour from earlier, and now sat,
tense, watching Steve the same way one watched a predator stalk ever closer. His eyes flicked
between Steve and the door behind him, and Tony waited in tense silence to see how it would play
out.

A creaking of the floorboards from under Steve's feet broke the spell Bucky was under and, before
Tony could so much as blink, the man was off his desk and making a break for the door.

Steve braced himself, seeming to have expected the reaction, and before Bucky could maneuver
passed him, wrapped his arms around Bucky's waist as quick as a viper's strike. He used the
momentum of his body to swing Bucky in front of him and wrangled his arms into a good hold
behind his back, and walked him over to Tony’s desk.

Tony watched as Bucky struggled half-heartedly at being caught, and had to hold back a whimper
when Steve lifted Bucky back onto the desk, chest down, ass facing Tony.

Tony broke his gaze away to look at Steve, who smirked and winked, before setting in to rid Bucky
of his pants.

Bucky lied prone over the desk as Steve yanked his pants and briefs down roughly. Steve hummed,
and used his free hand to pet the now exposed flesh.

Tony let out a breath at almost the same moment that he heard Bucky do the same, and it took
every ounce of his willpower to clench his hands into fists at his sides, instead of letting them
reach for his cock.

As fast as Steve had captured Bucky, he raised his hand and then brought it down against the
exposed flesh with a loud smack.

Bucky gasped and then yelped as his whole body jolted with the impact. Steve held him fast as his
struggles renewed.

“You asked for this,” Steve said, plainly, as he brought his hand down a second time to hit the
other cheek.

“Y’know—ow, fuck! You're really not—ahh—ouch! Making much of an argument—Jesus, Steve!
Against that whole ‘control freak’ comment I made!” Bucky ground out through his teeth.

“He’s got a point, Cap,” Tony said, eyes trained and the red, blooming skin. “You’re kind of
proving him right.”

“Thank you—OH! GOD DAMMIT!” Bucky shouted, as Steve's hand connected particularly hard against his skin.

Steve paused to run his hand over the red, heated flesh. “He wanted this, and if you don't quiet down, Tony, I'll take it as a request to bend you over next.”

Tony broke his gaze away from the movement of Steve’s hand to his face, and found the man staring at him with the same intensity that had been directed at Bucky earlier. And—oh, God, so that's what it felt like to be held under that gaze. Tony felt himself nodding, unable to break his eyes away until Steve did so first.

Steve continued to rub and pet Bucky’s ass as something else seemed to catch his eye.

“Stay,” he commanded and released Bucky's wrists.

He reached across the desk and picked up a wooden clipboard, which had been sitting innocently to the side. Carefully, Steve removed the papers from the clip, and felt over the polished wood, testing its smoothness against his hands.

Steve glanced between the board and Bucky’s ass with a calculating expression, which alerted Tony immediately to what was going through the blond's mind. He couldn’t stop his hand from rubbing over his cock through the fabric of his pants as it twitched appreciatively at the direction of Steve's thoughts.

Bucky, curious as to the sudden pause, turned his head to get a look at what was happening. His eyes widened at seeing what Steve held in his hands.

“Oh, hell no!” Bucky said, and made to try and get up, but Steve was faster and had him by his wrists, pressing him firmly back onto the desk.

“Shh, shhh,” he soothed, and put the clipboard down—still within easy reach—and used his now free hand to stroke through Bucky’s hair. “You've been acting up all day, Buck. First you slept through our training session, then you refused to eat all day, despite my orders telling you to do so, and then you came in here to bug Tony about the email, deliberately disobeying my order to give him time.”

Steve picked up the board again, as Bucky let out a pathetic sounding whine at the loss of Steve's hand in his hair. Tony felt a pang of concern flash through him when Steve raised the board and brought it down with a sharper sounding smack that wrenched a cry passed Bucky's lips. His cock throbbed at the sound, despite his mental misgivings, and he silently cursed. He assumed Steve knew what he was doing—they'd been together longer, and this obviously wasn't their first rodeo—but Bucky did seem to be putting up an awful fight...

“You know,” he started, a bit hesitantly. “That is a... rude misuse of my property.”

“The way your pants bulged when you saw me reach for it tells me you don't really mind,” Steve replied as he brought the board down again.

“...Touché.”

Damn his traitorous cock.

Tony caught Steve eyeing him, and heard the man hum to himself before he was facing Bucky
again.

“You know your word, Buck,” Steve said suddenly. “If you really want to make it stop, you know you can.”

Bucky hissed through his teeth at the sting of another slap, but stayed otherwise silent.

Tony’s breath stuttered on the next hit as he noticed Bucky’s hips twITCHING against the desk, trying to find friction for his cock. Of course the bastard was getting off on this.

Tony unzipped his pants, trying to relieve a bit of the pressure that was on the wrong side of uncomfortable now, and moaned along with Bucky on the next swing as he pictured their roles reversed.

He shifted in his seat so that he could remove his suit jacket, feeling much too warm for it now.

“Hey Cap,” he said, as a stroke of genius hit him. “Slide him further down a bit, would you?”

At the look on Steve's face, Tony was quick to add, “Please,” as he made a show of loosening his tie and unbuttoning the few buttons of his shirt.

Steve studied him a moment—just long enough for Tony to grow nervous that maybe Steve was somehow immune to his puppy-eyes—when, without looking away, he pulled Bucky forward so that his hips no longer sat on the desk.

Tony leaned up and pressed a kiss to Steve's mouth and mumbled a quiet, “Thank you,” against the man's lips.

Tony pushed his office chair to the side and fell to his knees. He swiftly maneuvered himself under the desk where he could face Bucky’s cock, which was standing proud and flushed dark red, leaking from the tip. Tony licked his lips at the sight of it. He gripped Bucky’s legs and leaned in, licking a stripe from the base to the tip. Above him, he heard Bucky’s strangled sounding gasp, which turned into an outright cry as he let himself sink down, taking him deep into his mouth, flicking his tongue teasingly along the underside veins. Tony smirked around his mouthful at the moans he could hear stuttering out passed Bucky’s lips. He pulled back slowly to suckle on the tip, tasting him as more pre-come leaked from his slit and onto his tongue, as he rolled it around the tip and flicked teasingly at him.

Steve, it seemed, had finally decided that he'd given Bucky a long enough break.

“Tony,” he warned, voice husky and rough, before another smack sounded and Bucky’s hips thrust forward on the impact, forcing his cock deeper down Tony's throat. His eyes watered at the sudden change, but he forced himself to breathe through it and relax his throat to accept the length.

Tony let his jaw relax as Bucky began all but fucking his mouth in time with Steve’s forceful smacks, pushing him forward.

Tony didn’t know how much time passed, he lost himself in his task and listening to Bucky’s whimpering moans. Tony’s eyes fluttered open as Bucky’s hips stuttered and his cock twitched.

“Ahh, oh, fuck, A-Anthony, Steve—shit, please.”

“What is it? What do you need, Buck?” Steve asked in that same, husky voice.

“I-I need—please, Stevie, let me come.”
Tony moaned around Bucky’s dick, the vibrations making him gasp wantonly.

“Fuck, please!”

“All right, shh, Buck. Tony—”

Tony hummed again, took Bucky down to the base, and sucked. Bucky moaned loudly, hips working as he finally came in thick ropes down Tony’s throat; Tony swallowing and humming happily as Bucky continued to moan and whimper. He only pulled away once he was sure Bucky was finished. He panted loudly and slowly extracted himself from under the desk.

He had only a moment to mentally complain about the pain in his knees before hands were grasping him and pulling him up.

Steve— he thought, before he was pulled into a desperate kiss. Steve bit and sucked at his lips until Tony opened his mouth for Steve’s tongue. He gasped into the kiss as Steve lifted him again, and placed him on the desk, next to Bucky.

Tony turned to look at Bucky, who smiled at him through his blissed out expression. Bucky raised his hand and stroked down his cheek as Steve worked on ridding him of his pants. Bucky leaned forward and captured his mouth in a slow, languid kiss that had Tony whimpering into it, longingly. He gasped as his cock was finally freed, the cool air of the room felt shocking against its heated flesh.

“Oh, Tony—” Steve moaned out upon seeing him exposed.

Tony didn’t have a chance to think before Steve was suddenly on his knees, swallowing him down to the base.

Tony arched up and breathed a gasping moan as Steve bobbed his head, sucking sinfully.

“Fuck!” He swore, smacking his hand against the desk looking for something—anything—to cling to.

Bucky’s hands were in his hair then, turning his head to face him and crashing their lips together. Tony reached over and tangled his fingers in Bucky's locks, desperate to hold onto him as Steve took him apart completely.

“Shit, fuck—oh, God, Steve!” Tony pulled away to gasp as he felt the telltale signs of his impending orgasm.

Steve hummed against his cock, much the same way he had done to Bucky earlier, and his hips tried to rut against the bruising hold Steve had on them as he moaned. Those were going to be marks he’d fucking cherish for days to come.

His breath stuttered in his chest as a wave of pleasure crashed over him.

“Steve, shit! I-I'm gonna—”

Steve pulled off and began pumping him in his hand. “It's okay, sweetheart, let go.”

Tony threw his head back and gasped, mouth falling open in a silent cry as he released all over his belly and Steve’s hand. Steve worked him through it, whispering praise Tony didn’t quite have the
mental capacity to comprehend at that moment in time. He was only barely aware of the sound of his voice, and of Bucky’s soothing kisses to his cheek, jaw and neck.

Tony let himself lie boneless for some time, eyes closed, leaning into Bucky’s caresses and kisses as he slowly came back to himself.

He opened his eyes slowly, just in time to see Steve re-entering the room. Tony frowned, not having realized he had left. Steve smiled brilliantly as he approached them, and ran a soothing hand through Tony’s hair before he bent down to kiss him.

“How are you feeling?” He asked in a hushed tone.

“Like my brain is melting out my ears, in the best possible way.” Tony mumbled as Steve took a warm, damp towel and began cleaning him up.

Next to him, Bucky began to chuckle.

“What?” Tony asked.

“We did it, Stevie. We brought his IQ right the fuck down.”

Steve huffed in amusement and rolled his eyes as Bucky continued to laugh.

Tony, for the life of him, couldn’t stop smiling, either.

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Tony stretched as he and Bucky made their way toward the kitchen. Absently, he rubbed at his jaw, trying to massage the telltale ache from his twinging muscles.

“I think you bruised my damn throat,” Tony groused.

Bucky groaned. “Do not speak to me about goddamn bruises,” he said in a grumble. “You didn't just have your ass paddled within an inch of your life by Captain friggin’ America.”

Tony huffed in humor. “Please, I’m lucky you didn’t dislocate my fucking jaw with the way you were going.”

“You loved every second of my dick down your throat. Don't even try to deny—”

Bucky cut himself off when they turned into the kitchen to see Clint staring at them, mouth gaping. He was posed in front of the open fridge, a jug of juice in hand, eyes bulging, his whole face one of horrified shock.

Then, like someone had pressed the unpause button, they watched as Clint’s face twisted into disgust and then a scream erupted from his mouth.

The archer shoved the jug back into the fridge and slammed the door so hard that it almost didn't stick.

“Jesus Christ! Are you kidding me?!” Clint shrieked. “Why—WHY! You're in a public space! I never needed to know any of that and NOW I KNOW ALL OF IT! I’m never wearing these again!”

He shouted, yanking his hearing aids from his ears. “YOU MAKE ME GLAD TO BE DEAF YOU FUCKING PERVERTS!”

Clint blew passed them in a flurry, running into the elevator like the devil himself was on his heels.
“In our defense, this totally isn’t a public place. This isn’t even the communal floor,” Tony said, breaking the silence that had settled heavily after the archer’s escape.

Bucky just let out a breath in a quick and heavy sigh, before heading to the fridge to start preparing lunch.

“So, on a very unsubtle change of subject, I wanted to let you know that the evidence I’ve gathered to exonerate you is going to trial,” Tony said, whilst taking a seat at the kitchen island.

Bucky froze, knife midway through a block of cheese. He stayed frozen for long enough that Tony felt a surge of concern jolt through him. Finally, Bucky cleared his throat, and continued cutting the cheese into slices.

“Oh?”

“Yeah, we—me and, well, I guess, your lawyers and I—believe that we have enough to start things off.”

Bucky nodded slowly, still concentrating on making the grilled cheese.

“You—before, you said they’d have to bring me in.”

Tony shook his head, though Bucky couldn’t see it.

“For now, no one knows you’re here, and I want to keep it that way as long as we can. Trials like this one take time. There’s a lot of evidence to go through, even before your testimony. It’s true that at a certain point, the courts will demand you be present for any continuation, however, that won’t be for a while yet.”

“All right. Just… keep me updated, I guess.” Bucky said.

Tony stood from his seat, and placed a hand on one of Bucky’s.

“Listen, I know this must be… extraordinarily stressful, but,” he paused, taking a moment to move his fingers over Bucky’s metal ones, “I’m not going to let them do anything bad to you.”

Bucky sighed, but pulled Tony in for a kiss.

“You’re really something else, y’know that, Mr. Stark?”

Tony flashed him a grin in turn, but the two were interrupted when Steve and Natasha came into the room, Steve looking perplexed, and Natasha—well, she didn’t give much away at all.

“Uh, does anyone know why Clint stopped in front of me in the hall, looking like a broken man, whispered ‘I believed in you,’ and then ran off without explanation?” Steve asked, frowning.

“Or why I found him in the kitchen downstairs, filling a container full of water, dropping his hearing aids into it, and then throwing them into the freezer, muttering about cursed objects?”

Natasha added, crossing her arms.

Tony and Bucky shot each other a look, before returning their gazes to the two newcomers.

“Huh. That’s odd. But, I mean, are we really surprised? Out of all of us, Clint’s always been the most—” Tony pointed to his head with one hand, and raised his other, palm down, and wiggled it, “—unstable,” he said.
At the same time, Bucky shrugged and said, “Jealousy, probably.”

Steve pinched the bridge of his nose, while Natasha cocked a brow.

“What did you two do?” Steve asked finally.

Tony gasped in over-dramatized offense. “Steve, I’m hurt! That you would accuse me—well!” He gestured wildly and huffed.

Steve shot him an unimpressed glance, hands on his hips, and looked completely unmoved by Tony’s acting.

Neither did Natasha, for that matter. Bucky seemed amused, though.

“Oh, fine! It’s his fault though for sneaking around my penthouse when we have a perfectly functioning kitchen downstairs.”

“What happened?”

“Bucky and I were minding our own business, coming to grab some lunch,” Tony pointed to the frying sandwiches, then looked to Steve, “and maybe we were talking about, uhh, our earlier meeting, and maybe Clint overheard, but then totally overreacted?”

Steve groaned. Natasha frowned.

“Like I said, my penthouse! I should be able to talk about my awesome sex life within the confines of my own home!” Tony was quick to defend.

“He has a point,” Bucky said.

Natasha rolled her eyes. “For the love of—I’ll go look after Clint,” She said, and disappeared.

Steve watched her go, then fixed them both with a stern look.

“What if that had been Peter in here?” He said, looking at Tony.

Tony blanched at the thought, then shook his head, as if to dispel the mental image.

“Peter only comes over on weekends.”

“That hasn’t been true for a while now,” Steve said. “Not only that, but he’ll be moving in here with you, however temporarily, at the end of the week when May leaves.”

Bucky looked up at Steve sharply. “We are not cutting sex out while the kid’s here.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “That’s not what I’m saying, just that, maybe, it might in our best interest to be a little more discreet.”

Both Bucky and Tony sighed in relief.

“Okay, you’ve made your point, Cap,” Tony said. “Now come join us for lunch.”

Steve sighed, but smiled and nodded, sitting down at the island. Bucky, flipping some of the already-made sandwiches onto plates, passed two to Tony to take over to the island while he threw more sandwiches onto the grill.
“Here,” Tony said, placing a plate in front of Steve and taking a seat next to him.

“Thanks,” Steve said, followed by a quiet, “hey.”

When Tony looked over, he found Steve’s lips meeting his. He inhaled sharply in surprise, and felt the corners of Steve’s mouth quirk upward in amusement, but then Tony relaxed into the kiss. He moved his lips with Steve’s, sighing happily at the small, teasing flicks of his tongue, and the promising nips of his teeth on his bottom lip. Tony frowned and whined a little when Steve finally pulled away.

He let his eyes flutter back open, unsure of when he had even closed them, and was met with Steve’s smile.

“What was that for?” Tony asked, wondering how the hell this man got to be so damn perfect.

Steve shrugged, smile still stuck on his face.

“Because I finally can now,” he replied.

Tony couldn’t help the smile that stretched over his lips at the genuine happiness that fluttered through his chest. He could remember once, a long time ago, his father telling him that Stark men weren’t built for happiness; that such a pursuit was a useless endeavour, and that the best Tony could ever hope for was for his work to bring him success. He really wished, in this moment here, that he had the ability to flip his old man the finger, but as it was—leaning forward and capturing Steve’s lips in another kiss, pulling back just enough to whisper, “Because I can,” and watching another huge smile blossom on the man’s face—it felt just as good.

Chapter End Notes

Phew so that happened!

Also I can't believe how much attention this fic is getting -good lord!
It blows my mind really so thanks so so much to all my readers for the continued support!
kudos and comments keep me going during school finals!
have a safe and fun weekend <3
Chapter Nineteen

Another week, another chapter!

This one is shorter than my other recent chapters have been however I felt it covered what it needed to and stretching it out wouldn't work as well.

Also I just finished my last final project today and now get 2 whole weeks off of school! Good lord I'm exhausted- but I'm hoping to do lots of writing over this period~

I still can't believe how well this story is still doing though! All the hits, kudos, and comments really blow me away.

Thank you all so much for your continued support!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Still with us, Mr. Parker?” Said a voice loudly, next to him.

Peter jolted in his desk, eyes widening, as he stared up at his teacher, who had just caught him dozing mid-class. He shot the woman a sheepish smile, and quickly glanced at the notes on the board.

“Yeah—yeah, totally, Shakespeare! What a guy!”

“Mm-hmm,” she said, looking neither convinced nor impressed. “Try to stay awake, I’d hate to have to give you detention,” she said, walking back to the front of the room to resume her lecture.

A few students around the class laughed at the scene, causing Peter to groan quietly. He wished he could say that this was the first time this had happened—today—but it wasn’t. He was finding it increasingly hard to stay awake in class, especially those he wasn’t very fond of to begin with. It was only Wednesday, and already his body was feeling the strain of his new schedule. He was running on two hours of sleep, plus the two fifteen minute naps he took during lunch and his spare period. Peter kept telling himself that he would get used to it, and that since school was almost out for the summer, he just had to hold out until he had more time. There were just a few weeks left before finals, but God, he was tired.

He took a few deep breaths and shook his head, trying to rid himself of the cottony feeling that clung to him.

The bell rang, saving him from another impromptu nap (and detention). Peter was quick to stuff his books into his backpack and make for the door.

“Peter, hey, wait up!”

Peter turned, slowing his walk as Ned jogged to catch up. He spared a smile for his friend, who clapped him on the back and puffed.

“What’s the rush?” Ned asked.
“Oh, I need to go on patrol,” Peter said quietly, as they made their way through the hall.

“Is that a good idea right now, dude?” Ned asked, looking concerned.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, it’s just… you look exhausted. You fell asleep in class and during lunch, today and yesterday.”

“I’m fine, Ned. I’ve just been busy.”

“With what, though?”

Peter sighed. “With patrolling and stuff.”

“But—”

“Listen, this—this is something I have to do.”

“I get that, I’m just worried. I don’t want you to get kicked out or anything—you’re super lucky you were allowed to finish this year!”

Peter winced, knowing Ned was right. It had been a small miracle that allowed him to keep attending MT, but he didn’t have a choice.

“I don’t have a choice!”

“Why not?”

Peter slammed open his locker. “Jason Ionello is dead!” He said, harshly, then looked around and lowered his voice. “He’s dead, and you wanna know where he lived? Queens. Where was he found? Queens. Ned, I—I can’t let something like that happen again.”

Seeing Ned’s frown, Peter sighed, feeling a bit bad about snapping at his friend, but he was just so tired, and his patience was limited.

“I’m sor—”

“You know it’s not your fault, right?”

Peter blinked. “What?”

“What happened to Jason. It’s not your fault.”

Peter shook his head, continuing to grab what he needed from his locker.

“I could have done something and I didn’t,” Peter said.

“You didn’t know.”

“That’s the point, Ned! I should have! If I had done my damn job, then I would have been out there that night and I could have done something!”

“There’s no way you can know that—no, just listen! We don’t even know if Jason was taken from Queens and, okay, even if he was, and even if you were patrolling, you can’t be everywhere at once!”
“Stop it, Ned.”

“I’m sorry, I’m just worried, okay!”

Peter sighed. “It’s fine, just—drop it, okay?”

Ned raised his hand in surrender, but his face was still twisted in an unsure manner.

“I gotta go. I’ll text you later.”

---

Peter swung from building to building, until he found a good place to perch and scan the streets below.

“Peter, logs indicate that your use of the suit has gone up substantially within the last three days,” said Karen suddenly.

Peter sighed. First Ned, now Karen?

“Yeah. I’ve been throwing more hours in.”

“With your workload from school, I’m concerned you may not be meeting the recommended hours of sleep for a person of your age.”

“I’m fine, Karen.”

“Have you been eating a balanced diet? Your biology and metabolism dictate that you should be eating large amounts of food.”

Peter groaned.

“I’m only concerned for your wellbeing, Peter.”

“If I get a hotdog, will you be quiet for a bit?”

“I don’t believe a single hotdog falls under a balanced diet.”

Peter huffed and stood up quickly—and was overcome with a sudden blast of vertigo. Peter gasped, holding his head as he stumbled to the side—and right off the side of the roof.

“Ah! Shit!” He cursed, and quickly caught himself with his webs, swinging onto another rooftop.

He sat again, and groaned as the waves of dizziness passed.

“Shall I call Tony Stark?”

“No! No, don’t! I’m fine, I just moved too quickly!”

“Very well. How would you like to proceed, Peter?”

Peter sighed and slowly stood up. “Anything coming up on the scanners?”

“There doesn’t seem to be anything noteworthy for now.”

“All right, I’m going to go get some dinner,” Peter said, as his stomach rumbled loudly.
Peter readied himself, and then started off in the direction of his apartment.

Halfway there, a siren caught his attention. He looked over on his upswing, and saw a firetruck headed down the next street over.

“What do you got for me, Karen?”

“An apartment building five blocks from here is reportedly on fire.”

“All right, change of plans!”

---

The building was old and long, but only five stories. Thick, black smoke billowed from its windows, and yellow-orange flames sparked dangerously. Even from the roof across, Peter could feel the warmth of the fire.

“Is anyone still inside?”

“Scanning,” Karen replied. “Reading two life forms—both human, one adult, one child.”

“Aw, shit. Where are they?”

“They appear to be trapped in an apartment on the fourth floor. Bringing up a wireframe map.”

The picture in front of him shifted, and suddenly Peter seemed to have x-ray-like vision of the building complex. Sure enough, in the corner apartment on the fourth floor, two colourful masses were huddled together.

“What about the firemen?” Peter asked.

“The closest truck is the one you passed on the way here, which will arrive in approximately two minutes. They will be too late. However, I must warn you, Peter, the building is no longer structurally sound.”

Peter gulped, and froze as his mind flashed to the last time he had a building fall on him.

Releasing a shaky breath, Peter nodded. “Okay, let's do this,” he said.

Peter jumped, his webs connecting to the roof of the burning building. He swung forward, aiming for the window on the fourth floor apartment.

The glass shattered as his feet met it in the full force of his swing.

He landed in a kitchen, and immediately began coughing as thick smoke filled his lungs. He ducked down, as much as he could, to avoid the thickest plumes.

“Hello?” He called out. “I’m here to help!”

He waited for a response, but none came.

“Move through the hallway. Do not enter the first door.”

Peter did as he was instructed, and worked his way through the apartment.

“Go to the second door on your right.”
Peter threw the door open, and saw two figures, lying unconscious on the floor of what appeared to be a kid’s bedroom.

“Oh no,” Peter breathed, then quickly ran over to them. “Hey—hey hey hey!” He shook the woman, trying to wake her. “Come on, please wake up!” Peter begged around his own coughs.

“Vitals show that they are both still alive, however, medical attention is required immediately for the treatment of smoke inhalation,” Karen said.

Peter swore, and decided that there was no point in trying to wake them. He lifted the woman over his right shoulder and carried the child, who looked no older than four or five, under his left arm. He quickly maneuvered back into the hall, and gasped when he saw the flames that were licking over the walls and ceiling. The first door Karen had warned him against entering had burned away, releasing more flames into the hall.

Peter moved as quickly as he could to get by, sweating profusely. He ran back into the kitchen and stopped.

He couldn't swing from the building when his arms were full. He looked around in a panic, then stopped himself.

“You got this, Peter, c'mon, think—aha!”

Peter set the two of them down, and drew out some of his web, and began wrapping it tightly around them—first the child, then the mother—like rope. He then attached a line from each of his web shooters, and hoped for the best.

Peter ducked out of the window and caught sight of an ambulance and a firetruck that were now parked outside.

“Hey! Over here!” He yelled, as loud as he could, and waved.

He saw commotion from down below and knew he had gotten their attention, and nodded.

“Okay, you first, little guy,” Peter said, and hefted the kid out the window, beginning to lower him. He could see a few people gather below, waiting, and sighed in relief.

Next, he lowered the woman, and she too made it down okay. Peter’s cheer was cut off as he started coughing again.

“Peter, structural integrity is failing, please exit the building immediately!” Karen's voice rushed out.

A loud creak and a splintering sound from above caused him to look up, just in time, to see some of the ceiling give way. A large beam of burning wood collapsed on top of him, smacking him hard on the back, causing him to cry out in pain.

He shoved the wood off, and made a break for it, jumping from the window just as the ceiling fully collapsed. He swung down to the street below, where onlookers cheered and applauded.

Peter waved, then quickly rushed over to the two people he saved to help the paramedics release the webbing, and inquire about their health.

One of the first-responders eyed him with a frown. “Will you let us take a look at that?” She gestured to his back.
Peter winced as the wound throbbed, but shook his head.

“It’ll be okay. Thanks, though.”

The paramedic huffed, but nodded, and Peter made a quick exit.

---

Peter was standing in his bathroom, shirtless, back to the mirror, with his head craned awkwardly to try and get a good look at the damage to his skin, when his phone rang.

“Hello?”

“What happened?”

Peter’s eyes widened.

“Uhh, hi, Tony—”

“I noticed you failed to comply with Karen’s suggestion to go seek medical attention, so I repeat: what happened?”

Peter gulped at the man’s no-nonsense tone over the phone. “It’s nothing! I was just—”

“Cut the bullshit, kid.”

“Wait, how do you know about that, anyway?” Peter asked, both curious and affronted.

“Part of the new system’s upgrades,” Tony said, “Karen now has to make note of it whenever you turn down advice for medical attention.”

Peter groaned.

“It wasn’t that bad. Okay, look, so—there was this burning apartment building down on—”

Peter paused when Tony groaned, miserably.

“There were two people trapped inside!” Peter insisted. “I was able to get them out in time!”

A heavy sigh. “But…?”

“But, when I was lowering them out of the building, a beam collapsed and hit me—I’m okay though!” He asserted.

“Okay, no. Listen, I’m sending Happy with a car to come get you so that, you know, a medical professional can confirm that you’re okay.”

“But—”

“I’m sorry, did I make the impression that this was up for negotiation?” Tony snapped.

Peter shook his head sullenly, before realizing that Tony couldn’t see him.

“No,” he said instead.

Tony sighed, and when he spoke again, a lot of the heat had left his voice. “Listen, pack up some of your homework, and I’ll order us a pizza or something after your check-up, okay?”
“Yeah, okay,” Peter replied with a small smile, feeling better at the prospect of a good pizza.

“All right. Happy should be around in an hour or so.”

“All right, bye.”

Peter put his phone down and threw on a shirt, careful not to upset the burn on his back.

He quickly went back into his bedroom and threw an extra change of clothes into his backpack—just in case—and ignored the tempting sight of his bed as he yawned, hugely.

His limbs felt like lead now that the resulting adrenalin crash was washing over him. His mind swam and felt horribly fuzzy, but he blinked his eyes forcefully and shook his head. He needed to pull himself together.

Grabbing his bag, he walked out into the main room of the apartment and wrote a quick note to May, in case she made it home from work and he wasn’t there, and then waited.

The chime of his phone startled him into alertness again, and he shook himself, realizing he must have been dozing.

He checked his notifications, and saw a text from Happy that said he was waiting outside, so Peter grabbed his shoes and bag and left the apartment.

“How’s it going, kid? Heard you got in a lick of trouble.”

Peter shrugged, and then tried to hide the wince.

“It’s being blown out of proportion.”

Happy quirked a brow, but shrugged, and started off on the familiar route toward the tower.

About halfway there, Happy’s phone blared with an incoming call.

“That’s the boss, gotta take it,” he said as he raised the partition.

Now that he had privacy, he clicked a button on the console of the car.

“Hey, Boss.”

“Hey, Hap, listen—there’s been a change of plans. We’ve had a situation at the tower, and I don’t know if it’s safe for Peter here right now.”

Happy frowned. “Everyone okay?”

“Yeah, thankfully, but it took us by surprise.”

“So what do you want me to do with junior? Drop him back off at his apartment?” Happy asked.

“No, I still want him to see a doctor. Take him to the mansion, and I’ll send someone down to see him. How does he look?”

“He seems okay, he was walking a bit stiffly, though. Think his back’s tender.”

“All right, thanks again.”

“No problem, Boss. I’ll let you know when we arrive.”
Happy clicked to hang up, then lowered the partition between the front and back seats once more.

“Listen kid, there’s been a change of—” He cut himself off when, with a look in the mirror, he glimpsed Peter, slumped against the side window, snoring softly.

Happy rolled his eyes but smiled. He was a bit worried about whatever had gone wrong at the tower, but that wasn’t his job at the moment. Besides, Tony had sounded more annoyed than worried, so he figured it must be okay. With a sigh, he flicked the turn signal, and began to adjust the route.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!

I hope you all have had survivable if not good weeks!

Please feel free to leave comments or reviews to let me know how I'm doing or just because :) 

Have an awesome weekend <3
Chapter Twenty

Chapter Notes

Last chapter I said I was going to do some writing over my break, well, here's literally the longest chapter I've ever written.

I'm so sorry for every word of it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

All things considered, the morning should have been fantastic. How could it not be, when he woke up sharing a bed with the two people he cared about most in the world?

Steve laid on one side of the mattress, lips parted and features soft, his gold hair striking against the dark pillowcases. He looked damn near angelic in his sleep.

Wrapped loosely in his arms laid Tony, back to Steve's chest. Bucky couldn't get a good look at the man's face though, considering how they were pressed chest to chest, with Tony’s head nuzzled into the side of his neck. Bucky could feel the soft breaths tickling his skin rhythmically. He tried to lean away to catch a glimpse of the sleeping man, but the action only caused Tony to whine and wrap his arms around him tighter. He was like a damn octopus.

It was nice. Wonderful even.

He could remember the night before; the three of them, curled up together on one of Tony’s sofas as they watched movies, sharing contented kisses. It had felt so comfortable and right that Bucky hadn’t wanted it to end.

Surprisingly, though, it had been Steve who suggested it, as the final credits rolled on the last movie.

Steve had been nuzzling up Tony’s jaw, leaving small, chaste kisses along his path. When he finally leaned back from Tony’s space, he had a smile.

“Share our bed tonight?” Steve had asked.

Tony had looked at him with a somewhat surprised expression, before Steve reiterated.

“To sleep, I mean. I understand if it's a little soon, but—”

“No, no, it's okay. Yeah, I think I'd like that.” Tony had said, and Bucky’s heart jumped in excitement.

One thing he had learned about himself, especially since starting his relationship with Steve, was that he was a bit starved for touch.

Bucky thought that it was probably a mostly subconscious action, but Tony was a very hands-on person, trading small touches and brushes of his fingers like it was nothing. Bucky craved it.

The thought that he could spend the whole night holding Tony in his arms was enough to make
him want to hop off the couch and drag the other two along with him without another thought.

He could remember changing into his sleep clothes with Steve, trying to hide the excitement in his actions. He could remember pulling Tony into the bedroom when the man had finally appeared, wearing loose sweatpants that hung low on his hips, and an old undershirt. He could hear the ghost of Tony’s laugh as Bucky manhandled him onto the center of their bed.

Everything had been fantastic.

So why couldn't he stop shaking now?

Bucky held Tony a tad tighter and nuzzled into the man's hair, breathing in the scent of his shampoo, with maybe just a hint of motor oil.

He desperately tried to ground himself in what surrounded him now. Bucky knew he was in his and Steve’s room, in Tony’s skyscraper, in New York. He knew if he lowered his hand, he would be able to feel Steve’s own hand resting firmly over Tony's hip. Or that in fifteen minutes, Steve’s alarm would be ringing.

He knew these things, but his mind still felt disoriented. He gritted his teeth and tried to push the whispers of memory deep, deep down.

He released a shaky breath and concentrated on keeping his breathing even, until the loud click of the radio-clock made him jump, just before music filled the silent room.

Bucky felt Tony shift, and then groan loudly against his shoulder.

“Make it stooop,” Tony whined.

Bucky could see the corner Steve’s lips quirk upward, despite showing no other sign of having woken.

He tried to concentrate on Steve’s face and its familiar angles.

Finally, Steve sighed and opened his eyes. He grinned across at Bucky, shifting his hand from Tony’s hip to pet through his hair.

“Time to get up.”

Bucky felt Tony try to settle deeper into his arms.

Steve huffed and rolled himself out of bed, then attempted to pull back the blanket.

“C’mon—up! We have a training session planned today, and I know for a fact you have a meeting with that Hong Kong representative this evening.”

“How do you—?”

“You were complaining about it last night. Now, up!”

Tony groaned miserably, turning his head back into Bucky's shoulder.

“Protect me—”

*Protect me, Soldier!*
Bucky shivered as the words cut sharply through his brain. Hollow echoes. Next to him, Tony and Steve continued to bicker, though he couldn't concentrate on their words. Fuzzy images danced behind his eyelids of dark concrete walls, cages, doctors and soldiers, their uniforms emblazoned with Hydra's sigil.

“—Ow!”

Bucky snapped back to attention at Tony’s yelp.

“Protect me a little less!” Tony said jokingly, though Bucky instantly became aware of how much his grip had tightened around him.

‘Fuck.’

He was quick to let his arms fall limp, letting Tony sit up.

“Sorry,” he mumbled.

Steve was frowning at him, concerned, and Bucky broke his gaze away, feeling a flare of shame sprout in his chest.

“You okay, Buck?” Steve asked, voice pitched soft.

He nodded. “Headache,” he said, rolling onto his back.

Tony hummed sympathetically as Steve moved to the attached bathroom to grab some painkillers.

Ardently, Bucky felt fingers card through his hair, and then begin to rub softly around his temples. He let his eyes flutter closed again at the relieving feeling.

“Here, want to take these?” Steve asked when he re-entered the room.

Bucky opened his eyes and stared at the pill bottle Steve was holding out.

Did he want to take them? Could he? No one had ordered him to.

He closed his eyes, and tried again to clear his mind.

He—He didn't have orders anymore. There was no mission.

“Do you want me to bring you anything to eat? Or do you want something to drink?”

Bucky felt a jolt of irritation pass through him.

‘DoYouWantDoYouWantDoYouWant—’

“Or—”

“I don't know!” He snapped at Steve, and immediately regretted it at the hurt look that flickered over the other’s face.

He took a deep breath.

“Get a bit more sleep, you don't have any obligations forcing you up,” Tony said, not unkindly, as he dressed.

Bucky felt a brief sense of relief at the suggestion. He nodded, and settled back down into the bed.
with a tired sigh.

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“Go ahead, say something—fight back!”

Another jolt rocked through his body—stronger this time—and brought him to his knees. He screamed through his teeth, clenched so tightly, it was a surprise they didn't crack.

“You are nothing but what we made you. You are a weapon with a singular purpose: fulfill the will of Hydra. You speak when you are told to speak, you eat when we let you eat, you sleep when we say you sleep.”

He felt the end of the baton stab into his side, a split-second before the pain erupted through his body. He gulped in desperate mouthfuls of air as the pain stopped, as suddenly as it started, his muscles twinging sharply with the aftershocks.

He was hit by a wave of intense rage. He wanted to fight, to kill. He glared up at the man standing over him.

“Wipe him. I want him ready to move out at eighteen hundred,” he said, eyes narrowed.

Bucky awoke with a startled gasp, and noticed that he was alone. He laid in his bed, staring up at the ceiling for a long while, before he realized that no one was there to tell him what to do. He let out a shaky sigh as his stomach grumbled insistently. He moved slowly, and stood for possibly too long in front of his open closet, looking at his and Steve’s clothing, hanging neatly. Well, Steve’s hung neatly; many of Bucky’s garments lay strewn on the closet floor.

He didn’t have much of a selection, and he didn’t much care what he wore, but he still stared at what he did have indecisively. Grunting in annoyance, he turned to leave the room, still in his sleepwear.

Stopping at the door, Bucky remembered his cell phone plugged into the wall; the phone Tony had slapped into his hand, days after he first came to live in the tower. Tony had told him to keep it on him at all times—demanded it, really. It was the closest thing he had to an order now, so he turned and plucked it from the nightstand.

The kitchen presented many of the same problems the bedroom had, and Bucky felt his frustration grow exponentially toward himself. He stared at the cupboards and fridge, feeling his stomach growl, but unable to open either one to grab something. It was a war between his instincts and higher mind. He knew that he was completely free to take what he needed, whenever he needed it, and yet there was a blockage happening somewhere between turning that knowledge into action and his instincts, which screamed at him to wait for instruction.

Bucky gritted his teeth as his head throbbed. He glanced at his phone, which he’d set on the counter, and debated calling Steve. If he did, he could simply ask—but no, he couldn’t. Steve was busy with Avengers business, and Bucky didn’t want to interrupt. He didn’t want Steve to get angry at him for being an annoyance. He shouldn't have to call him every time his indecisive ass couldn't make up his mind. A voice at the back of his mind was scolding him at that thought. He shook his head to try and shrug it off. It didn't matter, anyway; he didn't have orders to call Steve, and so he shouldn't.

His phone chirped loudly, startling him from his angry thoughts.

**Anthony:** *Hey Bucky Bear ;)***
Anthony: Steve wants me to let you know that we are on our way back, ETA 30 mins. We have Sam, Clint, and Natasha coming with.

Anthony: Also! Peter should be showing up in the next hour to see a doctor so he might be wandering around...

Bucky sighed, thinking that maybe it would be best to just retreat for now. Go back to bed.

A strong, burning rage exploded in his chest, freezing him in his tracks. He felt it fill him up, burning and consuming. He used its energy to propel him toward the pantry. He threw open the cupboard door and quickly grabbed a protein bar. He tore off the wrapping, even as a part of himself was screaming to stop, and took a huge, spiteful bite.

---

His stomach was churning sickly as he sipped at an electric blue drink Steve kept in his fridge. His head throbbed to the point that dark spots danced before his vision, but he continued to ignore it stubbornly. He was fine.

He picked up his phone with still-too-shaky hands, and finally typed a reply.

Bucky: Sounds good. Peter Okay?

Anthony: ETA 15 mins. He was hurt during patrol, hopefully not too badly. Feeling better?

Bucky paused, studying the message. He felt concern grow at the thought of Peter hurting himself, though Tony seemed to have moved past it fairly quickly—that being said, Bucky was still having trouble picking up on reading tone through text messages. He decided to let it slide for now; he figured he could go check on the kid once he was over later.

I’ll be fine, he typed, but paused over the send button.

The lights around him suddenly plunged into darkness. Bucky straightened and dropped his phone on the counter, forgetting his text. Even the floor-to-ceiling windows were blacked out.

Everything around him remained silent, but it now seemed much too unnerving.

“Friday?” he said, voice raspy from disuse.

No response. The anxiety settling itself over him skyrocketed. He didn't know much about Tony’s tech, but the AI wasn't something that just stopped working.

Bucky got up and moved quickly, using his memory of the floor’s layout to take him back to his room, where he was quick to grab two guns and a knife pouch.

He exited the room and immediately heard the telltale sound of the elevator. He swore silently, and found a place to disappear into the shadows.

He watched from his perch as the elevator doors opened, briefly bringing light onto the floor. Bucky counted: one, two, three—six figures, moving in teams of two. Guns drawn. The symbol on their uniforms confirmed his fears. Hydra.

The elevator doors closed, plunging the floor into darkness once more. Bucky assumed the assailants were equipped with some kind of night vision.

A loud ringing cut through the air. The agents spun toward the kitchen. One of the men upfront
motioned for two of the others to go through first. Bucky used the distraction to silently move from his hiding place. If they were separating, then this would be his best chance at evening out the odds.

He silently dropped to the floor behind one of the men, and quick as a striking snake, he wrapped his arm around the man's neck. He didn't give the man enough time to gasp before he was snapping his neck and lowering the body quietly to the floor.

He moved, quiet but quick, toward the next agent and plunged a knife into the man’s throat while he covered his mouth, stifling his dying noises.

Bucky felt something shift in him the moment he killed the Hydra agent. The noise that had been plaguing his mind started to die away, and everything became sharper. He had a mission. The ringing of his phone stopped by the time he had taken out the second agent.

From the kitchen, he heard one of the men call out an all-clear.

Four to go.

Bucky moved quickly. He aimed the barrel of his gun and pulled the trigger twice in quick succession. Chaos broke out before the third body hit the floor.

There were shots erupting from around him that he dodged with the skill and speed from years of training and conditioning. He blocked bullets with his metal arm and quickly disarmed another agent.

Three to go.

He turned and shot another in the knee, and didn’t give the man a chance to stop shrieking before he was grabbing him and using his body as a shield against the constant onslaught of bullets. The more he fought, the clearer his mission parameters became; the less noise existed in his brain. He faded, instinct taking over.

Two to go.

He noticed that the agents’ shots were aimed to maim and incapacitate him—not kill. He would make them regret that. He tossed the body of the man in his arms at one of the remaining agents while he shot at the other. The agent ducked behind the wall that separated the lounge and kitchen. His snarl was cut off as a bullet grazed his flesh arm. He turned quickly, and shot the man still lying on the ground by the body of the other agent that he had thrown.

One to go.

“Stand down, Soldier!” A voice called out.

He stopped, considering the voice. He didn’t recognize it as a handler. The man hadn’t said the words—he frowned, then checked his gun, three more bullets—but he did sound authoritative. Perhaps he had orders?

Movement caught his attention.

“That’s right, just stand down, Asset.”

The last agent came into view, gun pointed at him. He narrowed his eyes at him. He must have misread his hesitation as compliance. He could use that.
The man stepped closer.

“We—I’m here to bring you home.”

Something stabbed at his brain, making the throbbing in his head return.

No, that was—wrong. This—the tower—this was home.

The grip on his gun tightened.

The agent shifted his grip on his gun, and raised a hand to his ear.

“Yes, he’s here. He was hostile at first, but seems complacent now.”

There were more. Of course. He snarled and raised his gun—

The agent was fast as well, and fired two shots off, before he fell, dead.

He winced at the pain that bloomed in his side, and kicked at the man’s corpse, then grunted, satisfied that he was actually dead. He couldn’t stop, though—there were possibly more agents on the way.

A loud ringing had him pointing his gun toward the kitchen while he reached for a second gun—with a full clip.

The sound was bringing the pain back in his head. It was familiar. He approached cautiously.

On the counter was a small device—a cell phone. The screen was lit brightly. He continued to approach until he could see the screen clearly. A picture lit up the screen as it continued to ring—he hissed, holding his head as memories flowed into his mind. He knew the people on the screen—Tony—Peter, his mind provided. He—He had taken that picture weeks ago, after he had caught them asleep on the couch—when they had snuck him into HQ—

Everything else came back fairly quickly.

The ringing stopped and the screen went dark. Bucky tensed, his breathing picking up as he was submerged into darkness again. His panic rose—they’d found him. He’d—He’d killed those men. Bucky looked down at himself. Though he couldn’t see much, he could feel the blood—sticky and cooling—covering him.

His phone lit up again as it started ringing. Tony again. With a shaking hand, he picked up the device and hit ‘answer.’

“Bucky, thank God! Friday said she was disconnected from the tower and then you wouldn’t answer—are you okay, is everything okay?”

Bucky stayed silent. Tony sounded so panicked, and yet… it was just so good to hear his voice.

“Bucky? Bucky, c’mon, please—”

“They found me.”

God, his voice sounded wrecked, even to his own ears.

“What?”
“Hydra, they—there were agents—”

“Are you okay?” Tony was all but screaming into the phone. “Steve, I told you to drive faster!”

He heard a muffled, “I’m going as fast as I can!”

“Listen, we’re on our way—almost there—are you hurt? Are there more Hydra?”

“I-I don’t know. The strike team had communicators, there might be more. I’m stuck on my floor and the power’s completely out. I’m alone for now, I-I took care of the agents that broke in here—”

“Good.”

Bucky was taken aback by how hateful Tony sounded.

“Are you injured?” Tony asked again.

“I’ll be okay.”

“The hell is that supposed to mean?” Tony demanded.

“I was shot—”

“What!”

“They weren’t aiming to kill. It’s merely a flesh wound.”

“God fucking dammit! Listen, Friday is working double-time to get control of the tower back, and when I find out how the fuck they—hurry up, Steven!”

“I AM!”

Bucky sighed, then moved over to where he knew there was a tea-towel hanging by the sink. He grabbed it and a roll of cling-wrap. He folded the towel over the bullet hole and held it while he used the cling-wrap to help hold it in place. It was messy, and had him hissing in pain a couple of times when he had to twist to wrap the cling-wrap around his waist.

“What’s wrong?” Tony demanded, hearing him.

“Nothing. Just wrapping the wound.”

“Motherfuckers—I hope you tossed them off the fucking balcony.”

Bucky huffed a laugh.

“No, so you’re probably gonna want to leave the maid a—a really big tip—or give ‘em a really big raise. Yeah, just give ‘em a raise.”

Bucky startled when the lights came to life.

“AH-HA!” Tony exclaimed.

Friday’s voice interrupted the stillness of the tower. “I’m very sorry, Mr. Barnes. The virus that had me away has now been neutralized, and I am working to compile a diagnosis so that Mr. Stark can improve my coding to prevent further events such as this from happening again. Scans indicate
that the tower is clear of further intruders.”

Bucky nodded tiredly, then startled. “Where’s Peter?”

“Shit. Happy will be on his way to pick him up by now. I’ll call and tell him to take him elsewhere,” Tony said.

Bucky sighed in relief. “Okay—okay, good.”

“Okay, we’re here, heading up to you now. Hang tight.”

Bucky leaned against the counter and nodded, before realizing that Tony couldn’t see him.

“Okay. See you in a few minutes.”

“Yeah—in a few!”

Bucky pressed the ‘end call’ button on the screen and scrubbed his hands over his face, then grimaced, feeling the blood that streaked his skin.

He frowned when he heard the faint sound of a voice. Bucky stood tall again and followed it—straight to the corpse of the last man he’d killed. He tensed—the voice was coming from the communicator.

He knelt and plucked it from the man’s ear.

“I told you to report, dammit—wait, who’s there?”

Bucky froze. He knew that voice. He swallowed thickly. Of course one of his old handlers would be in charge of his recovery.

“Identify yourself.”

Bucky weighed his options.

“Your men are dead,” he said finally.

Silence followed for a moment, then—

“Not an unforeseen ending. They were disposable. We have more.”

Bucky glared, but wasn’t given a chance to reply.

“Do you think this is the end, Soldier? There’s nowhere you can run, nowhere you can hide where we won’t find you. Fighting only puts off the inevitable. You are an asset of Hydra, and we will bring you home.”

Bucky shook his head, and yanked the communicator away from his ear, crushing it in his metal hand.

“I am home.”

---

Tony was the first one out of the elevator when the doors finally opened, rushing into the main room of Bucky’s floor in a poorly-contained panic. The past twenty minutes had been spent in the
most horrendous fear. When Friday had alerted him that she had been shut out of the tower, Tony hadn’t known what to think. For a minute, he had just stood, shocked. How was that even possible? It hadn’t taken him more than that moment to gather himself into a state where, though scared, he was able to start figuring shit out. He first tried to call Bucky—to no avail, then he and Friday worked on trying to regain control of the tower’s systems.

The immediate relief Tony had felt when Bucky finally answered lasted only until the man had finally spoke. Then Tony was seeing red. Hydra had somehow locked out his personal AI, broke into his home, and tried to take Bucky. He was beyond insulted, and enraged, and terrified—he was terrified. Bucky should have been safe. He had been so, so careful. Bucky had trusted him, and Tony had failed him.

He froze once he exited the elevator, and saw what remained of the lounge. Bullet casings littered the floor, the couch and walls were torn apart with holes, and corpses laid strewn in pools of blood, which also stained the room in splatters.

Tony couldn’t fight the feeling of satisfaction that filled him at the sight of the dead men, but it was overshadowed by the sense of overwhelming guilt. This was his fault. He had missed something, or done something that must have given them away.

“Buck?”

Tony startled out of his thoughts when Steve called out.

“I’m here.”

Tony saw an arm appear over the back of the couch and wave. Bucky grunted as he sat up. Tony was around the couch and in front of him in an instant, wrapping his arms around the man, drawing him close.

“I’m okay,” Bucky said, voice muffled from his face being pressed into Tony’s chest.

Tony stepped back, his face twisted in concern.

“Jesus—let’s get you down to Med-Bay,” Steve said, as he knelt to try and get a look at Bucky’s wound.

Bucky pulled away from them. “I said I’m fine—or will be, once you remove the bullet.”

Both Steve and Tony’s faces twisted at the mention of the bullet still residing in the wound.

“I thought you said the others were going to be here?” Bucky said, changing the subject as Steve went to find a first aid kit.

“Yeah. Natasha, Clint, and Sam are doing their own sweep of the tower to be extra sure there aren’t any more operatives in the building.”

Bucky nodded, leaning back onto the busted couch. Tony sat next to him, moving carefully as to not upset Bucky’s wounds.

“I’m not made of glass, doll, I ain’t gonna break that easy.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “The hole in your side suggests otherwise,” he muttered.

A smile tugged at Bucky’s lips. “This little thing?” He joked.
Tony huffed. God, was this what Pepper felt, watching him get shot at? He let out a sigh as the guilt began to eat at him again.

“I’m so sorry.”

“What?”

“I-I should have—”

“Tony. Tony, look at me—” Bucky placed a hand under Tony’s chin to direct his gaze back up. “None of this was your fault.”

“How was this not my fault? This was my tower, my AI, my—”

“Hydra has been after me since the moment I deserted. It wasn’t a matter of if, but when—and I guess the when is now,” he shrugged. “Honestly, if it weren’t for you, this would have happened a lot sooner.”

“It shouldn’t have happened at all, with you—”

“That’s unrealistic,” Bucky said, cutting him off before Tony really started. “You’re good, Tony, but nothing short of God will keep Hydra off me forever.”

“I guess I’d better give Thor a call then,” Tony huffed a laugh that held little amusement.

Bucky rolled his eyes, and leaned over to press a kiss to Tony’s temple.

“I still have no idea what to think of that guy.”

“Got it!” Steve exclaimed, coming back into the room, waving the med kit.

“I still say we should call a doctor,” Tony said, looking uneasy.

Bucky shook his head. “No, Steve knows how to patch up a bullet wound just fine. Plus, I’m assuming you sent Dr. Cho to see Peter,” at Tony’s affirming nod, he continued, “I don’t like doctors, and she’s the only one I wouldn’t despise seeing.”

Tony sighed, but moved over to give Steve space to work.

“All right, let me take a look,” Steve said, voice pitched in a soothing manner.

Bucky huffed, but lifted his shirt so Steve could start unwrapping the wound.

“There we go,” Steve said as he put the bloody cloth and cling-wrap to the side. “Hmm, looks like a fairly clean wound,” he pressed around the inflamed skin, making Bucky hiss.

“Careful,” Tony murmured, frowning at the injury.

Steve nodded. “Okay, there’s the bullet. It’s not too deep. Let’s get this out of you and then patch you up.”

Bucky nodded, but didn’t otherwise reply as he watched Steve open the kit next to him to grab the disinfectant and tweezers.

“Shouldn’t we give him something for the pain before you go—” Tony gestured with his hands, “—digging around in there?”
Bucky shook his head. “It’s fine, just do it. I don’t know how many drugs will affect my metabolism, so it could wind up being pointless. Plus, the bullet’s been in me long enough; any longer and I run the risk of having my body begin healing around it, which will mean having to reopen the wound, and that is something I would prefer to avoid.”

Tony sighed, clearly disgruntled, but nodded, once more acquiescing to their wills.

Steve took the clean cloth he’d grabbed and poured some of the disinfectant on it.

“This is gonna sting.”

“Shut up and get to it, this ain’t the first time you’ve had to patch me up.”

Steve looked momentarily surprised, before a smile tugged at his lips.

“Remember that, do you?”

Bucky grunted. “Yeah, that Hydra base in—ow, shit!—France. Got shot in the arm, but with the way you started yelling, you’d’ve thought it was fatal—ah, dammit, Steve!”

Steve put the now bloodied cloth down, and grabbed the tweezers that he’d already taken the time to disinfect.

“I was worried about you,” he said, matter-of-factly.

Bucky shook his head, but a small smile played on his face. “Yeah, was still funny, though.”

Steve’s smile grew. “I’m glad you found it so amusing. Now, hold still.”

“Yes Sir, Captain!” Bucky said in mock-seriousness.

Tony chuckled, and Steve rolled his eyes, before leaning forward and putting a steadying hand against Bucky’s abdomen.

“All right, deep breath, Buck.”

---

Steve finished with the bandage with a sigh, and looked up at Bucky with a smile.

“How you doing?”

Bucky nodded jerkily. “Better, now that that thing’s outta me,” he said, nodding to the blood-drenched bullet, which sat on the open lid of the med kit.

Steve smoothed a hand over the freshly-bandaged wound, then leaned forward to place a gentle kiss over it. Bucky tsk’d and rolled his eyes.

“Bloody sap.”

Steve winked, his smile growing.

“I’m just glad that’s over,” Tony muttered, glaring at the bullet as if it personally offended him.

“Yeah, but what now?” Bucky asked, feeling suddenly unsure.

Now that he no longer had the bullet in him as a distraction, the situation was starting to catch up to
him, and shit. He gestured to the room behind them, and to the bodies that laid strewn where they fell.

“Don’t worry about it. I’ve already taken care of it,” Tony said, while showing off his phone. “I know it’s a bit soon, but I think you two should move your stuff into the penthouse. I can build another space for you guys if you need it, but hear me out; right now, it’s the most secure location in the tower, and it’s going to take time to repair... all of this,” Tony gestured to the room at large, much like Bucky had just done.

Steve nodded. “That would make the most sense. Regardless of security, we’re going to need somewhere to sleep while this floor is under repair—though the added security measures the penthouse has are definitely a bonus, if Bucky’s a target.”

“I also think that we should have someone here with him at all times—”

“Excuse me?” Bucky interrupted, not liking the sound of that at all.

“—in case this happens again. I don’t want another call from him saying he got shot again,” Tony continued, as if the interruption never happened.

“Uh, you called me,” Bucky said.

Tony waved his hand dismissively. “Semantics.”

Bucky huffed. “And I don’t need to be babysat,” he snarled.

“I dunno, Buck. I’m with Tony on this one.”

Bucky shot Steve a betrayed glare.

Steve raised his hands pacifyingly. “It’s not babysitting, it’s backup. Hydra knows you’re here, so it’s pretty naive to think that they won’t try again, and when they do, I’d feel more comfortable knowing that there was someone watching your back.”

Bucky shook his head. “It’s not—I’m—” He let out a frustrated huff.

How was he supposed to tell Steve how damn close he was to losing it? How close the Soldier was to taking over completely? How was he supposed to explain how he had stopped when he heard something even close to an order, or how a part of him had been instantly relieved at being placed under said order? Sure, he had killed the agent, but what if it had been his old handler in the room, instead of over the communicator? If Hydra attacked again—if a handler was present, and he fell too far into the Soldier’s mindset, he could present a danger to those trying to help him. God, he’d frozen and they hadn’t even used the words.

“What is it, Buck?” Steve asked, looking genuinely concerned.

Bucky opened his mouth, then closed it again. What the hell was he supposed to say? He hated Hydra. Hated it with every fiber of his being. He hated how they had taken him and tortured him, how they twisted his mind into what it was now. He hated how they had turned him into a mindless assassin for seventy whole fucking years, he hated all of the terrible shit they made him do.

So how the hell was he supposed to open his mouth and say a piece of him missed it?

Not the pain, or the missions, and certainly not the organization, God no—but the simplicity of
knowing his purpose, of not having to fight every day to sort out his own thoughts and memories, of not having to fight against himself daily to make even the simplest of decisions—he missed aspects, wisps. Parts of what had been something awful.

And didn’t that just hit him straight in the fucking gut? Worse than any bullet. How completely fucked up was he?

Bucky raised his eyes to meet Steve’s and he was hit, not for the first time, with the overwhelming need to just say all of it, confess everything. Steve would understand, he always encouraged Bucky to talk. He would—but… what if he didn’t? The thought of Steve turning away from him made his insides turn to ice with dread. He himself could barely make sense of how he was feeling and why, never mind burdening it onto someone else.

But Steve had always been the person Bucky could rely on. He didn’t always remember much, but he remembered that.

“I—”

“All right, Friday’s scans were accurate, the tower is clear,” Sam said as he, Natasha, and Clint stepped out of the elevator.

“Holy fucking shit,” Clint said, looking around the room.

“Hmm, their deaths were quick. More than they deserved,” Natasha muttered, kicking one of the dead agents with the toe of her boot.

“You scare me sometimes,” Sam said, looking at her.

Natasha shrugged, unbothered.

Bucky sighed, the small spark of courage he had mustered dying out. Maybe it was for the best that he remain quiet for now.

Bucky looked back to Steve when he felt the man take his hand and squeeze it, gently.

“We can talk later,” he said, quietly.

Bucky nodded, unsure of what he was really ready for.

Tony stood up and groaned, letting himself stretch.

“Why don’t you two go get your stuff to bring up? Clean-up will be onsite in less than thirty minutes, and I still have to go see if Peter is all right,” Tony said it casually, but they could hear the underlying concern.

“Okay, we’ll be fine here. Go make sure our little Spiderling is still functioning,” Natasha said with a smile.

Tony looked to Bucky. “You gonna be okay for a bit?” He said quietly.

Bucky nodded. “Yeah, go check on the kid. Stevie and I will start moving our stuff upstairs.”

Tony nodded and gave them each a quick kiss, before he was walking into the elevator.

“Friday, take me to the garage,” he said, waving as the doors closed.
Tony spent the entire drive to the mansion in a state of perpetual anxiety. He was worried about Peter, and what he was getting into, and whether he was okay, but it also tore him up leaving Bucky right after he was attacked. He wanted to immediately go into his lab and run diagnostics with Friday. His grip on the steering wheel tightened. It really had been a day. First Peter decided running into burning, collapsing buildings was a good idea, then Hydra attacked, dismantled his AI, and shot Bucky.

Tony forced himself to breathe and unclench his jaw. He had to just try and take this one thing at a time. He’d go make sure Peter was okay, get the kid some food—’cause, yeah, he promised—and then head back to the tower, check on Bucky and Steve, and lock himself in his lab for the next —*God dammit,* Ross was going to be at HQ tomorrow, and—

*Breathe—*

“Oh, *come on!*” He yelled, slamming on the brakes as a cyclist veered in front of his car, cutting him off.

He laid on the horn, swearing colourfully. The last thing he needed was ‘Tony Stark Runs Over Idiot Cyclist’ as tomorrow’s headline. Actually, with his luck, the cyclist would have been an environmentalist, mother of ten, who saves puppies and kittens on the side, and he’d be forced to feel guilty.

He groaned, rubbing over the scar on his chest, before he started driving again.

Seeing the mansion brought a brief sense of relief that began to dissipate as soon as he parked in the garage. Tony never liked having to come back here; too many memories, things he’d rather be forgotten.

Seeing Peter, lying on the floor on his stomach, school books and papers strewn around him, brought a smile to his face, though.

“Hey, kid.”

“Tony!” Peter sat up quickly, though Tony’s eyes narrowed when he winced.

“This place is *huge!* I think I got lost twice before I just, like, decided this room was good enough and made myself comfy—I hope you don’t mind—*wait!* Happy said something happened at the tower? Is everything okay?”

Tony put up his hands. “Whoa, whoa, whoa, one thing at a time—and first things first, are you okay? Don’t think I didn’t catch you wincing just now.”

Peter huffed. “I’m *fine.* It’s already healing.”

“Uh huh, and what did Dr. Cho say?”

“I gave him a cream for the burn, and orders to take it easy.”

Tony turned to face the newcomer in the room.

“Helen, thank you for coming out,” he greeted her, with a friendly smile.

“Of course. Peter should be okay with rest and proper care of the injury, but keep an eye on it.
Peter may have accelerated healing, but if infection sets in, then it’ll still be a problem.”

“Got it,” Tony said.

“All right, I’m heading out. If you need anything else, don’t hesitate to call.”

“Thanks again,” Tony said, before turning his attention back to Peter.

“So,” Tony began, as he sat down in an armchair.

“I, uh—might need some suit repairs?” Peter said, smiling nervously.

“Uh huh. All right, hand it over.”

Tony watched as Peter grabbed his bag, pulling his suit from it, then passed it to Tony.

Tony shook out the suit and studied it, turning it in his hands until he found the damage. It surprisingly wasn’t too bad; just a couple of small tears along the back.

“Okay, we’ll get this sorted,” Tony said, nodding.

“Thanks! So, uh, what was wrong earlier? Why couldn’t we meet at the tower?”

Tony debated what to tell Peter. He didn’t want to lie, but he also didn’t want to have to explain everything happening with Bucky. He sighed and rubbed his eyes.

 “…Is everything okay?” Peter asked, hesitantly.

“Yeah, it will be. There was an attack on the tower earlier.”


“Hey, hey, hey, calm down, kiddo, it’s fine now. Those responsible have been dealt with, and I’m going to be working with Friday to make sure that we don’t have a repeat of today.”

Peter was frowning, but nodded along. “But it’s okay now?”

Tony nodded. “Yeah.”

“No one was hurt?”

Tony hesitated.

“What—who?”

“Bucky was injured—but he’s going to be just fine,” Tony was quick to add, seeing Peter’s panicked expression.

“Can—Can I go see him?” Peter asked.

Tony frowned. He understood Peter’s desire to want to check on Bucky, but—

“I’m not sure I feel comfortable bringing you to the tower this soon after an attack, Peter. But,” he said, seeing Peter’s face fall in disappointment, “I’m going to be spending the next two days revising and improving security for when you get there Friday afternoon.”

Peter nodded. “Yeah, okay.”
“Don’t worry, I’m going to make sure things are safe for you.”

Peter sighed, but nodded again. “Okay.”

“Now, I think I remember promising you pizza.”

---

Bucky dropped two bags onto Tony’s king-sized bed, feeling torn. Now that the adrenaline was gone, the threat neutralized, he had nothing distracting him from his own inner turmoil.

“Okay, Tony says to just put our stuff in his closet,” Steve said, looking down at his phone.

“He text you?” Bucky asked.

Steve nodded, walking over to the closet doors to open them. Bucky watched as his brows rose. Curious, Bucky approached, and found himself mirroring the expression of the man next to him. Tony’s closet was a whole other room.

“Well, there’s certainly enough space,” Steve said as he entered the room-closet.

Bucky smiled in amusement, then pulled open a drawer, and was met with a showcase of twenty different watches.

Steve peeked over his shoulder and groaned. Bucky couldn’t help it, despite it all, he laughed.

“I’m—I’m not in the least bit surprised, but it also feels weird being in a room that has enough money thrown in it that if we sold it all, we would probably have enough to buy a small country,” Bucky said.

Steve laughed, shaking his head, then wrapped an arm around Bucky, being careful of his sore side.

“Come on, let’s find somewhere to put our stuff down and relax for a bit.”

Bucky nodded, feeling better at the closeness. He watched, somewhat mournfully, as Steve pulled away to grab their bags. The attack earlier was still weighing heavily on his mind, as was the rest of the day. He was still struggling. He followed Steve around the suite, listening to his chatter and helping put things away, as he debated with himself once more. He breathed deeply, trying to ground himself. Steve was—well, Steve, his rock. He could talk to him, surely. He could do this. He could.

A kiss, pressed to his cheek, snapped him back to the moment.

“There you are,” Steve smiled at him.

Bucky felt something in his chest ease. “Sorry, was thinking.”

“About what?”

Bucky sighed. He could do this. He just had to speak—*talk*. This was Steve. He could—

“I-I need to talk.”

He frowned. Okay, not the beginning of the great confession he was envisioning, but he could work with that.
“Okay, what is it?” Steve said.

He sighed again. “I don’t—I’m not sure how to say it right,” he said, honestly, as he ran a hand through his hair in frustration.

“Hey, it’s okay,” Steve soothed, while he ran a hand down Bucky’s arm.

“It’s really not, Steve. It’s complicated, and messed up, and—”

“Tell me.”

“I-I don’t even know if there’s a right way to say it, but—I’m struggling, Steve,” he said, a feeling of shame burning in his chest at the simple admission. But now that he had started, he couldn’t stop.

It was all right. This was Steve. Steve would understand, he would never—

He would never muzzle him.

“I-I was so close to losing myself back there—God, I think I did. Steve, he ordered me to stand down and I did—a part of me wanted to, and I just—”

He stopped, swallowing thickly to try and push down the desperation clawing up his throat, and took a moment to breathe.

It was so hard to start talking about it, but now that he had, the relief was immeasurable. He wanted to keep talking, keep confessing. Despite this, it was still hard to chase the confidence he wanted to portray, when he felt so mixed up about his own emotions and mental state, which was probably why his gaze darted nervously around, refusing to land on Steve for more than the split of a second.

It was why he missed it. So wrapped up in his own mind, Bucky failed to notice when Steve’s comforting hand fell away from his arm; the way Steve took a step back and stiffened, his posture straightening with a roll of his shoulders. “I don’t understand,” Steve said.

“I—sometimes I miss it, and—”

“What?”

The sharpness of Steve’s voice had Bucky’s gaze snapping to him for the first time since he began to speak. He saw how Steve’s eyes were narrowed at him, and the way the muscle in his jaw twitched, the way it always did when he was furious.

“No, I—it’s all confused, and—”

“No, what do you mean you miss it?” Steve said, louder.

Bucky’s instincts flared to life, causing him to recoil a step as they warned him of a threat, but no—it was all right. It was all right. This was Steve.

“No, I—” he tried, but was cut off.

“How can you even say that, after everything they did to you? After what they made you do? After everything Hydra is responsible for?” Steve’s voice was steadily growing louder in his anger, until he was almost shouting. The look in his eyes was so cold, nothing like the Steve he knew.
Bucky shook his head. He said it wrong. He had to try and explain, make him understand—this was Steve, he would understand. He would.

“Do you want to go back there?” Steve asked, accusingly, his voice practically dripping with anger. “Do you want them to take you back? Did you like—”

“No!” He yelled, desperately, his stomach dropping with a feeling of dread at the enraged expression on Steve’s face.

“Really? Because that’s exactly what it sounds like you’re saying.”

“I don’t miss them!” He shouted back, in a flare of his own anger, which died as quickly as it came. “I don’t miss them, I—I miss—”

But Steve was turning away from him. “No, you know what? No. I don’t want to hear it. God, Bucky!” Steve shook his head, throwing his hands up in a show of his own frustration.

“Yeah, well, you—you’re the one who’s always telling me to talk about it!”

Steve scoffed, fists clenching and unclenching, before he rounded on him again.

“Not this. I don’t ever want to hear that from you again, you understand me? Don’t you ever tell me you miss Hydra! Ever again!” Steve looked at him, fury in his eyes, then turned away, shaking his head again. “We are not talking about this. Christ, I—I don’t even want to look at you right now.”

_I don’t ever want to hear that from you._

Bucky’s retort was stolen from him, his mouth snapping shut of its own accord at Steve’s words. It felt like getting stabbed, and he had to take another physical step back. God, why did it hurt so damn bad?

“Whoa! I think that’s enough!” Bucky’s eyes darted up when Sam suddenly stepped between them, standing defensively with his back to Bucky, raising his voice at Steve.

Steve shouted something back, but the rest of his words were lost to him over the growing ringing in his ears, and the sound of his own beating heart. He was vaguely aware of more shouting—raised voices, going back and forth—but he couldn’t get a grasp on it.

_You speak when you are told to speak._

His chest ached, and _burned_, and—breathe, he had to _breathe_. He drew in large mouthfuls of air, but they didn’t seem to alleviate the tightness in his chest in the least. He became aware, suddenly, of how badly he was shaking, and the need to retreat slammed into him, full force.

He looked up and saw Steve’s face, still red in rage, as he shouted something at Sam. He had to go—leave. He turned away from the scene before him, his body moving like it was on autopilot.

It wasn’t there, but Bucky could feel the muzzle, tight around his face.

He opened the first door he saw and walked into the room, shutting himself in, and walked over to the bed and then let himself sit down on it, shakily. The quiet of the room pressed down around him, his breaths gasped out, desperate and raw. He let his head drop into his hands. He wanted to forget, forget and fade. He could feel the darkness of his mind lapping at his consciousness. He didn’t have the strength to fight against it, didn’t have the strength left to try.
He let himself drown.

Chapter End Notes

Keep in mind that if you murder me I can't finish the story!!!

Also I'm starting a blog for my fanfic [here](#)! Please consider following me, I'll be posting new chapters as well as chapter updates. The ask box will also be open for comments and questions!

Comments and Kudos keep the world going <3 (no matter how angry)
Hope you all are having a Happy Holiday!
Chapter Twenty-One

Chapter Notes

Before anything else I just want to extend a HUGE thank you to all the people who continuously support this fic!

I just found out that it was ranked in the top 25 of 2017 stucky fics and that's AMAZING to me! When I first started this four months ago I never thought that it would get the reception that it has- and I am incredibly grateful that it has so THANK YOU! <3

Please consider following my FF blog I've started Here!

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Now, the continuation and fallout of the previous chapters events.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony watched in nothing short of amazement as Peter grabbed yet another slice of pizza. Sure, he had seen the kid eat before, but it never failed to amaze him just how much his increased metabolism made him pack away.

“Thanks again for dinner!”

Tony blinked. “Oh, uh, yeah, of course!” This tiny kid ate as much as Steve.

Tony’s phone blared to life from his pocket. He fished it out and checked the screen, frowning at the number.

“Sorry, I have to take this,” he said, flashing Peter a quick smile.

Peter nodded absently, absorbed in watching what was happening on the TV screen in front of them.

Tony quickly left the room and answered. “Hey, everything okay?”

A sigh followed. “Yeah, you’re going to want to get back here,” Natasha said.

Tony frowned again as a weight settled in his gut.

“Was there another attack?”

“No, the tower is secure, but we need you here.”

There was a strained tone to Natasha’s voice that had him on edge.

“Okay, I’ll wrap things up here and be there as soon as I can be.”

“Please hurry.”

That had Tony’s brows raising. “Yeah, on my way.”
He pulled the phone away from his ear and disconnected the call. *Huh.*

Tony walked back into the TV room.

“Hey Pete, sorry to cut things short, but duty calls.”

Peter frowned. “You have to go?”

Tony nodded. “Yeah, they need me back at the tower.”

“Not enough time to finish the movie?” Peter asked, sounding disappointed.

Tony shook his head. He hated bailing on him, but he didn’t have a choice. He had warned Peter, after the kid first convinced him to stay for a movie, that he might be called back. And lo and behold—

“Sorry, not tonight. You can stay and finish up, and then Happy will drive you back to your aunt’s place.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

Tony smiled. “Hey, just wait, in a couple of days you’ll be staying with me at the tower, and then you won’t be able to wait to get rid of me!” He joked.

Peter rolled his eyes, but smiled nonetheless.

“And don’t stay out too late tonight, you have school.”

Peter fixed him with a dry look, but sighed and replied, “Okay, I won’t,” when Tony caught his gaze.

“All right, kid. See you later.”

“Bye!”

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The moment Tony stepped foot in the penthouse, he knew something was wrong. There was a feeling in the air, not unlike the aftermath of a great storm, and yet, as he looked around, nothing seemed out of place; there was just *something* off.

“Friday?” Tony asked.

“I’ve alerted Ms. Romanoff of your arrival. She will be out shortly,” the AI informed him.

Sure enough, not a minute later, Tony heard a door open and close from down the hall.

“*You’re here,*” Natasha said in lieu of a greeting, though Tony marked a particularly relieved tone to her voice.

“What happened?” he asked.

She sighed. “*Steve and Bucky got into some kind of fight,*” she said.

Tony’s brows rose. “*What?*”

She shook her head. “I didn’t witness it, but Sam says it was bad. If you want details, you’ll have to
ask either him or Steve, but from the sounds of it, Steve was an idiot, and Bucky, he’s—he’s not taking it well. I was hoping you being here might help.”

Tony frowned. The thought of Steve and Bucky fighting about anything seemed so alien to him. Apart from some playful banter, he’d never seen the two really argue. They always seemed so united; in all honesty, he couldn’t even really put together a picture in his mind.

“Where is he?” Tony asked, concern growing.

“He shut himself up in Peter’s room,” Natasha said, “I don’t think he knew where exactly he was going. Sam said he just disappeared when he was busy yelling at Steve.”

“Sam got involved?” Tony asked, a little incredulous. Sam and Bucky seemed to have more of a rivalry than a friendship.

“Like I said, apparently it was bad.”

“Fuck.”

“Yeah.”

They walked together toward Peter’s bedroom where Bucky was, but Natasha put a hand on Tony’s arm before he could open the door.

“Tony, you need to understand—I don’t know how much of the person behind this door is Bucky Barnes.”

“What do you mean?”

Natasha seemed to consider her next words carefully, before she sighed. “Once, Bucky told me that his mind was—broken—torn into two entities that were constantly fighting each other. He’s spent more time alive as the Winter Soldier than he has as Bucky Barnes. It makes sense that, sometimes, Bucky isn’t the one who wins that fight.”

Tony studied her. “Is he—”

“He doesn’t seem hostile, but he’s also not all there right now. I haven’t been able to bring him around, but maybe you can.”

Tony nodded, and after taking a steadying breath, opened the door.

The room was exactly like how Tony had last seen it. Still the same computer, the same desk covered with wrinkled papers, a few LEGO projects on the shelf with a couple of photos next to them. The one thing that threw off the image was Bucky, who sat on the bed with what seemed like an unnatural stillness, head bowed.

Tony paused for only a moment before he walked over.

“Hey Bucky,” he said, watching for a response, to which there was none.

He turned his gaze, meeting Natasha’s, who was watching with a worried expression. He turned back to Bucky.

“It’s Tony, I—uhh—well. Sounds like it’s really just been a shit day, huh?” he babbled. He sighed when that didn’t merit a response, either.
“Sorry I was gone for so long, I had to go check on Peter. Idiot kid had a roof beam fall and hit him. Saved two people from a burning building though, so I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t a little proud. He’s okay, Helen prescribed some burn cream, but other than that…” Tony stopped, sighing. It was like talking to a brick wall.

He knelt in front of Bucky, tucking a few loose strands of hair behind his ear so that he could try and get a look at him. Tony felt an icy chill run down his spine at the blank look on Bucky’s face. Natasha’s words echoed back to him, about not knowing how much of Bucky would be sitting here.


His smile dissolved, and he let Bucky’s hand go. His eyes didn’t so much as flicker in Tony’s direction. He stood and bent down, pressing a kiss to the top of the man’s head, then turned back to Natasha, who looked at him with sympathy in her gaze.

Tony sighed, trying to fight the bubbling anger as they left the room.

“Where is he?” Tony demanded, once the door was securely closed behind them. Natasha shook her head. “I’d bet the gym, but I don’t know.”

“Friday, where’s Cap?”

“Captain Rogers is currently in the gym.”

Natasha let a crooked smile grace her features.

“I’m going to get to the bottom of this,” Tony growled. “Can you—I mean—”

“I’ll stay with him,” Natasha confirmed.

Tony nodded and went back to the elevator. “Private gym, Fri.”

“Should I alert Captain Rogers?”

“No.”

“Yes, Boss.”

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When Tony entered the Avengers’ gym, he was immediately greeted to the sight of three broken punching bags laying haphazardly on the ground. Tony rolled his eyes, scanning the rest of the gym.

It wasn’t hard to spot Steve, considering he was the only other one in the room. He hadn’t seemed to notice Tony’s presence, and sat hunched over on one of the benches, his head in his hands. Tony had a small flare of concern roll through him, but it was quickly extinguished, replaced with the same rage that had been bubbling beneath the surface earlier, the moment he thought about Bucky sitting unresponsive in Peter’s bedroom, floors above.

“You mind explaining to me what the actual hell happened? I was gone for like, what, two, two and a half hours?” Tony said loudly,startling Steve.
“Tony—” Steve began, sitting up, before he was cut off.

“No, ’cause, you see, I’m really curious to hear what happened to send Bucky into—into—” Tony was close to shouting when he cut himself off, trying to calm the flurry of emotions brewing in him.

He looked at Steve, who looked away, shame-faced.

“You saw him?” he said, shoulders hunching downward.

Tony huffed. “Yeah. Yeah, I saw him, though I don’t think he even knew I was there. So you’d better give me something to convince me not to come back down here with my other suit, ’cause I am this—” he held his thumb and pointer finger a millimeter apart, “close to changing my mind on attire.”

“I-I might have messed up,” Steve admitted with a grimace.

“Oh, you ‘might have messed up?’ Give me a fucking break, Steven, and tell me what the fuck is going on!”

Tony was pacing, unable to keep still with the energy his anger was pumping through him, stopping only to point and gesture angrily to emphasize his words. Tony rolled his eyes at Steve’s surly expression, glaring holes into his boots.

“Well? Anything to say for yourself?” he demanded.

Steve’s teeth clenched. “What do you want me to say, Tony?” he yelled back. “Yes, I messed up. I completely and profoundly messed up!” Steve threw his arms up in frustration as he finally stood.

“I—he—he opened up to me and I didn’t understand! I didn’t get it, I didn’t want to, because it scared me, so instead of trying to understand I got angry, and I just—” Steve waved his hand again, his voice taking on a desperate tone. “I reacted, and I was wrong! Sam already explained it all, and I kind of get it, but it doesn’t erase what I said, and now he’s—Bucky’s—”

Steve took a gasping breath, blinking, and Tony felt shock run through him as he wondered, suddenly, if he was about to see Steve cry.

“I tried. I tried to talk to him, to apologize, but—” Steve shook his head and fell silent.

Tony did feel sympathy. Steve looked guiltier than he had ever seen him, and it was obvious that he was shaken by whatever the hell had happened to Bucky as a result of their fight, but it didn’t erase the fact that it had happened, and this was the fallout they were left with.

“You will fix this. I don’t care how you do it, but you are going to make this better, do you hear me?”

Steve swallowed thickly, but nodded nonetheless. Tony watched as he closed his eyes and took a breath, before squaring his shoulders and looking up at him with determination.

“Yeah, I will.”

Tony nodded. “I’m going to go back upstairs to see if anything’s changed, maybe talk to Sam, if he’s still here. Then I’m going to go down to the workshop and haul ass on reprogramming our security, ’cause the last thing we goddamn need is another Hydra attack while Bucky’s injured and —” Tony waved his hand, vaguely.
Steve nodded, thankfully still looking determined.

“And you are going to pull your shit together and work on fixing whatever it is you broke between the two of you, or I swear to God, the closest you’ll get to my bedroom is the park bench across the street, got it?”

“Loud and clear.”

“Good,” Tony said, fixing him with another unimpressed look before marching out of the gym, letting the door bang shut behind him.

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“Is Sam around?” Tony asked when he was alone in the elevator.

“Mr. Wilson is currently assisting the repair crews.”

“Take me there.”

He stepped out on Bucky and Steve’s floor, happy to see that the bodies had been moved and most of the blood and bullet casings had been cleaned up. There was still some debris lying about from the gunfight; however, Tony was pleased to note that it appeared most of the damage would be relatively easy to fix.

He spotted Sam talking to a couple of workers in the far corner, and waved to get his attention. Sam excused himself, making his way over.

“Good, you’re here,” he said, nodding in greeting.

“Yep.”

“You seen either of them yet?”

“Yeah, just finished… speaking with Steve.”

Sam huffed in amusement. “You yelled at him too, huh?”

“It was hard not to.”

Sam sobered and nodded. “He’s one of my best friends. I love the guy, but he was outta line.”

“I was actually hoping you could help shed some light on it.”

Sam nodded and sighed. “Okay, first off, usually I wouldn’t be telling this to anybody, but, given the situation, and the fact that I’m not technically running a support group here—though, I think maybe we should start one, ‘cause oh boy—I’m not under obligation to stay tight-lipped.”

“I understand that, and I know you’ve done work running therapy groups for vets. If you have any insight as to what’s going on here, I could really use the help,” Tony said.

“First off, you gotta know that Bucky, he might not have been talking about it, but he’s been struggling. He’s been traumatized to hell and back, and he doesn’t really know what to do or how to deal.”

Tony winced, his mind automatically dredging up memories of Afghanistan. He was gone for three months. Bucky was a POW for seventy years.
Tony’s hand found the scar on his chest and rubbed it absently, but nodded to show he was listening.

“I don’t know for sure, but I’d say Bucky’s been stewing for a while now on maybe mentioning something to someone. Maybe the attack today was that final push he needed to open up, I don’t know, but he decided it was time to talk—and, naturally, he picked Steve. Steve’s been the one constant that keeps reappearing in his life, so it’d make sense.”

“Except it didn’t end well.”

“Nope.”

“What’d he say?”

Sam shook his head. “Bucky told Steve that he misses things about Hydra, and Steve lost his collective shit.”

Tony blinked in surprise. “Bucky said that?” he asked.

Tony immediately thought back to the cold cave, and felt a phantom shiver run up his spine. There wasn’t a day that went by where he regretted blowing that place to shit, and he sure as hell didn’t miss it. The only thing he regretted was not being able to bring Yinsen with him.

“Yeah, but it doesn’t mean what it sounds like. It’s common for POWs. Bucky’s autonomy was stripped away from him for over seventy years, and it’s overwhelming to suddenly have it all back. Even the simplest choices can feel like monumental ones to him. It’s terrifying and confusing, where following orders was simple and familiar. That’s what he misses.”

Tony nodded, building the picture in his head. He thought back to earlier that morning, when Steve had been asking Bucky what he wanted to eat or drink.

_I don’t know!_

He could remember the frustration in Bucky’s voice, and Tony felt his insides twist at the memory.

“Of course, Steve’s issues with Hydra run a mile long, and he’s never been able to keep a clear head when Bucky’s involved. Add some repressed anger issues and overprotective instincts, and you got yourself a pretty volatile situation,” Sam continued.

“Bucky opened up, and Steve didn’t want to hear it.” Tony let out a groan.

“Yeah. So Steve flips and tells him to shut up, and that’s exactly what happened. He shut up tight. After a bit of yelling of my own, I was able to explain it all to Steve, and he tried to apologize, but the damage was already done, man.”

Tony let out a long breath that Sam could sympathise with. The whole situation was fucked.

“God, I hope Pepper still has good control over the PR team, ’cause tomorrow’s headline’s probably going to be, _Stark Kills America’s Golden Boy._”

Sam chuckled in amusement.

His reply was interrupted as both their phones went off simultaneously.

**Widow:** _He’s woken up a bit._
Tony looked at Sam, who nodded, and they both went for the elevator.

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Tony didn’t know exactly what he’d been expecting to see when he got back up to the penthouse, but Natasha leading a confused and lost looking Bucky into the lounge was not it.

Tony didn’t announce his presence the way he wanted to (simply out of habit), but instead, slowed his walk and watched the two interact. He could hear Natasha speaking quietly in what was definitely Russian, her tone soothing. She pulled him gently toward the couch and motioned for him to sit. He paused, looking between her and the couch once, before following her instruction and sitting. Natasha looked up and met his gaze, and the lead ball making itself at home in his gut seemed to grow heavier. She whispered something to Bucky that he didn’t seem to respond to, and then moved to meet Sam and Tony across the room.

“He seems to respond a bit to Russian,” she said, quietly. “He’s walking around now, but only when led, so he’s obviously hearing what I’m saying to some extent. He was tracking my movements with his eyes, so—progress, I guess.”

Tony sighed, rubbing his forehead and temple.

“Maybe—maybe if we keep him moving and—I don’t know, interacting, it’ll help jog his memory?” Tony said, looking between Sam and Natasha.

Sam shrugged and pulled a ‘Maybe’ face.

“Could happen. At the moment, it’s about all we can do.”

“All right, I think we should have him under pretty much constant supervision,” Natasha said. “I don’t know what kind of mindset he’s in right now, but, it’s not fully the Winter Soldier’s, and obviously it’s not Bucky Barnes, either. Regardless, if he swings one way or the other, I’d rather it not be with him alone.”

“Agreed,” said Sam, with a forceful note in his voice. At Tony’s cocked brow, he continued, “If he wakes up as Bucky, then the last thing his ass is gonna need is thinking he’s been abandoned or some shit, and I’ve faced the Winter Soldier. I’m not keen on the idea of that running around unchecked, trying to kill us.”

Tony nodded. “Point.” Then sighed. “Can you two take first watch, then? I need to check on Friday’s systems and get started on the security upgrades.”

Natasha and Sam both nodded.

“We’ll keep you updated, man,” Sam said.

“Thanks,” Tony said.

He looked back at Bucky, who didn’t appear to have moved a muscle. He let a weary sigh pass his lips before he moved back into the elevator.

“Take me down to the workshop.”

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Steve paced the length of the hall in front of the elevator, as he wracked his brain, trying to come
up with a solution. He could admit that he had messed up. Badly. When Bucky had told him he missed Hydra, his mind had immediately gone to assume the worst. If Bucky missed Hydra, it must mean he’d enjoyed it, and Steve had seen Hydra; the things they’ve done, the lives they’ve ruined. The thought of Bucky finding anything good in that was nothing short of terrifying.

Of course, if he’d kept his mouth shut, kept his head cool and allowed Bucky to explain, then all of this could have been avoided. He hadn’t though. He’d let his fear cloud his judgement, and he’d snapped—and he’d hurt Bucky. Badly.

It hadn’t taken him long to realize how badly he’d screwed up.

In fact, he remembered the distinct, sickening feeling that’d washed over him, sometime between Sam yelling at him to, “Sit your ass down, Rogers, we’re about to have a lesson!” and, “Now get your ass in there and apologize to the man, or so help you God!”

Steve had been pretty damn quick to do just that. He’d been surprised to find Bucky in Peter’s room, but had shrugged it off, too worried about how he was going to apologize.

When Bucky first ignored him, he’d thought that maybe he was getting the cold shoulder, and yeah, he kind of deserved it, so he just tried again. He pushed away the stubbornness of his ego and dropped to his knees in front of Bucky, took his hands in his, and begged to be forgiven.

Then he’d gotten a look at Bucky’s face, and his panic had arisen once more. Steve had seen statues that looked livelier. First he’d tried to break Bucky out of his strange trance himself, and then he’d called for Sam. When Sam could do nothing, Steve had called Natasha. When she couldn’t do anything either, he had brought up Tony’s number on his phone—and then hesitated. He hadn’t mustered up the courage to hit call before Natasha was pulling out her own phone and pressing it to her ear, shooting Steve a look that had him tucking his metaphorical tail between his legs—and promptly running away.

In his defense, he had just come to the realization that he may have legitimately broken his boyfriend, and he needed time to clear his head. Figure out a plan to fix things. But by the time Tony had shown up, Steve had gone through three reinforced punching bags, and was still no closer to a solution. By the time Tony left, Steve had felt both scolded and bolstered. He had to fix this.

Yeah, it sounded way easier in his head.

Encouraging himself, he returned to the penthouse. The lounge was surprisingly empty of life. He checked Peter’s room, and sure enough, he could hear Natasha speaking quietly in Russian.

He tried to rest, but his guilty conscious tied him to the waking world. He paced and thought, and when his restlessness grew to be too much, he would peak in on Natasha and Bucky. It was mostly sporadic, but at around 2 A.M., Steve gave up any notion of sleep and told Natasha to go to bed. She almost argued before Steve pointed out that he wouldn’t be finding sleep either way.

He stayed up all night, recounting stories of missions they had worked together during the war, things they had done as kids, even a couple stories involving Bucky’s sister. Bucky watched him for the most part, but never gave any other sign that he was listening, or that he even understood.

Natasha came back at around eight in the morning to take over watch once more, and let Steve get ready for the day’s meeting.

Steve rubbed at his tired, burning eyes with a heavy sigh, then checked his watch. Tony would be
coming up from his lab soon to take them back to HQ. Natasha had offered to stay behind with Bucky; however, Clint had vetoed, saying that, since she was being presented as a potential member of any future panel that overlooked the Avengers, then she should take part of the meeting.

He wanted to argue his attendance, but knew there was no point. Even if Steve didn’t want to be there, Captain America needed to be.

He fished his phone from his pocket as it vibrated.

**Tony:** *Meet in the garage in 15*

Okay, he typed and hit send.

This was the first he’d heard from Tony since their confrontation earlier. Not that he blamed him; if he had the ability to avoid himself right now, he’d definitely take advantage.

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Walking into HQ, Steve tried to push back all the problems whirring in his brain and don the Captain’s persona. If Tony had made anything clear, it was that he did not particularly like Thaddeus Ross. Steve had done research of his own leading up to this, and it wasn’t hard to spot the conflicts of interest. Ross had a long military history, and was none to pleased when Stark Industries pulled out of weapons manufacturing. Then of course, there was the whole ordeal with Bruce, and not to mention the Super-Human Registration Act.

Steve took his seat at the head of the table when they got to the room they’d been assigned for the meeting, while the rest of the Avengers took seats around him, minus Tony, who found himself a seat behind Steve, in the background. Steve turned to glance at him, curiously.

“I’m an advisor now, remember?” Tony said, catching his glance.

Steve nodded. It’d slipped his mind that Tony had taken a more backseat role in the Avengers, after the situation with A.I.M and the Mandarin. Honestly, Tony still responded like he was on-call, and with all the hours he put in upgrading their armor and weapons—to Steve, he was still a fulltime member.

His attention was drawn back to the front of the room when Thaddeus Ross himself entered. Steve straightened, giving the man his full attention—or as much as he could, with his worries eating away at the back of his mind. He tried to stuff them down, though; Tony may not like the man, but he was in a position of power that they could not ignore. Plus, it would be rude to fully form an opinion of the man without having met him properly. He had enough people angry at him right now, without pissing off the Secretary of State.

Steve didn’t like Ross’s tactics for pressuring them into the Accords. After a story about a heart attack that resulted in a triple bypass that he used to perhaps humanize himself to them, he was quick to jump on the messy side that came along with saving the world. Using guilt and fear wasn’t the way to win over his team. At least when Tony presented the Accords, he did so by (mostly) trying to emphasize the benefits, and how they’d help.

The man was also particularly grumpy, and liked to snap at them as if they were children, which Steve found particularly offensive. He turned to shoot Tony a look like, ‘Can you believe this guy?’ but stopped when he saw how tense Tony looked, his hand covering most of his face as he listened to them discuss the document and previous actions.
Steve felt concern bloom in his chest, but refrained from doing anything, knowing that his recent actions were undoubtedly part of what had Tony so stressed. Great, now he was thinking about yesterday. Yeah, there’s the guilt again.

On the plus side, it didn’t seem like Natasha much cared for Ross, either, based on the snarky attitude she carried despite him knowing, for a fact, she was already one-hundred-percent on board with the Accords.

It was fun to watch her try and play the field but again, Ross didn’t seem interested in their questions, which Steve didn’t find fair at all. Yeah, he wasn’t much of a fan of this, ‘Shut up and do as you’re told’ attitude. At least he would now have more input the next time Tony complained about the man.

Having things you like in common was good; having things you don’t like in common is fun.

He sighed quietly, trying to remain professional, though he didn’t have the energy to fully mask his skepticism or dislike of the man completely off his face. He was more than relieved when Ross announced the date for the signing (as if Tony hadn’t already told them, as soon as he knew about it) and then left.

Steve was a bit disappointed, however, when Tony made it obvious that he still wasn’t ready to really interact with him yet. Which, fair. Steve figured he deserved his anger and disappointment. It still hurt though. He tried to shrug it off, vowing that he’d do better. He’d show Tony that he’d do whatever it took to right his wrongs.

He suddenly wanted to get back to the tower as soon as possible. Back to Bucky.

Sam had suggested that Steve not give up talking to him, that maybe it might help jog his memory. So Steve decided that’s where he’d start. He’d make Bucky some lunch and talk with him some more. Even if it didn’t get any results, he wouldn’t stop trying. He couldn’t.

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Clint looked up lazily from the couch when Natasha and Steve entered the penthouse.

“How was the meeting?”

“Ross is an egotistical bully, but a powerful one, so we’re going to try to not piss him off,” Natasha said. “Though it’d probably be fun to.”

Clint snorted in amusement. “Glad to have missed it, then.”

“How’s Bucky?” Steve asked.

“I-Robot scared the shit outta me when he started moving about on his own, but other than that, nothing to report. I gave him a juice box like fifteen minutes ago, but he just kinda stared at it—and then at me. I don’t think he requires human sustenance anymore,” Clint said.

“Where is he? You’re not supposed to leave him,” Steve said, disapprovingly.

Clint put up his hands. “He’s in Peter’s room again, seems to like it in there, for whatever reason. Unlike you two, I don’t speak brainwashed assassin, so he just kinda stares at me blankly. Seriously creepy. Sue me for wanting fifteen minutes alone.”

Natasha huffed in annoyance and shot him a look.
“He’s fine, Nat. I told Friday to alert me if anything changed. I’m not completely irresponsible.”

“He started moving around, though?” She asked.

“Yeah, he’s actively observing things around him now, so whatever processors he has installed are obviously back up and running.”

“He’s not a damn computer, Hawkeye,” Steve snapped.

Clint put up his hands in a surrendering motion again. “Right. Sorry, Cap.”

“Has he eaten?” Natasha asked.

“I put out some snacks, but they might as well have been made of plastic for all the attention he paid them.”

Her face pulled into concern. “He hasn’t eaten since regressing,” she muttered.

Steve felt his nerves flare up again, that was—he checked his phone’s clock—nineteen hours ago.

“Has he had anything to drink?” he asked, his concern growing.

“Didn’t seem interested in the water bottle earlier or the juice just now,” Clint said, sounding a bit more grave.

Steve sighed. “All right. I’ll go make him something I know he likes, maybe…” he trailed off. It was hard to get his hopes up.

“Hey, it’s worth a shot,” Natasha said in an encouraging voice.

Steve nodded, feeling better that he was able to do something, and headed to the kitchen.

He studied the spread of food currently in the fridge and pantry, deciding on something simple; soup and grilled cheese. He also couldn’t help but notice that they had all the ingredients to make a good old-fashioned casserole. He could make it for Bucky for dinner, just like his mom used to make it.

With that decided, Steve got to work heating the soup and cutting the cheese, working as quickly as he could, without running the risk of making anything less than perfect. It had to be perfect. Once everything was done, he made sure to use matching dishware to plate the food, and grabbed a glass of milk.

The door to Peter’s bedroom was open a bit, but Steve paused in the hall to take a few calming breaths. He could do this.

“Hey, Buck,” he said in a voice that he hoped sounded both happy and soothing. Bucky didn’t reply, so he switched to Russian. “I brought you lunch.”

Bucky looked up at him and the food he carried. Steve placed the dishes on the night table, next to where Bucky sat on the bed.

Steve felt his facade crumble a little at Bucky’s lack of response.

“Do you know who I am?” he asked.

Silence.
“Do you know where you are?”

Bucky continued to stare blankly at him. Steve sighed.

“I’m sorry,” he said, voice quiet in the sudden helplessness that washed over him. “I’m an idiot.”

There was still no answer. Dejectedly, Steve shook his head.

“I’ll come back later with dinner.”

It was hard not to feel disheartened.

Steve left the door open a small bit, turning to go back into the lounge. Clint had taken up a controller and was playing Mario Kart, and Steve settled in to watch half-heartedly, and maybe, if he was being honest with himself, mope a bit.

Clint huffed and sat his controller down after a few matches.

“Not the same without my player two,” he groused.

Steve felt a pang of guilt. Clint and Bucky’s videogame duels were now infamous among the Avengers crew.

“I mean, I guess it doesn’t matter if he’s going around doing a great mime impression, considering I’m deaf anyway, but it’d be so much better if he could remember videogames—I put time into teaching him this shit,” Clint continued to bemoan.

Steve knew that was an exaggeration. Clint had challenged Bucky to one round of Soul Caliber, which Bucky had promptly lost, and then Bucky had put in the time and energy to practice, just to show him up the next time Clint came over to the tower. Steve had rolled his eyes at it at the time, but it had paid off—Bucky was a videogame champ.

Steve sighed, sadly.

“I just want to hear his voice, even—even if it’s just to yell at me. I just…” he trailed off, quietly.

There was a beat of silence.

“You’re telling me,” Clint broke it with a huff. “The last time I got to hear his voice, it was him telling Tony the horrible shit you did to his ass. That’s what I have to remember his voice by—you have no idea how badly I would give literally anything for those to not be the last words I ever hear from him.”

Steve stared at Clint, wide eyed.

“Is—is that why you ruined your hearing aids?” Steve finally asked.

Clint looked him square in the eyes. “Wouldn’t you?”

Steve shook his head in bewilderment as laughter built up in his chest. Good God, no wonder Clint had been so distraught.

He heard Clint join him in his laughter, and Steve looked at the other man.

“Sorry you had to hear about that.”
Clint shrugged. “Eh, just more wonderful memories to repress,” he said. Then, “I’m just lucky I’m a pro at this whole lip-reading thing. Honestly, I thought Tony would have new hearing aids for me by now, but—” he shrugged. “He’s got a lot on his plate.”

Steve nodded in agreement about that.

“Wanna give it a go?” Clint asked suddenly, holding out another controller.

Steve studied it for a moment. It wasn’t really his thing, and it felt wrong to try and enjoy himself when Bucky was in the state he was in.

Clint must have seen the war going on over his face, because he shrugged.

“No pressure, Cap, but you should know—you don’t gotta torture yourself. You moping around isn’t gonna fix Barnes.”

Steve frowned. “Neither is playing videogames,” he stated.

“Yeah, probably not, but it makes you feel better. And who knows, maybe him watching will jog his memory?” He nodded to the side.

Steve turned and jolted. Bucky was standing in the lounge now, back to the wall, observing the TV. Even with his enhanced senses, he hadn’t heard Bucky come into the room.

Cautiously, he accepted the controller from Clint.

“All right, let’s do this.”

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The videogames didn’t seem to make any sort of impression on Bucky, but Steve had enjoyed himself for a short period of time. Well, as much as he could, with Clint winning almost every single round. He’d started catching up during the final rounds, and even came in first once, so he couldn’t chalk up his first experience with Mario Kart as a complete failure.

In the evening, Steve cleared away the untouched soup and grilled cheese, and brought a plate with a steaming hot slice of casserole to Peter’s bedroom, where Bucky had once more retreated.

“You’ll like this one, I promise,” he said, setting it down next to Bucky. “It’s just like Ma used to make it. Remember? You always loved casserole night.”

Steve looked to Bucky imploringly.

“It’s—it’s fine if you don’t want to talk, but please eat something—drink something. I-I don’t know what to do,” he admitted.

Bucky, of course, remained silent, not giving anything away. Steve sighed, and reached up to brush a strand of Bucky’s hair away that had shifted from place, but Bucky jolted suddenly, moving quickly away. Steve froze, looking from his raised hand to Bucky, and back again.

His throat tightened painfully and he gasped.

“Buck, no, Bucky, I—I’m not—I wouldn’t—” he struggled to get out the words, as the tightness in his throat spread down into his chest.

Bucky stood tensely, staring resolutely at his socked feet.
Steve backed away, then quickly turned and fled the room, as a burning sting came to his eyes.

He was so desperate to flee the scene that he almost ran straight into Natasha, who was waiting in the hall.

“Hey,” she said, gently resting a hand on his arm.

Steve nodded, not trusting his voice, and swallowed the painful lump daring to rise in his throat.

“You’re not giving up, are you?” she said.

Steve shook his head, resolutely. “No, of course not!” he replied, finally regaining control over his voice.

“Really? ‘Cause it kind of looks like you’re running away.”

“I—he—” Steve shook his head, a despairing look crossing his face. “He thought I was going to hurt him. He flinched away from me—”

“Nothing’s happened that you can’t fix.”

“You don’t know that! I-I’ve ruined everything. He doesn’t trust me anymore.”

“No, Steve, that person in there,” she pointed to the door, “that isn’t Bucky. Bucky still trusts you, but you need to find a way to get through to him. It might take a lot of time, and it’ll definitely take some effort, but don’t you dare give up on him.”

Steve shook his head, taking deep breaths to calm his breathing.

“I won’t. I promise I won’t.”


That startled a small laugh out of him, and Natasha grinned.

“Don’t worry, I’ll stay up tonight.”

Steve nodded and retreated to the lounge, where he’d set up a spare blanket and pillow on the sofa. Tony was still down in his lab, but Steve figured that he wouldn’t be very welcome in the man’s bed, regardless.

It took him a long time of tossing and turning before he was able to drift off into sleep, and when he did, his dreams were filled with flashes of icy cold water, gunfire, the screeching of twisting metal, and the sight of Bucky falling—over, and over, and over.

Chapter End Notes

So, a little bit of Steve's POV in this chapter.
Sometimes even good people can do bad things, especially in ignorance.

Thanks for reading, please leave kudos and/or comment to let me know what you think! <3
Have a very good weekend, and a HAPPY NEW YEAR!
Tony looked over the data entries for what must have been the millionth time since the Hydra attack. He wanted so desperately to perfect the work before him, but more and more, he was beginning to feel like he wouldn’t be satisfied until he tried a full system overhaul. Paranoid? Probably. But it could also be argued that he hadn’t been paranoid enough earlier, and thus, unintentionally allowed terrorists access to his building.

“Mr. Stark, Dr. Banner is requesting access.”

“Brucie?” Tony’s head popped up, and he swiveled to look at the glass doors. “Let him in!” he said, waving when he saw Bruce waiting.

“Hey, Tony.”

“Science Buddy!” Tony smiled. Lord, it had been awhile since he’d done that.

“I came by as soon as I heard,” Bruce offered.

Tony sighed, the smile slipping from his face. “Heard what?”

Bruce shrugged. “Something about a Hydra attack, and that Bucky isn’t well.”

Tony nodded and waved Bruce over, then brought up a video feed of the penthouse. Clint and Natasha were in the lounge, as Bucky stood in one of the corners, where he had the best view of the room.

“He went practically catatonic for a while. Now he’s responding, but doesn’t seem to be himself. He refuses to speak, eat, or drink anything—” Tony began.

Bruce’s face twisted in concern. “How long has it been since he’s had any nutritional intake?”

Tony shook his head. “He went into this state early Wednesday evening.”
Bruce’s posture straightened in alarm.

“I called Helen Cho yesterday, but he reacted… poorly to seeing a doctor.”

“Did he… is he the Winter Soldier?”

Tony shrugged. “That’s the thing we’re trying to figure out. The only examples we have of the Winter Soldier’s behavior are some Hydra files, and then what happened in DC. Those examples all show the Soldier while under direct orders. We don’t really have anything to compare—” he gestured at the security footage, “this to. We’re flying blind and—and guessing. Truth be told, we have no idea what he needs right now, what kind of mental state he’s in—apart from unstable—and I-I don’t know what to do!”

Bruce remained silent during Tony’s small outburst, but placed a hand on his shoulder and squeezed in a reassuring manner. It was a little awkward, but neither of them were great at the whole social interaction thing—Bruce anytime, and Tony whenever it required genuine emotion.

“Why don’t I go over things with Helen? Maybe we can figure something out together?”

Tony looked up at his friend. “You’d do that?”

“Of course. I mean, if he flips out and tries to kill me, then you’ll have more repairs to foot the bill for, but, if I can do something to help, then I will.”

Tony sniggered at his initial comment and nodded.

“Okay, then. I think Helen’s still down in Med-Bay; she said she’d stay until we figured something out, or…” he shrugged.

Bruce nodded. “All right. Now that that’s straightened out, when’s the last time you’ve eaten?”

Tony sighed. “Friday.”

Tony started. “Shit, what time is it?”

“Uh, just after twelve. Why?”

“Peter’s coming over today,” Tony frowned at his computer screens. “Hydra’s virus won’t work a second time, but I’m still worried about the security levels. And with Bucky in the state he’s in—what the hell am I going to tell him? He’s going to want to see Bucky, it’s not like I can keep them separated for however long it takes to fix this!”

“That, I can’t help you with,” Bruce said with a shrug. “Though I suggest you tell him the truth, or as close to it as you can, without compromising the situation.”

Tony groaned.

“That, I can’t help you with,” Bruce said with a shrug. “Though I suggest you tell him the truth, or as close to it as you can, without compromising the situation.”

Tony groaned.

“The last thing I want is for Peter’s view of Bucky to—to change. They were getting along so well,” Tony concluded.

“You know Peter better than I do.”

Tony nodded.
“Nice evasion, by the way,” Bruce started, “but you should still come upstairs and grab something to eat.”

Tony threw Bruce an unimpressed look.

“If you burn yourself out, then you’re not going to be able to help anyone, and it seems like people need you right now.”

It was a bit of a low blow, and Tony winced, but it was effective based on Tony’s resulting nod.

“Yeah, okay.”

Bruce sighed, relieved. “Okay, good,” he said, “I’ll go see Dr. Cho.”

They parted ways in the elevator, Bruce getting off at the Med-Bay, and Tony going up to the penthouse. The lounge was empty again when he arrived, so he detoured to his bedroom, where Bucky was with Natasha. He had to fight against an instinct that recoiled at the thought of Natasha somewhere private to him. She was there because Bucky needed her.

“You finally emerge,” she said.

Tony nodded and moved into the room. He smiled at Bucky, who looked at him in what appeared to be mild curiosity. It wasn’t the same blank look as the first few times he’d seen him. Tony felt his chest clench.

“Hey, Bucko,” he said, before turning back to Natasha. “Yeah, I have a good start on the security upgrades.”

“Good,” she said with a nod. “I’ve been trying to acquaint Bucky with your room more than Peter’s, since he’ll be showing up later.”

“Good idea.”

“What are you going to tell him?”

“I’m working on that, too,” Tony admitted.

“Have you eaten anything yet?” she asked, giving him a look.

Tony rolled his eyes. “I will, I wanted to check on Bucky first.”

“Go make something for yourself,” Natasha said, giving him a look that didn’t leave room for argument.

Tony huffed but nodded, and with another smile at Bucky, he left the room.

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Tony entered the kitchen and immediately caught sight of Steve at the counter. He watched as Steve prepared yet another meal, which would probably go as uneaten as the last. Tony had gotten into the habit of watching what was going on in the penthouse while he worked on security measures; he was aware of Steve’s new habit of offering Bucky food, every day, every meal, without fail.

His eyes zeroed in on Steve’s hands as he worked, and a frown pulled at Tony’s brows when he saw the swollen and bruised knuckles.
His mind flashed back to Wednesday, when he had first found Steve, huddled in the gym with the broken punching bags. It had been the first time he’d broken any since Tony had them reinforced with Kevlar and titanium. Of course, Steve’s hands still shouldn’t have remained this damaged, unless…

He wondered how many littered the gym floor now.

Tony’s gaze flickered back up to Steve’s face, or what he could see of it, with the man’s back mostly facing him—but he could still read the strain in Steve’s posture, and the twitching in his jaw as his teeth clenched and unclenched in rhythmic fashion. Every ounce of his concentration was focused on making and perfecting a lunch that wouldn’t be touched.

Tony turned and quietly left the room, headed to the bathroom to grab what he needed, then headed back.

Steve was putting a toothpick into the slices of bread to hold them together when he entered back into the kitchen. One of the sandwich halves kept slumping over despite the pick keeping it together, and Tony could see a frustrated and desperate look build in Steve’s eyes as he kept trying to fix it; he knew the emotion had nothing to do with the actual food.

Sighing quietly, Tony put down the supplies he’d gathered on the island and walked up to stand next to Steve. He placed a gentle hand on the man’s arm, startling him. Steve’s head whipped to the side to look at him.

“T-Tony,” Steve began, his voice rough. He cleared his throat and blinked the wet shine from his eyes. “I, uhh—I didn’t hear you come in.”

“Leave it,” Tony said, keeping his voice pitched low and nodding to the plate of food. “C’mere.”

He led a compliant Steve over to one of the stools and told him to sit. Next, he took a cloth and wiped away the lingering bits of butter that had strayed from the bread to his hands, before picking up a tube of ointment and dabbing some gently over Steve’s knuckles.

“I’m sorry,” Steve whispered, finally breaking the silence between them.

Tony glanced up to look at him briefly, before going back to treating his hands. He picked up the gauze he brought and began wrapping them.

“I know,” Tony acknowledged, then, after a pause, “I’m still mad at you.”

Steve nodded, acceptingly.

“Furious, even,” Tony continued, but sighed as he finished wrapping Steve’s hands.

He took them and placed a kiss over the bandage. “I know you’re trying,” he said finally.

He heard Steve release a heavily-shaking breath, and saw him nod again.

“Keep trying,” Tony said, as he packed away the first aid kit and then left to put everything away.

His tired, haggard appearance caught his attention when he glanced up in the bathroom mirror. Tony grimaced and rubbed his jaw. There wasn’t any immediate fix for the bags under his eyes, but he could at least clean up his beard before Peter showed up. Mind made up, he gathered everything he needed and got to work.
When Tony made it back into the kitchen, Steve was no longer there; however, there was a plate with a freshly-made sandwich, and a bowl of fresh, cut fruit sitting in front of his usual spot at the island. He didn’t need to look at the way his name was handwritten on the little tag of paper propped against the plate to know Steve had left it for him.

He smiled at the gesture and sat down to eat. Yeah, there was still anger there, being fueled by his incessant worry over the entire situation, but Steve really was trying to do whatever it took to make things right.

“Tony!”

Tony turned and smiled at Peter, as the kid walked over to Tony—as quickly as he could, without breaking the workshop’s no-running policy.

“Hey, Peter!” he greeted.

It was incredibly odd and relieving how the sight of this kid, happy, could ease some of the stress plaguing his body and mind.

“Friday just kinda, uhh, let me in. Hope that’s okay.”

Tony nodded. Since he was already messing around with some of Friday’s protocols, he figured he might as well adjust some of the ones surrounding Peter. He’d been planning on doing it eventually, anyway.

“Yeah, as long as I’m down here, and not working on something dangerous or classified, you’re allowed in.”

Peter looked surprised, then thrilled. “Thanks! That’s—that’s so cool!”

Tony’s grin widened at his enthusiasm.

“How was school?”

Peter shrugged as he pulled up a chair next to him, studying the lines of code displayed on the screen.

“It was okay, pretty average day—oh, except MJ leant me a book she wants me to read, so I’m gonna have to find the time to do that, too.”

“You know you can say no to things like that, right?”

Peter shot him a strange look. “Not to MJ. Plus, she’s really into this series, so I am pretty interested. I’ve just been busy lately.”

Tony nodded as he typed.

“So what are you working on?” Peter asked, changing the subject.

“Security.”

“Still?” Peter said, sounding surprised.
Tony glanced at him and nodded. “I’ve got most of the big stuff done, I’m really just nitpicking at this point.”

“Most of the big stuff?”

Tony frowned. “Yeah, there’s some new tech hardware I’ve developed along with the coding. I’ve already installed it, but in order to fully integrate it, I need to reboot the system. I’ve been putting that off until after I have everything else done, because when I do, the tower will be vulnerable until Friday comes back online.”

Peter hummed and nodded. “I thought you said the guys responsible were caught?”

Tony paused, then nodded, deciding not to correct Peter’s interpretation of what he meant when he said those responsible had been ‘dealt with.’

“Those men were from a larger organization, and there’s a chance that they could try and strike again.”

Peter frowned. “But why? What are they after?”

Tony shifted uncomfortably. Here it was, question period. He wanted desperately to be able to wrap Peter up in a bubble of happy ignorance, but he knew that, not only would that be unfair, it would also be a very short-term solution. As in, as soon as he went up to the penthouse and saw Bucky, it’d be another round of Twenty Questions.

“They were after Bucky,” he finally said.

Peter’s face slackened in shock, before twisting in concern. “Why? What do they want with Bucky?”

Tony sighed heavily. “That’s… very complicated, and mostly classified.”

A bit of an evasion? Yes. But not a lie. Peter was silent for a few seconds as he seemingly frowned at nothing, before he was looking up at Tony. Tony watched a series of expressions pass over Peter’s face, most of which looked nervous.

“Does it, uhm—does it have something to do with him being kept in—kept in hiding?”

Tony raised his brows. It wasn’t exactly a secret among them that Bucky was hiding out in the tower (after all, they had shoved him in a trunk the one time they’d let him leave), but it was also one of those things that was just left unsaid, not talked about. Until now, apparently. Because Tony knew his kid was smart and as curious as they come, so as soon as he started answering questions (that Peter had undoubtedly been sitting on for some time), he was going to start putting the pieces together in his head to figure something out for himself. Or, Tony could tell him just enough to maybe keep him satisfied. None of the gruesome details, but—

“Yes it does,” Tony finally responded, “and it’s very important that anything we discuss about this matter doesn’t leave this room. Got it?”

Tony tried to keep his face neutral as he debated with himself. He was used to keeping things close to his chest; this upfront, honesty shtick wasn’t what he was comfortable with or used to.

Peter nodded vehemently in agreement. “Yeah—yes—of course! I-I wouldn’t put Bucky in danger like that.”
Tony nodded. “Good.” He rubbed his face with his hands, then looked at Peter again. “So I guess, first things first, what do you know?”

Peter shrugged, breaking eye contact as his nerves got the better of him.

“I don’t actually—don’t actually know anything, really.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “What have you deduced.”

Peter swallowed. “Uhm, well, I guess I know that Bucky’s hiding out here for some reason, and I know that he’s the same James Bucky Barnes from the 40’s that Steve fought with and stuff—or at least, I’m like pretty sure he is, I never got to ask him.”

That had Tony raising his brows, but nodding, so Peter continued.

“And now I know that someone is definitely after him for some reason, and that they want him bad enough that they’d attack the tower, which seems like a pretty risky move. I mean, with how often the Avengers are here and stuff—sorry, I’m rambling now. Anyway, whoever these people are, Bucky must be pretty important to them, so he either knows something, or was involved in something—” Peter cut himself off, his face turning unsure as he looked to Tony. “That might not have been all that good?” he finally concluded, questioningly.

Tony studied Peter for a moment. It seemed he had the basics figured out for himself. Finally, he nodded.

“That’s pretty close to accurate. Though, I think it should be added that, the bad things he was involved in were forced.”

Peter looked distinctly uncomfortable, and then worried.

“And now those same bad guys are trying to get him back again.”

Tony nodded.

“We’re not going to let them though, right?” Peter said, sounding defiant.

Tony smiled lightly. “No. No, we’re not.”

Peter nodded. “Good,” he paused, then, “is—is he okay?”

Tony paused. “Bucky has…” he sighed. “He’s not his usual self. We’ve been trying to bring him around again but, it’s not a simple situation.”

“Can I see him?”

Tony nodded again. “Yeah, but don't expect much, he—he might not really recognize you.”

Peter frowned, but nodded slowly. “Okay.”

“Sam suggested we keep talking to him, but so far, it’s not doing much,” Tony admitted.

Peter nodded again. “Talk. I can do that.”

“I’m aware,” Tony said with a playful smile.

Peter huffed. “All right, let’s go see him!”
Peter walked into the penthouse, with Tony following close behind him. Natasha and Bucky sat next to each other on the sofa, watching the TV. Sam sat on the armchair, reading a novel.

Bucky looked over first, then Natasha. Peter realized what Tony meant by not recognizing him; Bucky narrowed his eyes at Peter, pensively.

“Hi!” Peter said, smiling at Bucky.

“Hey, you ready for your extended stay?” Natasha asked.

Peter nodded, dropping his bags on the floor and walking over to join the others in the lounge, completely missing the way Tony rolled his eyes and picked up the bags to take to his room.

“Yeah! I’ve been really looking forward to this—” he broke off, yawning. “Sorry, it’s been a long day.”

Natasha was giving him a calculating look that had him on edge, so he was more than glad when Sam spoke up.

“How’s school treating you?”

“Good! I’m just happy that it’s almost over,” Peter replied.

“I’ll bet,” Sam said, smiling.

“All the teachers are trying to cram a bunch of stuff on us at once now, so I’m loaded with homework. Plus, I have to study for finals coming up,” Peter rolled his eyes, but kept smiling.

“Hey, well, I’m sure Tony wouldn’t mind giving you a hand if you get stuck,” Sam shrugged.

“Of course,” Tony said, coming back into the lounge. He had somehow pilfered a mug of coffee from somewhere. “If you can’t find me, just ask Friday. Chances are I’ll either be here or in the workshop, though. Speaking of…” he pointed back to the elevator.

“You’ve been down there for days, take a break, man,” Sam said.

“He has a point,” Natasha agreed.

“T’m almost finished. If I keep going, I can have things ready for reboot by tomorrow morning, maybe even tonight,” Tony argued.

Natasha shrugged. “Well, Steve should be back soon to take over for us,” she said.

Tony nodded. “I’ll—I’ll talk to him later—I’m not avoiding him,” he said, catching the look Natasha was sending him.

Peter frowned, feeling a little swell of disappointment. He knew Tony wouldn’t be able to switch his schedule around completely for him, but he was still sort of hoping that he’d make an exception, at least for tonight. It was Friday after all, and Peter’s first night.

Tony must have been able to read his face, because the man let out a sigh and walked over to the loveseat Peter was sitting on.

He waved his hands in a shooing manner. “Scooch over.”
“You don’t have to stay if you’re busy!” Peter panicked. He didn’t want Tony to feel like he was forced to spend time with him.

“It’s fine, I’ll go back after dinner,” Tony said, in a voice meant to make it sound like it was no big deal.

Peter couldn’t stop the little smile that tugged at his lips, though. He looked back up to Bucky, who had been obviously tracking the conversation, based on the small movements of his head and eyes. He remembered what Tony had said before they came up here, and decided he might as well try to interact. Maybe if he kept talking, something would click?

He made sure to look at Bucky as he debated what he could talk about. Finally, he decided it probably didn’t matter too much, as long as he kept talking.

“Guess what? I totally aced my chemistry test yesterday!” he said brightly.

He watched as Bucky glanced at him, but didn’t respond.

“Ned—he’s like my best friend, I’m pretty sure I’ve mentioned him to you before—anyway, he didn’t do too good on it, which is, like, weird, ‘cause he’s actually pretty smart, but a game he was really excited about was released, like, three days before the test, so I think he might have been distracted. Anyway, I helped him study, since apparently not that many people did all that well, so our teacher’s having a make-up test on Monday.”

Peter paused to take a breath. Bucky still wasn’t responding. Maybe he should change it up.

“Oh! I totally saved this lady’s purse when I was out as Spider-Man the other day! This guy pushed her over and snatched it, but I ran him down—it wasn’t that hard with my web-shooters, to be honest—but the lady was so nice and so happy I got her purse back, she paid me, like, twenty bucks! I tried to turn it down, obviously, ‘cause I’m not, like, doing it for money, y’know? But she was really insistent, so I bought myself a hotdog, and then saw this homeless guy across the street, and gave him the change I got back. He seemed like he needed it more than I did. He was super nice, too, said his name was Bill, and he let me pet his dog, which was awesome!”

Still nothing. Peter frowned a bit.

Time to bring out the big guns.

“Also, the other night, I was using those throwing knives you got me for my birthday in the park, you know, as practice, and I might have accidentally skewered a jogger who was running by and —”

“What?” Tony snapped loudly, next to him.

Sam choked on his drink and was coughing loudly. Natasha’s brows rose, but apart from that, didn’t seem to respond. Bucky turned to look at Sam when he coughed, but otherwise, nothing.

“I didn’t actually kill an innocent jogger!” Peter was quick to assure. “I just wanted to see if it’d get a reaction!”

Tony sighed and slumped down. “Well, congrats,” he groaned.

“Well… I did kind of impale myself, though.” Peter lifted up his pant leg to show off a thick bandage. “See?”
“Peter!” Tony said, alarmed.

Natasha sighed and shook her head.

“It was an accident! I was startled by the jogger and dropped my knife!”

Tony was rubbing his temple with the hand that wasn’t cradling his coffee.

“All right, well, lucky for you, Dr. Cho is here,” Tony muttered.

“I don’t need to see a doctor, it’s just a scratch!”

“I’ll be the judge of that, I think,” Tony said, looking thoroughly unimpressed.

Peter winced. Maybe he should have omitted that last part. He looked up to Bucky, who hadn’t changed in the least, and felt his spirits drop. Bucky was always really serious about safety; if that didn’t get him to snap out of it, nothing would.

He turned his head when he heard the elevator doors open onto the floor.

A huge smile overtook Peter’s face. He was wrong, if anyone could bring Bucky around, it would be—

“Steve!”

Steve stopped then, smiled brightly at Peter. “Hi, Peter. Wow, I must have lost track of time in the gym if you’re here.”

Natasha and Sam both stood and stretched.

“I’m off,” Natasha said. “You all have a good evening, though.”

“What she said,” Sam added, and moved toward the elevator.

Natasha smiled and said something to Bucky in—Russian? Peter didn’t really know—then she was leaving, too.

Steve looked at Tony with a bit of a surprised expression. “I thought you’d still be in your workshop.”

Tony shrugged. “I’ll head down later, spending some time with the kid first,” he replied, throwing an arm around Peter, who smiled hugely in response.

Steve smiled too at the scene, and took a seat in the armchair Sam had vacated.

“You’re just in time!” Peter cheered.

“Oh?” What am I in time for, exactly?

“I’m trying to get Bucky to talk, but so far, nothing!” he said, turning to look at Bucky. He frowned. “None of my stories seem to be getting through to you, huh? But it’s okay now, ‘cause guess what? Steve’s here!” Peter pointed to Steve.

Peter missed the way Steve winced at his words, and the way he shot Tony a pleading look, and how Tony then looked pointedly away, sipping his coffee.
“You gotta remember Steve, right? He’s your best friend, if anyone can fix what’s going on, it’s him,” Peter said, sounding assured.

“I-I think I’m going to make some more coffee,” Steve said, standing, pausing only to take Tony’s now-empty coffee cup when the man held it out to him, and then retreating into the kitchen.

“Hmm, maybe pictures will help?” Peter hummed, then hopped over the back of the couch.

“Careful,” Tony warned.

Peter smiled in response, but then frowned when he looked at the elevator and didn’t see his bags.

“In your room,” Tony said, gesturing in the direction down the hall.

Peter nodded and dashed off to his room, throwing open the door and immediately spotting his bags sitting on top of his bed. He dashed over and went about grabbing his laptop. Peter paused in front of his shelf when he noticed the new boxes of LEGO sitting unopened and grinned; he’d have to take a look and send pics to Ned. Later, though—right now, he was on a mission.

He hadn’t been totally sure what to expect when riding up the elevator with Tony. The man had been rather vague, and seemed more content on figuring out what Peter had put together in his mind, rather than explaining the situation in detail. However, he was grateful that he had at least confirmed his theory was accurate.

Still, actually seeing the state Bucky was in made him uneasy. Sure, Peter had figured out that the man was struggling with something, that he had some kind of past to him—his combat skills, the history he had discovered, plus the time Bucky had almost attacked him had all proven that.

But at the same time, Bucky always seemed to be someone who rose above it, seemed strong and capable and steadfast. Seeing him mute and barely responsive wasn’t sitting right with Peter at all. So, he was going to do everything he could to help bring him back.

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There were many strange things about his current predicament. The most frustrating of which was his inability to pinpoint who his current handler was supposed to be. The red-haired woman, whose face and voice brought back inklings of memory, spoke first to him properly; however, she did not present a mission or orders to follow, apart from occasionally following her.

There was also the fact that no one had taken him to be reset. Whispers of memory came to him when he spent too long without recalibration.

He listened to the others around him to try and learn more. Natasha, that’s what the others called her—but somehow, to him, she was Natalia. Though, the whys of it were still lost to him. Her vague familiarity struck a chord with him, and made him feel more comfortable in her presence than the others’.

Then there was the large blond, Steve. He made him the most uneasy. Like the redhead, his presence brought with it whispers of memory. It was mixed, though; he had a notion that this man was somehow a part of a previous mission, and that notion told him not to trust him.

Another part of it felt older, though; deeper, and was horrendously enticing. The picture in his mind would almost seem clear for a few moments when the man spoke, telling him stories of past events, as if he were a part of them. Maybe he was, he could not properly remember.
Every time he thought he might be close to figuring it out, the pieces slipped away from him. It was like trying to cup water in his hands—no matter how hard he tried, it still trickled away from him in the end. Maybe it was better he did not remember; despite how tempting it was to try, if he did, surely they would know, and then the pain of recalibration would come.

Steve also had a confusing habit of presenting him with food that he couldn’t eat. Surely they knew he wasn’t foolish enough to eat the meals without express orders to do so from a handler. He thought that perhaps it was a test. His training was sound, though; he wouldn’t stray from it.

Then there was the other blond man, Clint. He held himself with less restraint, and tended to go between long bouts of silence and long-winded rambling. He noticed that he seemed to have a problem with his hearing; he watched the television with subtitles always on, and watched the others’ lips closely when they spoke, and he had seen Natalia gesturing to him in quick, precise motions that he recognized as sign language. He didn’t know how he knew that, though. Clint had a habit of throwing bottles of different drinks at him for him to catch. He was tempted to throw them right back, especially when the man turned away from him. He didn’t, though.

There was Sam, too. The man was mostly quiet when they were alone, but he had heard him try a couple of times to get him to break his silence. He wasn’t around as much as the two blonds or the redhead. He had the distinct impression that he made Sam uncomfortable; perhaps he hadn’t worked with trained Assets before. He didn’t know, but he also supposed it didn’t matter much. It was obvious he didn’t have orders for him, either.

Tony rarely came around. From listening, he made the connection that he was a scientist of some kind, and was often in a lab or workshop. He wasn’t supposed to have opinion or biases, but if he was rebellious enough to do so, he would prefer Tony’s company. He couldn’t explain why he felt calm in his presence, but he did. It was much like the feeling that wanted to come to life around Steve when he spoke of old stories, but unlike with the blond, there were no hints of memory classifying Tony as a mission to get in the way. It was a shame that he was around so little—or it would be, if he had an opinion on the matter.

He had been awake for days, and still had no mission, no orders. He couldn’t say anything for sure, but that struck him as odd. From the bits and pieces that he could recall, if he was awake and out of cryo, that meant there was a purpose for him to fulfill. So why was he still here?

Maybe they were told to wake him before the handler arrived, and then complications arose? He was getting tired of waiting, and it was getting harder to turn away from the food and drink offered to him so readily.

Natalia and Sam were with him most of the day when he heard the elevator coming up to their floor. He hadn’t been to the other floors of the tall structure—or had he? Thinking about it made his head hurt, so he decided not to. Tony appeared, but with him was… someone new.

Perhaps this person had orders. He made sure to straighten up. He would be ready to comply once the handler had proven their status.

He frowned, though, when he got a better look at the newcomer. He seemed very young. Much younger than any handler could be, surely?

This child had a large presence. He noticed how the others seemed to be happy to see him. Part of their unit? He learned that they called him Peter. He seemed particularly close with Tony. Perhaps he was training under Tony? He mentioned chemistry, but he wasn’t exactly sure what Tony did. They seemed closer than a professional relationship would dictate. Perhaps family? They both had dark hair and eyes, but apart from that, didn’t look particularly similar. Maybe he took after his
Peter liked to talk, and when he did it, was in a rush of sentences that almost blurred together with the haste in which he spoke them. But as the child spoke, he thought that perhaps he had been wrong; he spoke of fighting and of training—perhaps he was another Asset-in-training. Hydra often took children to train; the younger the mind, the more malleable. But he seemed particularly more… lively, than any other training Assets he’d seen in the brief flashes of memory, which came more and more now. The group also reacted in shock, and otherwise negatively, when he mentioned killing during a training mission.

It wasn’t long after that that Steve returned, marking an end to his time with Sam and Natalia. There was something about being together, the four of them—Steve, Tony, Peter, and himself—that clawed at his mind, and caused his brain to ache awfully. He had been out of cryo with no orders for too long.

Steve left, looking distinctly uncomfortable, saying something about coffee.

He was almost startled when Peter jumped and ran out of the room. He stared after the boy curiously. A churning in his gut, which closely resembled concern, confused him further.

Peter was the first to return, carrying with him a portable computer. He was surprised when, instead of retaking his seat next to Tony, he chose to sit next to him, instead.

“I’ve been taking lots of pictures with the camera Steve got me, it’s so great!” he said, opening the computer and turning it on. The password screen came up immediately. “Here, let me show you some!”

Peter was bringing up his picture folder when Steve re-entered the room, carrying a tray with four glasses. He passed them around to the room’s occupants, and then settled in next to the boy.

Steve seemed to notice the picture file on screen and paused. “Are those pictures you took?”

“Yeah, I thought maybe showing Bucky the city or just random things might help,” Peter answered.

He also referred to him as ‘Bucky.’ Assets didn’t have names—it was odd to be in a place where everyone suddenly decided he needed one. A name implied that he was an individual—a person—not just a weapon for Hydra.

“This is the neighborhood I live in! I took this from a rooftop down the block from my apartment. I thought the lighting made the buildings look cool,” Peter said, snapping him back to what was going on on the screen.

“Oh! I took these at this outdoor artist’s market. There was some real crazy stuff happening there,” Peter clicked through the pictures. “Oh, and there were these cute little ducklings at the park last time I was there!”

“These are really very good, Peter,” Steve praised. “Tony come take a look at these!”

“Yeah, okay,” Tony began, distracted by something on his StarkPad. “Just give me a sec—” Tony was cut off, yelping as he was hit with one of the throw pillows. Steve grinned cheekily.

He looked between the two men, searching for something that might result in a fight. Then the boy next to him started laughing, his laughter accompanied by Tony’s chuckles.
“All right, all right. Work’s going away,” he said, pointedly turning off the tablet and setting it down on the coffee table.

Peter moved as close as possible to him so that they could make room for Tony.

It was—odd, being in such close quarters with people. Usually, getting this close to a person happened only moments before their death. This proximity and gentle touches were foreign concepts, and he didn’t know how to react, or if he should at all.

“Oh wow, these are really good,” Tony said, leaning forward to get a better look.

The boy continued to smile, though there was a nervous tick to it. His hearing picked up the boy steadying his breaths. He didn’t know why the child would be nervous. Maybe from being forced so close to him? But he did not have orders to harm Peter—that made him frown; he didn’t much care for that train of thought at all.

He pushed it away. It wasn’t his job to have opinions and cares.

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“You sure about this?” Sam asked, side-eyeing him as they took the elevator down.

Steve huffed, a small smile playing on his face.

It was one o’clock on a sunny Saturday afternoon, and Steve was trying not to fidget too much in his nervous state.

“You trying to talk me out of it?” he asked.

“Nope. I think it was a good decision, I just want to make sure you’re ready.”

Steve’s face turned, taking on a more serious appearance. He nodded.

“I need to do this. I need to be better, do better.”

“Well, I’m proud of you, man. It’s not an easy decision to make,” Sam said, clapping him on the shoulder.

Steve nodded and sighed, shifting nervously. Truth be told, he wasn’t sure about this—but Sam seemed to think it would help him. When it was just his own self that was put at risk, it didn’t seem to matter so much, but his words and his actions had hurt Bucky. That was unacceptable.

“How’d you know I’d ask you?” Steve questioned.

Sam shrugged. “Honestly, I didn’t. I was just thinking ahead and things lined up.”

Steve cocked a brow. “What, were you going to try and force me?” he said, a little defensively.

Sam sent him a look that said, ‘Stop being dumb.’

“Of course not. That would be counterproductive; therapy works best when it’s sought after. You gotta want to take care of your problems and baggage, man. Hell, even then, it’s hard as shit.” Sam shook his head. “And with your stubborn ass? There’s no way in hell I’m dumb enough to think this’d work unless you want it to.”

Steve sighed and nodded. He couldn’t help but feel out of his depth. Mental health wasn’t
something that was known a lot about when he was growing up. Psychiatric studies were really just beginning, and not a lot of faith was put into the so-called “Talking Cure.” Signs of mental instability of any kind were usually met with hospitalization, and then it was up to the kindly doctors to decide what new, promising treatment would be best: electroshock, lobotomies, induced comas—even purposeful infection of malarial diseases to “burn” the madness away.

Steve knew that medical treatments and therapy had come a very long way since the common practices of the 1930’s and 40’s, and he was genuinely very happy about that, but still—a deep, ingrained fear still stuck to him around the thought of potentially, willingly, partaking in such things.

“Hey, man, I know the first session is always the most nerve-wracking one, but you’ll be fine,” Sam said, obviously seeing his tension. “And listen, I’ll be close by, so if you need some support, just call me, man.”

Steve nodded and smiled at his friend. “Thanks. I appreciate that.”

The elevator stopped and opened its doors. Steve was meeting a doctor that Sam had personal experience with through his support group. The personal recommendation did help alleviate some of his fears, but many were just too instinctual at this point to fully cut out.

“Want me to wait with you?” Sam asked, knowing Friday would hold the elevator for them.

Steve paused, then shook his head. “No, it’s okay.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah. Thanks, though,” Steve said.

He finally exited the elevator onto the medical floor, where there were a few offices; one of which, Steve would be meeting this woman.

“Okay. Take care, man,” Sam said.

“You too.”

Steve sighed after the elevator doors closed, and he was left alone in the hall. He gritted his teeth and rolled his shoulders. He could do this.

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Running through the halls of the tower, Steve could only pretend to be surprised that his first therapy session would end in literal gunfire. He stormed into the armory where his suit and shield were kept, as he tried to focus on not shattering his teeth with the force in which he was clenching them.

He stormed over to his locker and punched in the access code, waiting as the computer responded and his suit was displayed before him. He didn’t know who he was angrier at—himself, for not expecting the attack, Tony, for turning off Friday, or the Nazi assholes who took the opportunity to blow a hole in the side of the building. Okay, that was a lie—Hydra definitely took the first place ribbon on pissing him off. And he was pissed. But also terrified. The last time Hydra had tried to take Bucky, he had been able to fight back, but now?

Now, Bucky was defenseless, and—
No, not defenseless. Natasha was with him.

Steve tried to take a calming breath as he headed up the maintenance stairwell. It, thankfully, seemed to help a bit—for all of five seconds, before a unit of Hydra agents entered the same hall, a floor above him.

They shot as soon as they saw him, and Steve raised his shield, the bullets ricocheting off of it harmlessly as he pushed on. Steve picked up his pace, slamming into the first of the Hydra agents. His shield cracked one directly in the face with a horrifying crunch. He threw himself at another agent, at the same time as he tossed his shield to hit another in the head. Steve was beyond furious; he punched and kicked and threw himself and his shield at every agent that stood between him and Bucky.

He panted as he continued up the stairwell, leaving behind a trail of collapsed agents.

Another explosion going off nearly had him toppling backward down the stairs. Steve’s hand shot out and clutched the stair railing, righting himself as shocks trembled through the tower. His breath picked up a bit as he worried about the structure’s integrity. He had to get to the penthouse, to Bucky and Peter. Steve rushed up the stairs as soon as he felt like he could balance. He headed for where he thought the last explosion came from, and listened through the door. He could hear voices, one of them barking orders. His eyes narrowed as he snarled soundlessly. He let all the worry and anger that he had been pushing down for days bubble to the surface, and with a growl, he burst through the door.

Steve could see he was on a floor that used to be office spaces. Luckily, it seemed empty of anyone, other than the stunned Hydra agents, who stood in front of where the large floor-to-ceiling windows used to be.

Steve took advantage of the surprise, and ran at the closest Hydra soldiers. He only had enough time to take out two before the surprise wore off and they were shooting. He used his shield, and was more than thankful for Tony’s armor upgrades, when a bullet hit him in the shoulder and bounced off.

He circled and fought, but he was rather heavily outnumbered and definitely out gunned. They weren’t kidding around this time. The ten remaining agents stared him down, and Steve glared right back, shield raised protectively in front of himself as his muscles coiled, ready to spring at the first sign. Movement behind the agents caught Steve’s attention. He frowned. For a split of a second, he could have sworn—his mouth fell open when he saw Tony’s head peak out from over a desk. ‘What in the actual hell?’

Tony brought a finger up to his lips in a shushing motion that had Steve frowning. Where was Tony’s armor?!

He watched as Tony leaned to the side and rolled something across the floor toward the feet of the agents. One of them noticed and looked down, shouted something to his companions, but it was drowned out by a loud BANG! There was a huge flash, and the room began to fill with smoke. Steve heard the telltale sounds of the repulsors charging, and took advantage of the situation, smacking his shield at more agents as he ran passed them to get to Tony.

Tony was standing now. Dodging behind office furniture could only be so much fun. Steve felt his stress rise, seeing the man. He wore a plain hoodie and jeans, a heavy looking satchel slung over his shoulders, and his forearms were armored with repulsors.

‘WHERE’S YOUR ARMOR?’ Steve yelled as he kicked a Hydra goon in the gut, and brought his
shield down across his head.

Steve glanced at Tony, in time to see him pause and waggle his armor-covered fingers at Steve.

“Where’s the rest of it?!” he demanded, hotly.

“Uhh, about that, so—” Tony began, but was cut off when he had to dodge a bullet.

Steve ran over and threw his shield in front of them, taking the oncoming fire. Tony grinned sheepishly, then dug through his bag to pull out another device.

“Brace yourself, this one goes boom!” he said, and then threw it toward the agents before Steve could stop him.

Moments later, another explosion erupted, and Steve threw his body on top of Tony to protect him from the debris.

Steve hefted himself up, glaring at Tony.

“Okay, in my defense, I didn’t think it’d be that powerful,” Tony said, accepting the hand Steve offered to help him stand.

Steve had to stifle the scream of outrage that wanted to claw out of his throat.

“Why aren’t you in your armor?” he demanded again.

Tony glared, taking up a defensive stance.

“What, you think I’m useless unless I’m Iron Man?”

Steve bit back a groan. “That’s not what I said.”

“No, but it’s what you just impl—”

Steve cut him off with a frustrated growl.

“Listen to me!” he said, marching over. “You are Tony Stark, billionaire, genius, you’re incredible and resourceful, and there is no doubt in my mind you could literally collapse the entire tower with whatever the hell is in there,” Steve gestured at his bag. “I am not questioning your abilities, but this—” he grabbed Tony’s hoodie roughly, “won’t protect you against bullets!”

Tony sighed. “Friday is down. No Friday, no suit.”

Steve bit back a curse. The door Steve came through burst open, and more Hydra ran into the room. This time, Steve didn’t hold back his scream of rage.

“Stay behind me or find cover—hurry!”

Steve covered Tony’s retreat back behind one of the walls. Once he was sure Tony wasn’t in the direct line of fire, Steve charged. He had to clear a path.

He had taken out another three agents when something huge and heavy hit him over the back of his head. Steve collapsed to his knees as Tony shouted something. What, Steve wasn’t sure, but it sounded angry. Steve looked up in time to see the man standing over him get blown back by repulsor fire. Steve stood quickly, and charged at another agent who had their gun drawn on Tony. Steve barreled into them, throwing them back out the door and down the stairs in the hall with a
bellow.

“I’ll have you know, this enraged bull look is weirdly attractive on you!” Tony called.

Steve barely had the time to roll his eyes before he had to throw his shield to take out another two agents.

Steve ran and grabbed his shield, turning to take out the last two agents, only to find them already on the ground, Natasha standing over them.

“Widow,” Steve gasped out, trying to catch his breath.

“I cleared the floor above this, too. You’re welcome,” she said.

“Yeah, thanks for that!” Tony said, coming out of cover again.

Natasha narrowed her eyes at him, then raised her brows in an ‘Ooh’ expression.

“No AI,” she stated.

Tony nodded.

“Stay in cover. I’d rather not deal with Steve’s conniption if you got shot,” she said.

Tony scoffed, and Steve rolled his eyes.

Natasha raised a brow at Steve. “You denying you’d go batshit if Tony was hurt?”

Steve shifted. “I’d kill every last one of them,” he snarled.

Natasha nodded. Tony was the only one who looked surprised at that.

Steve started, then. “What about Bucky?”

“Penthouse was secure when I left, but we should hurry back. I’ve cleared quite a few agents, but they keep making holes and crawling in like insects,” Natasha answered.

Just then, another great explosion rocked the tower from above.

“STOP BLOWING HOLES IN MY TOWER!” Tony shrieked angrily at the ceiling.

“We need to move. Now,” Steve said, marching back toward the stairwell.

Tony followed next, with Natasha bringing up the rear.

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Peter lounged on the couch with his laptop on his stomach as he gamed lazily. He was trying to keep himself awake after another night on patrol. He yawned hugely. Trying to not fall asleep was hard. He sighed.

“You look tired.”

Peter glanced up at Natasha and shrugged.

“A bit,” he answered.
“Hmm. It’s still early, why don’t you have a short nap? I could wake you in an hour or so?” she offered.

Peter paused his game so he could consider. He didn’t have the brain power to multitask right now. The last two days had been especially bad—he slipped between two moods: hyper to the point of almost being manic, and so dead-exhausted he couldn’t do anything but sit where he was, dissociating from the happenings around him. It was the worst during the end of school, and then trying to ride transit anywhere—he kept falling into micro-sleeps. He swore he could feel the snapping sensation in his brain every time he suddenly jolted himself into consciousness.

Maybe it wouldn’t be such a bad idea to catch a couple hours of sleep. He was at Tony’s place now, and he wasn’t planning on going patrolling in Queens until later in the evening…

“Okay, I think I’ll—”

Peter was almost pitched sideways off the couch when an explosion rocked through the tower.

Natasha was on her feet in an instant. Bucky, who had been watching from the far side of the room, was looking around tensely before he moved over to them.

Natasha took Bucky and quickly led him to Tony’s room and shut him in. She turned to Peter, who had followed behind.

“Do you have anything to defend yourself?”

Peter looked at the closed bedroom door with wide eyes, then at Natasha.

“Oh, my god, are—are we under attack? What?”

“Peter!” Natasha snapped.

“Sorry! Uhm, yeah—yeah, I have my web-shooters.”

“What about your knives?”

“Well, yeah, but, I’m not very good with them—and I don’t think I’d want to—”

“Peter, these aren’t good people. You need to be ready to protect yourself.”

Peter nodded.

“Go lock yourself in your room and barricade the door.”

“But—!”

“Now!”

“What about you?” Peter shouted.

“I need to go clean up this mess,” Natasha said, then pointed at Peter’s bedroom. “Go!”

Peter sighed and nodded, running into his bedroom and closing the door.

“Push your bed and desk against it!” Natasha called through the wood.

“All right!”
“I’ll be back soon!”

“Oh, okay,” Peter said, nervously.

He grabbed his web-shooters and listened as she left, then waited a few moments more, before bursting out of his room and running to Tony’s, where Bucky was.

Bucky looked up when he came through the door.

“Okay! So, the bad guys are here, I think!” Peter said, slamming the door closed behind him. “Don’t worry, though! I’m not gonna let them get you!”

Peter looked around the room. He hadn’t stepped foot in Tony’s bedroom before, and he felt a little awkward at the invasion. He tried to shake the feeling off, though; protecting Bucky was way more important. Peter was sure Tony would agree.

He ran over to the window where a couple of armchairs and a small end table sat. He lifted them up, one at a time, and stacked them against the door. Next, he threw open the closet doors and paused.

“Holy shit,” Peter said, impressed at its contents, then shook his head. That wasn’t what he was here for.

He immediately caught sight of the footstool and large ottoman, and grabbed both, putting them against the door, too.

Peter looked at his work and nodded. His heart was beating somewhat wildly in his chest.

“There, that should—” Peter was cut off by another explosion, this one sounded closer.

Instinctively, he jumped, moving close to Bucky and grabbing at the man. Peter calmed himself after some shaky breaths.

“Sorry,” he apologized, releasing his grip from Bucky’s arm.

Bucky looked down at him, a crease between his brows.

Peter sighed and started to pace restlessly. He could still feel the tendrils of exhaustion clouding his mind, but most of the effects were drowned out by the adrenaline spike.

Peter could hear the faint sound of gunfire coming from somewhere in the tower, and his stomach knotted in fear. He wished he could get a hold of Tony. He would feel a thousand times better if he were here right now. His mind flashed to his fights against the Vulture and his minions, and he shuddered. He had been so terrified, especially during that final battle on the plane. He tried to calm his breathing. He had defeated the Vulture, Mr. Toomes was in jail, because Peter had fought and won. Peter would fight and win again, if he had to.

Peter froze as a feeling of dread washed over him, like a warning. He wasn’t given the time to act before an explosion rocked the whole floor.

The first thing Peter became aware of was the loud ringing in his ears. He gasped and sputtered as he tried to catch his breath. He groaned; his whole body ached something awful when he tried to sit up.

The ringing in his ears was finally starting to lessen, and dully, he began to pick up on a heavy thud
“thUD—THUD—!” that was growing louder with each pass. Peter looked at the door, and saw the furniture against it shudder and threaten to collapse with each dull wack. Someone was trying to break down the door.

Peter gasped and forced himself up, just as the wood began to splinter.

“We gotta get outta here!” Peter grabbed Bucky’s hand and tugged. He didn’t know where they could go, but they had to do something.

Bucky pulled his hand away from Peter and continued to stand, waiting. Peter whimpered in frustration and worry. His head whipped around as the door let out a mighty groan and crack. Peter looked up to the ceiling and jumped.

Sticking, he crawled over to stay right above the door and hopefully remain out of sight. If he could take the attackers by surprise, then he might just have a better chance of stopping them—or holding them off, until the Avengers showed up.

Peter jolted when the furniture flew into the room, the door blowing right off its hinges with a great force.

Peter watched, silent and as still as he could make himself, as a towering man stepped into the room. He was dressed in heavy, black combat armor, with an intimidating helmet that covered his whole face. Some of the paint had been scratched off the surface reminded Peter vaguely of a skull. Peter could also see the man was armed to the teeth, with guns and knives and what looked, alarmingly, like explosives.

Three other men followed him into the room, guns drawn, pointed directly at Bucky.

“I told you we’d find you,” the large man spoke to Bucky, in a smarmy voice that Peter immediately hated.

Bucky, of course, didn’t respond—just looked at the intruders in a way that seemed crossed between apprehension and confusion.

“How. Never were much of a talker, were you? Except for when you were whimpering for your precious Steve. That won’t matter much to you soon, though, once we throw your brain back into a blender.”

He paused his advancement, obviously waiting for something. Peter watched as his head cocked to the side, curiously.

“No way…” the man said in disbelief, then snapped his fingers at Bucky.

Peter’s stomach lurched. Of course they’d notice he wasn’t in his right mind.

“Well, hell, if it isn’t our damn lucky day!” The man crowed with a laugh. “Half the work’s already done. I didn’t think the Avengers had it in them to utilize you properly, but I guess I underestimated them. Too bad they couldn’t finish the job though, huh? After all, they don’t know your trigger words. But guess what, Soldier? I do.”

Trigger words? What was this, some kind of bad spy movie?

But Peter watched as something changed in Bucky’s posture. He stood more at attention, tense and ready—but there was also something else. Peter frowned as he studied Bucky, trying to push down his own nerves, and that’s when it hit him. Looking at Bucky’s eyes, Peter saw fear.
“Don’t worry, I’ll give you purpose soon enough, Asset. You’re going to kill Stark and that Romanoff bitch, and then bring me Rogers. I’ll let you watch what I do to him, but you won’t care, will you? No, not unless I let you remember, and I think I just might.”

Peter felt a fury rise in him. How dare this asshole come in here and talk shit like this? It was time to move.

Peter shot out his webbing in quick motions, latching onto the three minions’ guns and yanking them up. One of the guys was a little trigger-happy, and let loose a stream of bullets, before the weapon was out of his hands and stuck to the ceiling.

The big guy spun around, and Peter dropped from the ceiling and onto one of the agents, cracking him hard over the head. He blasted webbing onto the face of another, blinding him, then stuck him to the wall, and was moving onto the third, when a fist connected with the side of his head hard.

Peter shouted and fell to the ground. He blinked rapidly, trying to rid his vision of the dark spots that danced before him. Before he could regain himself, he was grabbed by the back of his shirt’s collar and lifted into the air. Peter’s feet kicked out uselessly as he struggled against the man holding him. His ears picked up what sounded like an electric crackling, before a fist was punched into his side, and a huge pain erupted throughout his body. The force of the attack threw him clean across the room, where he hit the back wall with a solid smack.

Peter slid to the ground with a whimper. He thought, for a terrifying moment, that he was about to pass out. It reminded him a lot of the pain he’d experienced going up against Vulture’s minion with the Taser weapon, except somehow worse. A horrible smell of singed flesh caught in his nostrils, making his stomach churn alarmingly, and Peter realized that the weapon had had direct contact with his skin. He was suddenly really missing his suit. He could really use the reinforced material and Karen’s soothing voice in his ear right now.

“‘The fuck was that?’ Peter heard the man say. ‘Well, I guess before I make you do anything else, I’m going to have you kill this kid.’

Peter shivered, but braced himself. He couldn’t give up now; he was Spider-Man, and right now, his friend needed his help.

“Stop it!” Peter tried to sound braver than he felt.

He stood, pushing off the support of the wall to stand tall—well, as tall as he could, with his waist cracked open in blistering, searing pain. He also noticed that he was down to one web-shooter, the other having been damaged when he was thrown.

Still, the man in black turned to face him, and Peter could see his eyes widen in surprise. Obviously, he hadn’t been expecting Peter to be standing after taking that last hit.

“What the fuck?”

“Leave Bucky alone!” Peter shouted, as he took the bedside lamp from Tony’s nightstand and tossed it at the guy’s face, and then jumped at him.

Peter punched him hard, making him stagger backward, then used his web-shooter to stick the last minion to the wall. Another hit soared toward Peter’s head, but this time, he caught it.

“Do you really think you’re going to get away with this?” Peter gasped, trying to hold off his attacker’s fist. “‘There are Avengers here, you’ve attacked Tony Stark’s tower!’”
The man huffed, then brought his knee up and jabbed it right into Peter’s injured side. Peter crumpled with a scream of pain so intense, it took all his power not to let out a sob. As it was, a few tears leaked from his eyes, regardless. This was why he liked his mask.

The man took his opportunity to pick up Peter by the throat, and slammed him into the wall.

“How the fucking hell are you still awake, never mind fighting? This thing—” he showed off the contraption around his forearm and wrist, as it crackled with more electric current, “—should have had you down for hours, if not dead.”

Peter’s retort was cut off as he continued to struggle against the man’s grip. He coughed when said grip tightened further around his neck, briefly cutting off his air supply.

A hand yanked up his shirt that was hiding his injury, and the man holding him made an interested noise.

“Well, ain’t that something. You’re enhanced, aren’t you, kid?”

Peter felt a shiver travel down his spine. He couldn’t see the man’s face, obscured by the masked helmet, but he could see his eyes. Peter saw the way they lit up in terrifying glee, and that had him visualizing the smile to match.

“On second thought, perhaps Hydra could use another Asset.”

Peter continued to struggle, even as his vision wavered. He was so, so exhausted, and in pain, and had no idea what an asset was, but he knew it wasn’t good.

“Thanks to the recent losses in Siberia, our forces are weakened. We need more manpower. With your enhancements… you’d be a perfect Winter Soldier recruit.”

Peter wasn’t exactly sure what happened next. One minute, he was shoved against the wall, dangling by the neck, and the next, he heard something so loud and primal and terrifying that, for an oxygen-deprived second, he wondered if Tony had somehow trained exotic attack animals. The moment after that, he was no longer coughing and sputtering against the wall, but rather on the floor, and when his wits had returned to him, he looked at the scene before him in shocked wonder.

Peter watched as Bucky descended upon the armored man like a vengeful spirit, moving so quickly that Peter could barely track the motion of his limbs. He could just see the blur of fists and legs, punching and kicking the absolute shit out of the guy who had threatened him. More than that, though, was the sound—the metallic clanking of Bucky’s arm striking against the intruder’s armor, the creaking and ripping as Bucky forcibly pulled the protective gear away from the man's body to strike upon his flesh, but above that all, almost drowning it out, was the sound of Bucky’s voice as he screamed. Peter, never in his life, had heard such pure, concentrated rage.

The intruder didn’t have a chance, trying to defend himself was just about all he could do. Bucky was just too fast.

Bucky tripped him and he landed on the ground with a heavy sounding thunk. He growled and held the man down, ripping his helmet off of his face and tossing it to the side with a clank. Peter got a glimpse of his face, scarred horrifically, briefly before it was covered by Bucky’s metal fist.

“Don’t—you—EVER—go near—him—again!” Bucky snarled viciously between punches.

Peter felt a spark of something akin to excitement pass when he heard Bucky speak. Steve and Tony would be so happy! That feeling was washed away fairly quickly, though.
Peter could see that the guy had stopped struggling, his body going limp under Bucky, but Bucky wasn’t stopping. It was like he was in a whole different trance. Bucky’s eyes were wide and glinted madly, his lips pulled back from his gritted teeth in an aggressive snarl.

Blood splatters came away with Bucky’s knuckles as he continued to punch and punch and punch and—and he wasn’t going to stop. Peter realized, in an instant, that Bucky was going to kill this man.

“Stop,” Peter tried, but his voice sounded weak and unsteady, and Bucky didn’t seem to hear him.

Peter grunted as he forced himself to stagger over to Bucky. His vision tilted and swam as his body begged him to rest, but he couldn’t—not yet.

Peter collapsed to his knees behind Bucky, crawling the rest of the way. He wrapped himself over Bucky and grasped for his hands, trying desperately to still them.

“Stop, it’s okay, you can stop, he’s down. I’m—I’m okay now,” Peter pleaded. “You don’t—you don’t have to fight him anymore. It’s okay now.”

Peter didn’t really know what to do or say. He just knew that he was exhausted physically and mentally, and maybe even emotionally, and that there was a lot more happening in this situation than he fully understood.

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” Peter repeated desperately.

To his surprise, Bucky seemed to finally hear him. His punches slowed and died out. Peter could feel Bucky’s whole form rock and tremble as another scream escaped past his lips. Peter wrapped his arms tighter around him.

Bucky pushed them away from the prone form of the man on the floor, and turned so he could face Peter. Then he was wrapping his arms around Peter, drawing him close in a tight hug.

The two of them collapsed from their knees to lay splayed on the floor, still intertwined. Peter let his head rest against Bucky’s right shoulder as the man’s hand lightly ruffled Peter’s hair. Peter sighed, and closed his eyes, finally letting himself rest.

He was almost asleep when Bucky let out a long, pained groan.

Peter opened his eyes and looked questioningly at Bucky, who only sighed.

“I’m so fucking hungry.”

Chapter End Notes

#FeedBucky2018
Twenty-Three

Chapter Notes

Finally, here's the new chapter!

I'm so sorry for the delay but as I mentioned on my Tumblr I was very busy with school this week!

Regardless I hope you all enjoy the newest installment <3

Tony sat with his head bowed and cradled in his hands as he waited for Peter to come around. His mind shifted between states of contemplative calm and near-manic hysteria. At the moment, he was calm, or at least somewhat detached, as he mused on how, with all his money, the designers for the tower’s medical facilities had decided to decorate the floor with the world’s most uncomfortable chairs. Surely he could afford better. A grumble and the sound of shifting blankets had Tony’s head snapping up to look at the bed he sat next to. He stood immediately when he saw Peter’s face scrunch unhappily. He leaned over the bed, taking one of Peter’s hands in his.

“Peter? Kid, you awake?” Tony said, his gut twisting in worry at the lack of response. “Come on, open your eyes, kiddo.”

“Don’ wanna,” came a grumbly reply.

Tony’s face broke out into a huge grin as relief flared up within him. Realistically speaking, he’d known he didn’t have too much to worry about—Dr. Cho had already examined Peter and stated that he would be making a full recovery—but knowing that Peter would be okay and believing that he would be ended up being two distinctively different things.

It was easy for him to fall into despairing thoughts when looking at the unconscious teen lying pale, sweaty, and beaten under the harsh lights of the medical wing.

Peter’s face scrunched again as he blinked his eyes open, squinting at his surroundings.

“Where am I?” he asked.

“Med-Bay, remember? We brought you down a few hours ago.”

Peter nodded and forced back a yawn. “I feel weird,” he stated, head rolling to look at Tony.

Tony spared a glance at the IV bag, which was dripping fluid.

“Yeah, they’ve got you on the good stuff,” he said with a grin.

“I feel floaty and—and weird,” he gasped suddenly, trying to sit up. “Are we flying?”

Tony placed a firm hand on Peter’s shoulder to keep him down while he tried not to laugh. Much.

“No. No, we’re not flying, or floating, or anything else. Stop squirming, you need to rest.”
“’M’not tired though,” Peter said, even as he yawned hugely.

Tony rolled his eyes, petting Peter’s bangs back away from his face.

“Wow, call me convinced.”

Peter nodded, obviously too drugged up to be able to process sarcasm.

“Good, ‘cause m’actually pretty tired,” Peter said. “Can’t let you find out though, so shh!”

Tony stifled a laugh. “Your secret’s safe with me.”

He looked up and nearly jumped out of his skin when he saw Bucky, hovering nearby.

“Christ! What have I told you about—what are you doing out of bed?” Tony questioned, throwing his best ‘I’m not impressed with you’ look on his face.

“Bucky!” Peter cheered.

“Wanted to see how the kid was doing,” Bucky said, nodding to Peter.

Tony sighed. “You’re supposed to be resting.”

“I rested, I’m fine.”

“It’s been, like, three hours,” Tony said.

Bucky shrugged and walked up to the bed. “How are you feeling, kid?”

Tony rolled his eyes, letting it slide for now, though he made sure to keep an eye out for any sign that Bucky wasn’t ready to be up and about yet.

“I’m good! I’m floating.”

“You’re not floating, Peter,” Tony said, gently.

Peter frowned, as if he was considering a particularly difficult equation.

“No, m’pretty sure I’m flying,” Peter said with a serious nod, or at least what Tony supposed Peter thought a serious nod was supposed to look like, in his current state.

Bucky released a low whistle. “They really hooked you up.”

Tony snorted in amusement. “He’ll be down for the count for a while, yet.”

“Whaaaat, no! I-I need to go—to go on patrol! I need to be Spider-Man!”

“You were plenty Spider-Man earlier. Now you need to rest,” Tony said, firmly but gently.

“No, I—I can’t miss patrol, if something bad—”

“Hey, hey, hey, calm down, kid. It’s okay, you’ve done more than enough,” Bucky cut in.

Peter continued to look unconvinced. “I-I should really—”

“Should really get some more rest,” Tony finished, “I’m just waiting for your aunt to call me shrieking. I’d rather have you in sight when that happens, thanks.”
“You can’t tell Aunt May!” Peter gasped in alarm.

“Don’t worry, I’m not exactly keen on telling your concerned aunt that I broke her nephew after a single day in my care,” Tony snarked, then paused, his eyes glazing over and a slightly horrified look crossing his face. “Oh my God, it’s only been a day,” he whispered.

Bucky squeezed Tony’s shoulder in what he guessed was supposed to be a comforting gesture. His mind was reeling, though. How horrible of a caregiver did you have to be to let your kid end up in the hospital after just one day? No, not his kid. Tony gritted his teeth. He had to start nipping those thoughts in the bud right away. He hadn’t signed the papers, not yet—not ever, if this was a trial for how proficient he was at looking after Peter, then he could say, with gut-wrenching certainty, that he’d failed. Peter didn’t need that kind of failure in his life; he needed someone who he could depend on, someone who could guide him and actually keep him safe. Not someone like—

“Stop it.”

Tony was jerked out of his spiralling thoughts by the commanding tone of voice.

“I don’t know what’s goin’ through your head right now, but I know it’s wrong, so you have to stop,” Bucky continued.

Tony sighed heavily, but was saved from replying by the nurse coming in. Tony latched on to the distraction, answering any questions she had that Peter couldn’t, and watching closely as she checked the teen over.

“Dr. Cho will be in in a moment,” the nurse said as she left the room.

Tony sighed, but smiled when Peter grinned dopily at him. He couldn’t help but reach over to brush the boy’s bangs from his eyes again.

“Stop it.”

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“Dr. Cho will be in in a moment,” the nurse said as she left the room.

Tony sighed, but smiled when Peter grinned dopily at him. He couldn’t help but reach over to brush the boy’s bangs from his eyes again.

“You should rest,” he heard himself say, gently.

Peter pulled a face that had a spark of amusement lighting up in him.

“I don’t wanna,” Peter replied, then smiled again. “I want ice cream!”

“Ice cream?” Bucky asked with a smirk.

“Yeah! Chocolate—no, mint chocolate!” Peter said, enthusiastically.

Peter’s tangent on what ice cream he wanted was cut off by Bruce and Dr. Cho entering the room.

“Well, look who’s awake!” Helen greeted, smiling at Peter.

“Tony’s gonna get me ice cream!” Peter said, smiling back.

“I don’t remember agreeing to this,” Tony protested, though without much merit.

Bucky cocked a brow. “Everyone in this room knows that you’re gonna be getting this kid ice cream as soon as it’s medically okayed.”

Tony scoffed, but didn’t try to deny it. Bucky was right; all Peter had to do was flash those puppy dog eyes.

“How are you feeling?” Bruce asked Peter.
Peter shrugged. “A little less floaty than a few minutes ago.”

Helen nodded. “The nurse turned down the drip bag a bit. Are you experiencing any pain?”

Peter shook his head. “No, not at the moment.”

“Good, that’s good. Now, I’d like to get a look at your side. I want to check to make sure everything’s healing the way it should.”

Peter nodded in understanding. “It’s probably fine. I mean, it’s not my first time getting tased or anything.”

Tony frowned, filled instantly with anger. He knew Toomes’ men were behind bars, but the thought of anyone hurting Peter had his hackles raising immediately.

“Nonetheless, I’d like to mark the progress of your recovery, super-healing or no,” Helen said.

Peter nodded. ”Okay.”

---

Dr. Cho had just finished reapplying Peter’s bandage and gone about her way when the door to the room burst open, revealing a panicked-looking Steve.

“HAVE YOU SEEN—OH MY LORD, THERE YOU ARE!” Steve said, loudly between his heavy breaths.

Tony shot Bucky a look that devolved into an eye roll when the man smiled cheekily back at him.

Steve huffed, stepping into the room, pausing next to where Bucky sat as he glanced at the bed.

“Peter! It’s good to see you awake, how are you feeling?” Steve asked, noticing the teen was actually sitting up.

“I’m good. A little out of it still, but Dr. Cho says that’s ‘cause of the medicine!” Peter replied with a smile.

Bucky interrupted by pointing to the bags Steve was holding in his hands.

“Those for me?”

Steve nodded and began digging through the bags of take-out. The smell of cheap McDonalds permeated the room.

“Okay, I got you your Big Mac meal, upsized, ten double cheeseburgers, and forty chicken nuggets—you know, this isn’t really healthy, Buck—” Steve said as he passed over the food, “—and here’s your large smoothie.”

Bucky snatched up the bags and immediately dug in, groaning around a huge bite of his first burger. He paused his chewing, seeing Peter’s pouting face looking at him, and sighed, tossing the teen a couple of the cheeseburgers, making him smile hugely.

“All right, score!” Peter cheered.

Tony huffed a laugh and Bucky glared.
“You actually gonna eat all that?” Tony said.

“Watch me,” Bucky said, unwrapping another burger.

Tony’s cell phone ringing cut off any reply he might have had, and he was quick to fish the item from his pocket; however, his face paled substantially when he looked at the display.

“Everyone, shut up!” he said to the room, without breaking his gaze away from the screen.

When the room around him was quiet, he answered, bringing the device up to his ear.

“Hey, May.”

“Stark, where’s Peter?” the woman on the other line demanded, sounding dangerous.

“Peter’s fine!” Tony reassured her, even as his eyes flicked to the hospital bed.

“Really? Because the news is saying that someone tried blowing up your tower. There’s video,” she replied, sounding even less impressed than before.

Tony gulped. “Yes, that’s true, there was an attack on the tower, but Peter wasn’t involved in any way.”

Tony waved his hand dismissively at Steve’s face when the man looked like he was going to interrupt.

“Oh?”

“Yeah, he wasn’t around, thank God. I don’t know how the media is making it look, but I can assure you that the situation is completely under control.”

“Where was Peter if he wasn’t there?” May demanded then.

Tony cursed silently. “Uhh, he was with—Bruce!”

“Bruce?”

“Yeah, you remember Dr. Banner, he was at Peter’s birthday,” Tony said, ignoring the startled, abortive gestures Bruce was making at him.

“Of course I remember. What was he doing with Dr. Banner?”

“They were just talking science!”

“They had to go out to do that, huh?”

“No, they went out for—uhh—milkshakes!” Tony panicked. God, it was like this woman had a built-in bullshit detector. No wonder she got along with Pepper.

“Milkshakes.”

“Yep. Milkshakes.”

“Uh huh. Can I talk to Peter?”

Tony glanced at Peter, who was looking at one of the cheeseburgers in his lap like it was a gift from God. Tony winced; he couldn’t give the phone to Peter when he was still coming off the
“Uh, he’s asleep! I really don’t want to wake him up if I don’t have to.”

May sighed heavily. “He’s finally resting?”

“May, listen, I know you’re worried, but we’re okay here,” Tony said. “How about I get Peter to call you as soon as he’s awake?”

Tony waited with bated breath for the woman to answer.

“Fine,” she said after a moment of contemplation, “but I want to hear from him as soon as he’s awake.”

“Of course!” Tony agreed, readily.

“Everyone else is okay?” May asked, sounding much less accusatory and more worried, now.

“Everyone’s okay, there was a bit of a fight, but nothing we couldn’t handle. The people responsible have been detained.”

“Okay, okay,” May sighed. “Should I come back?”

“No, no, it’s all right, May. Stay, enjoy the program.”

“All right,” she said, hesitantly. “Please call me if anything happens, and remember to tell Peter to get in touch.”

“Of course. I’m sorry you were worried,” Tony said.

“Okay, it’s—it’s okay, just—take care of him, Tony.”

“I will,” he replied gently, though he couldn’t stop the wince when he glanced again at Peter.

“All right, okay—I’ll talk to you later, then.”

“Yeah, call you later,” Tony said, then removed the phone from his ear and ended the call.

“I can’t believe you lied to May,” Steve said with a frown.

“Why did you involve me?” Bruce exclaimed, rubbing his eyes.

“I had to tell her something!” Tony said.

“I can’t even drink milkshakes!” Bruce cried.

Tony rolled his eyes. “I had to think of something—”

“I want milkshakes!” Peter cut in.

“Yeah, let’s get some milkshakes in here!” Bucky added.

“Milkshakes!” Peter cheered.

“Do you really need—” Steve began, but was cut off by Bucky’s glare. “Right, milkshakes coming right up,” he sighed, pulling his keys from his pocket. “Just text me what flavors everyone wants, I guess.”
Bucky watched the blond leave with a satisfied smirk.


Bucky stiffened.

“I’ll take that as a resounding ‘no.’”

“Talked about what?” Peter chipped in.

“Nothing,” said Bucky and Tony in unison.

The teen looked between them, skeptical, but decided to shrug it off for now.

“When can I get outta here?” Peter asked instead. “I hate hospitals.”

“Helen said you could leave by tonight, as long as your next check-up goes well,” Bruce answered.

“The better question is, what flavor of milkshake do you want?” Bucky said, smiling.

“Oh! Uhm, strawberry—no! Uh, mint chip!” Peter answered in excitement.

Bucky nodded and began typing on his phone. “Tony?”

“Chocolate,” he replied.

“Get me caramel!” Clint’s disembodied voice shouted loudly from... somewhere.

---

Later that night, Peter was, in fact, allowed to leave the Med-Bay. His healing powers seemed to be doing wonders for him, though Dr. Cho had made the teen promise to take it easy. Steve had a sneaking suspicion that Peter would disregard that order as soon as their backs were turned.

Nonetheless, he thought that it would be nice to sit down for a good dinner. Despite Bucky’s love of take-out, Steve wanted to get some food in him that contained actual nutrients.

So that’s how he found himself slaving away in the kitchen, doing his best to prepare a good meal they could all enjoy. Peter had popped his head in when he’d first started, offering to help, but Steve had turned him away with a smile and an order to go rest. Tony, too, had awkwardly shuffled in, and looked immensely relieved when Steve banned him from the kitchen. Tony couldn’t even scramble eggs without burning them, and Steve needed this to be perfect. Bucky didn’t come in, but rather stayed in their living room, watching TV with Peter. Steve didn’t find that at all surprising—he worried that Bucky was still a lot more tired than he was letting on.

They were currently on Steve and Bucky’s personal floor. It had been cleaned up since the first Hydra attack and, luckily, sustained next to no damage during the second. So the four of them were having dinner together there, for now. Work had already begun on repairs to the tower, but it would be a few days yet before everything was finished.

The oven beeped, signaling it was time to check the roasts. With a proud smile, Steve turned it off and went about finishing the gravy and the vegetables.

“Hey, uh, are you sure you don’t need any help in here?” Peter asked, leaning into the kitchen.

“It’s fine, I’m just finishing up. Why don’t you let Tony and Bucky know?” Steve said with a
smile.

Peter grinned, excited at the prospect of food. “Sure thing!” he said, then turned toward the living room. “DINNER’S ALMOST UP!”

Steve rolled his eyes. “Well, I could’ve done that,” he said in amusement.

Peter shrugged, then peeked at the stove, curiously.

“Ooo, that looks awesome!”

“I found the recipes online, which means it’s either going to be wonderful, or terrible,” Steve admitted with a shrug.

“If it tastes half as good as it smells, then it’ll be great.”

Steve turned and saw Tony peeking in.

“I know I’m banned, but the kid called.”

Steve smiled. “It’s fine. I’m just about to dish up.”

“I’ll set the table,” Peter said, and began to open the cupboards.

“One more over,” Steve told the teen.

No more than five minutes later, the four of them sat around the dining table, the center of which was laden with food. Steve said a quick prayer and then told them all to dig in. He waited until they had all served themselves before going in for some himself.

Tony made an absolutely obscene noise as he tasted the roast beef.

“Holy shit, Steve, this is amazing,” he said.

Peter laughed, then nodded. “It’s really good, thanks!”

Bucky nodded and shot a quick thumbs up, his mouth already stuffed with food.

With a small sense of pride, Steve finally tucked into his own meal. And, yeah, he had to admit, it turned out pretty well.

The rest of the dinner passed with a light-hearted air that Steve was almost able to fall into. He told Peter about how he had, in fact, been serious about teaching him how to drive, which seemed to elate Peter.

“Once you have more free time,” Steve promised. “I know you’re busy getting ready for your exams.”

Peter seemed momentarily disappointed, but it lasted only a second before he started talking about how excited he was. Tony cracked a few jokes about Steve getting into a moving coffin, which prompted Peter to throw his napkin at the man, who only laughed in turn.

It was good. It felt natural and comfortable. Steve wished he could fully enjoy it, but there was a lingering worry nagging at the back of his mind. He glanced to Bucky, who was staring at Tony with a small smile as he listened to the other man recount a story, which Steve was only partially listening to. His heart ached; they needed to talk—tonight. He couldn’t spend another night tossing
and turning in worry. Whatever happened, whatever the outcome, it couldn’t be put off.

“Hey Buck, could I get your help with the dishes, please?” Steve asked once they were all done eating, and simply basking in the afterglow of a good meal.

“Sure,” Bucky replied with a shrug.

Tony caught Steve’s eye and gave him a significant look. Steve could read the silent question inside it, and nodded in response.

“Oh, I think it’s time I show you where you’ll be staying while the penthouse gets rebuilt,” Tony said to Peter, after seeing Steve’s nod.

“Shouldn’t we stay and help clean up?” Peter asked, concern written on his face.

Steve shook his head.

“It’s okay, Peter, it’s getting late. Bucky and I can handle things here,” Steve said.

Peter continued to look unsure, but nodded nonetheless.

“If you’re sure…” the teen said, uncertainty clear in his voice.

“Go on, get a good night’s sleep, kiddo,” Bucky stated.

Peter nodded again. “Okay. Thanks again for dinner, it was really good.”

“You’re welcome,” Steve said with a smile, as he watched the two leave.

He sighed quietly and began gathering up the plates. Bucky watched for a moment, seeming to study Steve with a light frown, before he moved to help. Steve rinsed and Bucky loaded up the dishwasher with the plates and cutlery, then they moved onto the pots and pans, which Steve continued washing while Bucky dried. The chore was spent mostly in silence, both men lost to their own thoughts during the monotonous work.

When the last pan was dried and put away, Steve sighed, knowing he couldn’t put it off any longer.

“Buck…” Steve began, but paused when Bucky sighed. “We’ve gotta talk about it, Buck,” he continued.

Bucky nodded, but he suddenly looked a lot more tired than he had previously. Steve couldn’t help but wince slightly. After all, they were in this position because of him.

Bucky sighed again. “Let’s—let’s at least sit down,” he suggested.

Steve nodded, and the two slowly made their way to the living room. Steve took a seat on the newly-purchased sofa, watching as Bucky hesitated. Finally, Bucky took a seat on the opposite side.

“I’m sorry—”

“Steve—”

They said at the same time. Bucky nodded, motioning for him to continue. Steve paused, waiting to be sure.
“I’m so sorry, Buck,” he began, “I should never have spoken to you like that, it was so far out of line. I—” Steve swallowed, thickly. Speaking was making all the tumultuous emotions rise up within him.

“I was angry, and sad, and—” Steve breathed, steadying himself, “—scared. I was scared.”

It was painful to admit that, shameful, somehow. But less shameful, Steve reminded himself, than how he had treated Bucky.

“I know it’s not an excuse for my behavior. Nothing could excuse how much I hurt you. I’m so sorry I hurt you. I know—I know words can seem empty, so starting now, I’m going to do everything I can to make it up to you. I understand that you’re upset, and—and angry—”

“I’m not angry, Steve,” Bucky said, so quiet that Steve almost missed it.

Steve paused, waiting to see if he would say more, but Bucky was staring resolutely at his toes.

“You’re not?” he asked.

Honestly speaking, Steve had hoped to hear—and feel—Bucky’s anger. You needed passion to be angry, and Steve had seen enough of the hollowness that could exist within Bucky to last a lifetime.

“I’m upset, yeah. But I’m not angry.”

“I’ve disappointed you,” Steve said.

Bucky didn’t answer verbally, but Steve understood.

“I want you to know that I’m going to do everything and anything to make sure this never happens again. I—I’ve already taken some steps. Sam, he—he helped me understand what it was you were trying to tell me, when I was being too stupid to listen. He’s also put me in contact with someone who can help me deal with my, uhh, problems. Like my anger.”

“Your ma always said you had the Rogers’ family temper in you,” Bucky said with a weak smile.

Steve sighed. “And of course that was when I was a hundred pounds, sopping wet.”

Bucky sniggered. “You used to remind me of an angry kitten.”

Steve rolled his eyes, but the small smile that appeared at Bucky’s comment faded quickly.

“She’d slap me silly if she was around now,” he replied. “I want to make myself into someone you can trust again, someone who’s worthy of that. And I know I can’t always relate to your struggles, but, I want to be able to help you with them.”

He was finding it hard to look away from his hands, which sat clasped together in his lap. He could feel Bucky watching him, and rubbed his thumbs together nervously as he continued.

“You deserve someone who can do that for you; who will listen when you need to talk, even if it’s difficult or hard to say. When—we first discussed and changed the nature of our relationship, I thought that, by taking on a more dominant role—by taking the lead, especially when it came to making decisions in our lives—I could help you. I could see you were struggling even then, and I wanted to help, but obviously I misjudged just how much your struggles were wearing you down. You put a lot of trust in me, and I realize that my outburst against you has betrayed that trust. More
than that, I didn’t recognize that you were struggling to the extent you were.”

Steve shook his head; he’d been failing Bucky even before his outburst, and he hated himself for it.

“I-I understand if you—if you—” Christ, he didn’t want to even say it, “I understand if you don’t feel comfortable enough around me to continue our—to continue this relationship.”

“You’re making it sound like you wanna break up,” Bucky said.

Steve finally snapped his head up to look at him.

“God no! Buck, I—I care about you so damn much. I want to stay with you, and I’ll do whatever it takes to make it work, I’m just saying that, I realize how out of line I was, and that if you—”

“I’m not breaking up with you, Stevie.”

Steve felt relief surge through him at that, his chest clenching almost painfully at the nickname.

“I’m still upset with you, though. You were a right asshole.”

“I know,” Steve agreed, nodding miserably, “I’m glad you realize how much I was.”

“Yeah, well, you aren’t the only one who’s been talking to Sam,” Bucky said. “And you’re right, that—that did hurt. A lot. But I should have mentioned the trouble I was having sooner as well, rather than let it stew. That was my bad, but still, you’re gonna make this up to me.”

Steve nodded. “I’ll do anything,” he promised, making sure to meet Bucky’s eyes as he said it.

Bucky nodded, and with a deep sigh, a lot of the tension that he’d been holding himself stiff with vanished.

Steve was met with the overwhelming urge to wrap Bucky in his arms and hug him close, but stopped himself just as he began to move. Bucky had given him a chance; he needed to not mess this up. He could still remember how Bucky had flinched away from him earlier, even if he hadn’t been in his right mind.

Bucky was watching him. “What is it?”

“I—” Steve sighed, “I’d like to hug you, is that—would you be okay?” he asked, unsure.

Bucky’s expression softened a bit as he moved himself closer to sit next to Steve.

“C’mere, you dumb punk,” Bucky said, allowing himself to get pulled into Steve’s hug.

“Thank you,” Steve whispered, after a moment of just holding each other.

Bucky sighed. “You’re an idiot, but you’re my idiot.”

Steve nodded and let his eyes drift close. It felt like it’d been so long since he’d been able to hold Bucky like this. He felt tears threatening to come at the feeling, but he pushed them down.

“I expect to be spoiled rotten, Rogers.”

Steve huffed a laugh. “Whatever you want, Buck,” he agreed.

“Cake. I want cakes.”
“Okay.”

“And ice cream.”

“Okay.”

“And you’re going to cook me more dinners.”

“Sure thing, Buck.”

“Seriously, I didn’t eat for, like, four days.”

“I know.”

“I want the cake and ice cream now.”

Steve chuckled and nodded, pulling away from Bucky.

“Okay,” he said.

---

An hour later, Tony found them curled up together on the sofa, watching reruns of Kitchen Nightmares, and laughing as Gordon Ramsay described loudly and colorfully how inept the managerial staff was. Bucky caught sight of Tony first, his face brightening.

“Mind if I join?”

“Hurry up,” Bucky said, patting the empty bit of cushion next to him. “Ramsay’s about to check how they keep the kitchen and is gonna flip.”

Tony smiled, crooked and fond, and sat down with them.

“Steve,” Bucky said, elbowing the blonde. “Go get Tony cake, too.”

“Would you like some cake, Tony?” Steve asked, smiling.

“Of course he wants cake,” Bucky scoffed, answering for him.

“Okay, okay,” Steve said.

Bucky leaned closer into Tony so that Steve could leave the couch. Tony raised a brow at Bucky, who smirked in return.

“Yes,” he said to the silent question, “I’m going to milk this as long as possible.”

Tony laughed lightly as Steve came back in, carrying the plated dessert and handing it to him. He thanked him quietly and let himself relax for the first time in days. There was still a lot to do, but he was relieved to see that at least Steve and Bucky were getting along. He knew that they were going to have to talk about everything together at some point, to try and come to a greater understanding, but for now, Tony was content to spend the evening enjoying the atmosphere and company of his two favorite people.

Chapter End Notes
Thanks so much for reading!
Please comment your thoughts and reviews for this chapter below, I love reading them all!

And since the weekend has passed, I hope all of you have a fun and productive week! <3
Alright here's another chapter for my lovely readers!

Thanks to everyone who commented on the last chapter, I love reading and responding to you all!

And the biggest thanks to my beta reader for always making my nonsense legible! <3

I hope you enjoy this next installment!

Peter turned over in his bed with a groan as his cellphone blared, obnoxiously. Without opening his eyes, Peter reached out and blindly felt along the top of his night table, where he knew he kept his phone. A soft thud sounded as Peter knocked something off the cluttered surface, and he groaned again, but elected to ignore it—stopping the horrendous noise was much more important. Finally, his hands clutched the ringing device, and he was quick to silence the alarm. Peter sighed happily as silence overtook the room, and he stuffed his face contentedly back into his pillows.

He was just drifting off when the obnoxious ringing started again.

Peter groaned, opening his eyes this time to glare at the device. Sighing, he turned off the alarm and looked at the time—9 A.M.

“Good morning, Peter, would you like me to tell Mr. Stark that you’ll be sleeping in today?” Friday asked, making Peter start in surprise.

He let his head drop into his pillow to stifle another groan, before he kicked off his blankets.

“If you had gone to bed at a reasonable hour, perhaps you would feel more rested,” The AI continued, sounding, impossibly, a little smug.

“I had work to do.”

“You’re still healing, Peter.”

“I’m fine,” Peter grouched as he grabbed a clean set of clothes from his closet.

There was a few moments of silence, before the AI finally spoke again.

“Mr. Stark is already in the workshop. You may meet him whenever you’re ready.”

Peter stumbled into his ensuite bathroom and into the shower in the hopes of waking himself up. He’d managed to get three hours of sleep last night, which was better than most of the previous week, but it was still tempting to crawl back into bed and spend his Sunday napping.

After almost drifting off under the warm water, Peter hurried to get dressed. He stopped briefly in the kitchen to grab a muffin for breakfast, then was on his way to the workshop.
Tony looked up when he heard the door to his workshop open.

“Hey, Pete,” he greeted with a smile.

“Morning,” Peter mumbled in return, before stifling a huge yawn.

Tony raised a brow in question, taking in Peter’s haggard appearance. Peter shook his head.

“I’m okay, I’m just waking up still.”

Tony frowned as concern built up in him; super-healing or not, Peter looked worn out.

“I hadn’t planned for anything in particular today, so if you need more rest, then we can postpone —”

“No!” Peter said quickly, “I—ah, I wanna be here!”

Tony smiled. “Okay, okay. Well, take it easy today, okay? If you need a break, have one.”

Peter nodded in agreement, and Tony watched the teen shamble over to his own workstation. A feeling of intense fondness bloomed, along with amusement, when Peter nearly tripped and fell over some loose wires—the same wires Tony had told him to pick up the last time they’d been down here together. He couldn’t quite contain his snort of laughter when he heard Peter’s muttered curse.

Peter turned and shot him an unimpressed look, which just made Tony’s smile grow. He forced himself not to laugh again when the teen huffed, grumpily.

Tony watched as Peter settled in and began tinkering with something of his own. It seemed that with every passing day, Tony grew more and more tempted to pull out May’s paperwork and sign. He turned and frowned at his own project, but his mind lingered on the documents locked in the drawer of his office desk. To be completely honest, his mind never left the subject for too long before circling back around to it. It wasn’t a lack of interest that had him hesitating, no; if it was only about what he wanted to do, then Tony would probably have signed already.

It was more complicated than that. May had insinuated that Tony was already acting like a parental figure toward her nephew, but Tony hadn’t fully accepted that yet, simply because he hadn’t fully accepted that responsibility. At times, it was terrified just thinking of himself as a mentor for Peter.

Tony was all too aware of his own shortcomings, and the last thing he wanted was to pass on any of his many, many flaws to such an amazing kid. It seemed to be a very Stark-inclined cycle of abuse, which Tony was terrified of repeating.

And yet, when Tony looked at Peter, he was immediately filled with so much hope. Tony was a self-proclaimed futurist—everything he worked toward, everything he built, was done in the hope that he could leave behind a foundation for the people of the future. And when he looked at Peter, he could envision that future so much more clearly, and he was that much more willing to fight for it.

Tony sighed, trying to reign in his thoughts and pull his concentration back to his task at hand—improving his suit’s energy consumption with his arc reactor tech.
“Friday, music,” Tony said.

He startled when a horrible, cheesy pop song blasted out through the workshop’s speakers.

“What the hell is this?” Tony demanded.

He turned when he heard laughter from behind, and saw Peter with a huge grin on his face and a mischievous glint in his eyes. Tony gave him a deadpanned expression that he hoped conveyed his annoyance, though honestly, it was a little funny. Peter must have been able to read through him, because the teen started laughing again. Tony rolled his eyes and turned back to his work, before Peter could see his face break into a smile.

“Friday, put some good music on before I reprogram you for this treachery.”

---

Tony didn’t how long they’d been at it, but eventually, he became aware of eyes watching him, and then a presence behind him. Casting a glance over his shoulder, Tony saw Peter, standing just to the side, watching him work.

“Sorry,” Peter said, quietly. “Didn’t wanna interrupt.”

“Don’t apologize,” Tony said, smiling. “Pull up a chair. I don’t mind if you want to watch for a while.”

Peter smiled, and ran to do just that. Tony knew it said a lot that he felt so comfortable with Peter around while he worked. His workshop was his sanctum; it was an intensely personal place that he often liked to keep private. Yet he felt no apprehension or discomfort sharing his space with the teen.

Peter placed a chair directly to Tony’s right and sat down, watching intently as Tony fiddled with his newest arc reactor design.

“That’s a reactor, right?” Peter asked.

“Yep, sure is.”

“What are you doing with it?”

“Optimizing energy consumption for long-term wear,” Tony said, then continued to point out and explain different things.

It wasn’t too much longer after that when Tony felt a soft thump against his shoulder. Looking over, Tony saw that Peter had slumped over against him. His eyes were closed, his breathing deep and even in his sleep.

Tony placed his tools down and gently felt Peter’s forehead with the back of his hand. He breathed a sigh of relief when the teen didn’t appear to be feverish. Still, Peter’s complexion looked paler than normal, and he was sporting some heavy bags under his eyes. Tony felt concern twist in his chest. Was it from his injury? Was Peter not resting well? Tony had made sure he was in his bedroom by ten last night so that the kid could rest, but that didn't necessarily mean Peter slept right away.

Regardless, he made up his mind to ask Peter about it later, but for now, it wouldn't do him any favors if Peter woke up with a sore neck from leaning against Tony.
Tony softly ran his fingers through Peter’s hair.

“Hey, Pete. C’mon, wake up,” he said softly.

Peter grumbled sleepily, but made no move to waken. Tony frowned again, gently shaking the teen’s shoulder.

“Come on, can’t fall asleep here.”

Peter groaned and blinked his eyes open.

“There you are,” Tony said, unable to keep the amusement from his voice, as Peter frowned up at him in confusion.

The teen blinked slowly again, before startling and sitting up straight, his face flushed in obvious embarrassment.

“I—I’m sorry, Tony! I don’t—”

“Hey, hey, it’s okay, Pete. You’re fine, just didn’t want you waking up with a sore neck.”

Peter nodded.

“Why don’t you go upstairs and have a short nap?” Tony offered. “You look like you need it.”

Peter sighed, frowning, and for a moment, Tony thought the boy was going to argue. Instead, Peter surprised him by nodding in agreement.

“Yeah, okay,” he said around a yawn, then stood up off his seat and stretched.

“Make sure to eat something before you sleep!” Tony said.

Peter nodded again, still looking dreadfully tired.

“Need me to walk you up?” Tony asked, feeling his concern mount again.

Peter shook his head. “I’m tired, not dying.”

Tony rolled his eyes and said, “You’re right I think zombies shamble around faster than you.”

Peter huffed, but smiled a bit. “Okay, okay, I’m heading to bed.”

---

“Oh, Peter!”

Peter turned at the sound of the voice calling him. Sure enough, Steve was just coming out of the kitchen.

“Hey, what’s up?” Peter asked.

The man smiled as he approached.

“Are you doing anything this afternoon?” he asked.

Peter glanced in the direction of his temporary bedroom. He really wanted that nap, but he was also intensely curious about what Steve wanted. If it had something to do with training, he could always
ask that they meet another time.

“I have a couple things I need to get done, why?” he asked with a nonchalant shrug.

“Oh, well, I found a rather nice walking trail in the park last week. I remembered you mentioning that you wanted to try and get some nature shots in, and thought we could check it out.”

Peter blinked. That actually sounded really nice. He glanced outside at the beautifully clear sky, and felt a pang of longing. It would be really nice to get out. Not only that, but Peter thought that it was particularly thoughtful of Steve to have remembered.

“I’ll get my camera!” Peter smiled, letting his excitement fuel him.

“Maybe grab a jacket as well, just in case it gets windy later.”

Peter called back an affirmative, and ran to the guest room he was using while the penthouse was under repair.

Minutes later, the two were heading down to the garage.

“Oh, have you eaten yet?” Steve asked.

“I had something this morning before going down to the workshop.”

“Hmm, well, we’ll pick something up on the way,” Steve decided with a nod.

Peter grinned. He would never say no to take-out—well, food in general.

In the garage, Steve headed over to Tony’s personal key locker and typed in a code. Peter raised a brow when the locker opened and Steve dug through it, grabbing the set he was looking for. He must’ve caught Peter’s look, because the man laughed lightly.

“Don’t worry, we’re not stealing. Tony gave us permission,” Steve said, showing off his phone, implying he must have texted the other man.

Peter nodded. “Don’t you have a car?” he asked, curious.

“I usually drive a motorcycle, but I don’t have a second helmet at the moment, and even if I did, I’m not sure how comfortable Tony—or May, for that matter—would be with me taking you out on it,” Steve answered with a shrug.

“Oh, that’s actually pretty cool,” Peter said, then hesitated, “but I think you’re right; May might be concerned if she found out. Though, just saying, even if something did happen, I’d probably be fine, with my abilities.”

Steve grimaced. “Yeah, let’s not test that theory,” he said, as they got into Tony’s Acura.

Peter smiled, buckling up his seatbelt.

“All right, what would you like to eat?” asked Steve, as they pulled out of the garage.

---

The park was decidedly beautiful, and Peter had his choice of scenes to photograph. The open picnic areas were bustling with activity, from both people and animals alike.
Peter was jumping from place to place, snapping shots. Steve would wait patiently with a smile every time the teen veered away the path without so much as a warning. Peter was still feeling the strain from his lack of sleep, but he was able to push it to the back of his mind for now, while his excitement was still palpable. It had occurred to him on the drive over, that this was the first time he was spending time with Steve outside of Avengers stuff. How could Peter not be excited about actual Captain America wanting to hang out with him?

Steve had been right, too; the trail he took them down was gorgeous. It was a small trail, a bit off the beaten path, and easy to miss because of the growth of the trees and bushes around it, but the deeper they walked, the thicker the small forest became, until the light shone down in green-tinged beams, making the place seem almost ethereal. Peter had a complete field day. He’d even climbed a tall tree in order to get a couple photos of a bird’s nest cradled in the branches, which Steve had pointed out.

The day was going great, despite the tiredness adding extra weight to his head and limbs. Steve also seemed to have a basic knowledge of art, and often pointed out things that would make for a good photo. Apparently, he enjoyed sketching, and wasn’t Peter interested to see that.

After a while, Steve suggested they turn around and head back. A part of Peter wanted to stay out here for longer, and enjoy the fresh air; however, his body was beginning to call it quits. So, reluctantly, Peter nodded, and the two began retracing their steps out of the woods. And hell, at least now he was leaving with some pretty cool selfies featuring Captain America.

---

Steve watched as Peter clambered awkwardly down from another tree, ready to run and catch him if he misstepped.

“Need a hand?” Steve called when he saw Peter stop partway down, looking for a better route.

“No, I got this!” The teen replied—and then jumped.

Steve sucked in a sharp breath as Peter willingly threw himself from the branches. Peter landed in a crouch and stood, dusting himself off.

“You could’ve hurt yourself,” Steve said, when Peter trotted back over to him.

Peter shot him a dry look, which startled Steve with just how… Tony it looked.

“I’m Spider-Man, remember?” he said, quiet and carefully. “Jumping off things is kind of what I do.”

Steve huffed a laugh and nodded. “Sure, but you usually have your suit and webbing for that. Plus, you’re still healing. You should take it easy.”

“It was, like, ten feet. Seriously, it’s fine.”

Steve nodded, conceding. “Okay, okay. So did you get a good shot?”

“Yeah, here, take a look!” Peter said, excitement back, turning the display screen on the camera on to preview the last picture.

Steve smiled and nodded, taking a look at the picture. It really was good; a good view of the tree canopy, and the park beyond.
“This really is incredible, Peter,” Steve encouraged.

“Thanks! I like the lighting.”

“The framing is well done.”

It was good seeing Peter enthusiastic about this. Though, he was still concerned that Peter was straining himself too much. Maybe it was too soon to have taken Peter out? Honestly, he’d underestimated Peter’s ability to go all in. Steve had been envisioning a calming, relaxing walk through the woods, not climbing and jumping from trees. Any other time, Steve would be overjoyed to see Peter enjoying himself so much, but even though he was trying to hide it, Steve could see how tired he looked. Especially now that they had been out for a bit.

“Hey, let’s start heading back,” Steve suggested.

Peter pouted for a minute, then smiled again, nodding.

“I saw an ice cream stand here last time. We can check if they’re open on the way out of the park.”

“Yes!”

They chatted most of the way out of the woods, Peter mostly talking about school and Spider-Man.

“Hey, do you think Tony would mind if I invited friends over later this week?” Peter suddenly asked.

Steve shrugged. “I don’t see him minding too much, as long as you’re not planning on throwing a party.”

“No, nothing like that, just, I know Ned’s been wanting to hang out, and I thought it would be nice to have a movie night.”

“Well, it’s up to Tony, but I think you should ask him.”

Peter nodded absently, obviously thinking it over.

“The ice cream was this way last time,” Steve pointed down the main trail, when they finally made it back onto it.

“Then let’s go!”

They walked for a little bit more in comfortable silence, until they turned around a bend and the path opened up to a nice paved clearing, the ice cream cart set up with a couple of benches.

“There we go!” Steve said as Peter ran over to look at the flavors.

“Can I get a, uh, chocolate? No, wait! Birthday cake, please!” Peter said.

“How many scoops?” the man running the cart asked.

“Two, please!”

“And for you, Sir?” he asked Steve.

“Two scoops of Butter Pecan, please.”
“That’s such an old man flavor!” Peter teased.

“Hey! It’s good!” Steve defended his choice, smiling. “Plus, I am old. Even Tony’s going to have trouble finding enough birthday candles for my cake this year.”

Peter barked a laugh.

“Will you be paying cash or card today?” the clerk asked.

Steve focused his attention back on the clerk and smiled.

“Sorry, that will be on card.”

Debit cards were definitely one of the better things about the future.

The clerk set up the machine, then went about scooping the ice cream.

Steve heard a light gasp behind him, but didn’t pay much attention as he followed the prompts on the machine.

“Hey, come get your cone, Peter,” Steve called over his shoulder, when the clerk put it in the holder on the counter.

Steve turned when Peter didn’t reply.

“Peter?” he asked, but stopped short when he realized the clearing around him was empty.

Steve’s eyes widened as he looked around, his heartrate picking up.

“Peter!” Steve called, then turned back to the clerk, who was just putting the second cone in the holder. “Did you see where the kid I was with went?”

The clerk shook his head. “No, sorry.”

Steve groaned. “Peter!” he yelled.

His mind immediately started spiralling. Where was he? How the hell could he disappear so quickly? Oh, God, it was just like that cold case episode on A&E last night. Shit, what was he going to tell Tony—

Steve heard a scream from down the trail, and was moving before his brain could even properly register it.

Steve’s stomach dropped at the thought of Peter in danger, again. What if it was Hydra? Or—

He came around the bend in the trail and stopped short. There was Peter, lying on the ground, shrieking in obvious delight as a huge dog stood over him, tail helicoptering with joy as Peter scratched and petted it, without a care at all for all the drool-soaked kisses.

The owner of the dog was standing a couple of feet away, laughing fondly at the antics. Steve felt relief surge through him.

“Pete!”

Peter turned and saw Steve, then waved.
“Steve, look!”

“Looks like you made a friend.”

Peter nodded, then struggled to stand.

“Come on, down, boy,” the owner said, pulling on the leash a bit.

Peter brushed himself off, somehow missing all the dirty bits, and gave the dog another pat.

“Thanks so much for letting me take his picture!” Peter told the owner.

The woman nodded. “Of course!”

“All right, bye, Sarge!” Peter said, with one last pat to the huge beast’s head, before he turned away.

“Come on, I kind of abandoned our ice cream when I noticed you were missing,” Steve said, leading them back.

Peter gasped. “Shit—err, shoot! I’m sorry I just vanished!”

“It’s okay. Maybe just say something next time, though, all right?”

“Sure, of course!”

Peter took pictures of another three dogs before they escaped the park.

---

Peter stumbled over to his bed, ripping off his mask with a groan. He was completely and thoroughly exhausted. He honestly didn’t know if he had ever felt this tired in his life. He pulled back his comforter. He was so ready—

“Time to get ready for school, Peter!” Tony said through his door with a knock.

Peter froze, staring down at his sheets with desperate longing.

“Peter?”

“Yeah! Just—just making the bed,” he replied.

“Okay, breakfast will be ready soon.”

“Thanks.”

He heard Tony retreat away down the hall, and groaned loudly.

“Shit.”

Peter smoothed the comforter back in place and looked around his room. His head felt foggy and full of cotton. He grabbed the first shirt and pants off his floor that seemed clean and pulled off his suit, in exchange for actual clothes.

He walked into his bathroom to brush his teeth and splash cold water on his face, in the hope of waking himself up a bit. It was only partially relieving. It actually just made him aware of how warm he felt.
Leaving his room, Peter could smell bacon cooking; usually that would have his stomach rumbling hungrily, but now, it just left him feeling slightly nauseated. Still, he followed the smell to the kitchen, where Tony was sitting, drinking coffee and chewing on some toast as he studied something on his tablet. Bucky was next to him, head cradled on his arms that he had folded on the kitchen island, like he’d just passed out there. Clint was glaring at Steve as he worked on a bowl of cereal, while Steve stood over the stove.

“There he is. All ready for school?” Tony asked.

Peter plastered on a smile and nodded.

“Sure thing!”

“You sure? You look pretty tired, kid,” Bucky cut in, apparently not asleep.

“It’s seven in the morning, of course he’s tired,” Clint grouched.

“Clint’s grumpy because Steve won’t give him your breakfast,” Natasha said, walking into the kitchen. “Good morning, Peter.”

“Morning.”

Steve smiled as he turned off the stove and plated up the bacon, eggs, and toast, then passed it to Peter.

“For me?”

“Breakfast is the most important meal of the day, you’re going to need it to get through your morning classes,” Steve smiled.

“Thanks,” Peter said, taking it and sitting across from Bucky.

He stared down at his plate for—actually, he didn’t know how long. Time didn’t really seem to be registering with him at this point. Finally, he picked up a piece of toast and nibbled on it slowly. He thought Bruce wandered in at one point, but he couldn’t say for sure. He was too hyper-focused on his plate.

Now, his current predicament might seem like his own fault at first, but it really wasn’t. He was a victim of circumstance, really!

Last night had been crazy. Fun, mostly, but crazy. After he’d gotten back to the tower from the park, he had every intention of either working on his homework or napping. He ended up doing neither, because when they made it to the communal level, he was met by Wanda, who wrapped him up in a tight hug. He soon became aware that the entire team had shown up while he was gone with Steve. Everyone had been worried after hearing about the attack, so now they were having a Team Night, as Wanda was calling it.

It was really fun. They ordered out tons of food and played an insane amount of board and card games. Also, Wanda made ‘get well’ cookies (which he definitely had some packed in his bag).

It wasn’t until Tony sighed and clapped his hands and told Peter it was time for bed that he realized it was past eleven o’clock already. So, Peter said his good nights and locked himself in his room to power through his remaining homework.

At 2 A.M., he finally wrapped everything up and donned his suit. He told himself that he’d only
check things out, that it would be quick, but two stopped robberies and a car chase later, he was climbing in his window just as the sun was lightening the sky.

Peter took another piece of bacon, eating it mechanically. He was just going to have to hope that his second wind kicked in.

Tony had a meeting that morning, so Steve had agreed to drive him to school. They got stuck in the morning traffic, and Peter felt himself drifting. His head, heavy and warm, felt nice against the cool glass of the car window.

He woke up to Steve lightly shaking his shoulder.

“Hey, Pete, we’re here,” he said, gently.

Peter nodded, yawning hugely.

“Thanks for the ride,” he said as he grabbed his backpack.

“No problem, have a good day at school,” Steve said as Peter exited the car.

Peter watched as Steve drove off, then turned to face the doors of Midtown Tech High School.

“We can do this,” he said to himself.

It became apparent very quickly that, though his mind was convinced he could stubborn it out, his body was not having it.

Ned kicked his chair, for what had to have been the tenth time during the lecture, to wake him up.

“Dude!” Ned hissed. “You’re gonna get detention!”

Peter was going to respond, but was cut off before he could even form the first word.

“Do you have something to add, Mr. Leeds?” their teacher asked.

“No, sorry, ma’am.”

Peter listened as she continued speaking about the ins and outs of basic engineering.

---

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Ned said as they made their way to their next class.

“I’m fine, just, like, super tired.”

“Dude, you’re wearing yourself out. You gotta take a break.”

Peter sighed. “Crime doesn’t take a break, so neither can I.”

“But—”

“Not now, Ned.”

Ned sighed, but thankfully dropped the subject.

“Are you ready for the chem test? It’s supposed to be like a mock exam.”
Peter groaned. “I still don’t understand that. If we’re going to be graded on the actual exam, why is he marking us on a mock one?”

Ned shrugged. “I don’t know. Hey, why don’t you Spider-Man him? He’s evil enough.”

“That’s not happening,” he said quietly. He didn’t have the energy to speak loudly. Or even to roll his eyes.

“Eh, worth a shot.”

They finally made it to their classroom, and saw that their chemistry teacher had arranged the seating plan based on their last names, so Ned was seated a few desks directly ahead of Peter.

He took his seat and took out his pencil, not bothering with his notebook or textbook. It was a closed-book test, and Peter knew this teacher well enough to know they would be jumping straight into it.

Their teacher walked in only a couple of seconds before the bell rang, carrying a stack of papers.

“All right, take one and pass the rest back. Keep them face down until I say so,” he said upon arrival.

Peter accepted his test packet silently, and passed the rest back.

“Does everyone have a test and scantron paper? Good. You may begin.”

Peter flipped over his paper, and began to write his name on the packet and the scantron sheet.

---

Peter woke up with a start as the bell rang.

“All right, class, you’re excused. Keep your tests face down on the tables as you leave.”

‘Shit.’

Peter groaned and flipped the sheets over, too ashamed to face his teacher, not to mention his completely blank test. He was doing well in this class—he could only hope the school didn’t end up calling May.

He sighed and stood, then had to grab his desk to steady himself as a spell of light-headedness passed over him.

Peter rubbed at his temples. The pressure that’d been steadily growing all morning had finally crested into a massive headache.

“Hey, ready for lunch?”

Peter turned to look at Ned, and his friend’s face immediately pulled into a frown.

“Hey, you look really pale. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m good,” Peter replied. “Let’s get outta here.”

Peter was relieved Ned hadn’t seen him pass out during the test.
The cafeteria was noisy and boisterous and absolute torture. Peter sat, rubbing his temples, merely poking at the food in front of him. His appetite was nonexistent, and he found himself swallowing thickly, fighting the urge to vomit.

“Wow, you look like shit.”

Peter looked up as MJ sat down next to him and Ned.

“Wow, thanks.”

“How was your test?”

“It was okay,” Ned said, unknowingly saving Peter from having to lie. “Should probably have studied more, though.”

MJ nodded. “I have it next.”

“Good luck.”

“You sure you’re okay, Peter? You haven’t touched your lunch,” Ned said.

“Yeah, what’s up with that? Usually you eat like a starving man,” MJ added.

“Just not hungry today.”

MJ and Ned shared a look.

“Maybe you should call your aunt to come pick you up?” MJ suggested.

Peter shook his head. “She’s out of town for a work thing. Plus, I’m fine.”

Neither of his friends hid how little they believed him.

By the time physics started, Peter was convinced he was going to die. A part of him was cursing his own stubbornness, but a bigger part of him was just angry that he was having trouble making it until he got back to the tower. He kept telling himself that he could nap as soon as he got back, but it was getting harder and harder to stay on his feet. Sitting was almost worse, since he couldn’t even keep his eyes open.

Partway through the lecture, Peter knew, with startling clarity, that he wasn’t going to make it. Only two seconds after that realization, the room around him tilted, his vision darkening around the edges. He felt himself slip sideways out of his chair, then nothing.

Chapter End Notes

To keep up to date, consider following my Tumblr

I hope you all enjoyed this new chapter
Please comment and/or leave kudos to support this work
I love reading and responding to your comments! :D
Chapter Twenty-Five

Chapter Summary

Thanks for all the lovely comments and kudos on the last chapter, you guys are the best!

I absolutely loved reading through all the comments <3

I should probably mention that this chapter will have mentions of anxiety.

Without further ado, please enjoy the chapter!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tony was elbow-deep in wires and circuitry when his phone rang. Sighing, the man ignored it while he sorted through the mess. The phone stopped ringing, and Tony tried to lose himself in his work once more, until the ringing picked up a second time. He swore and fumbled around until he found his phone.

“Hello?” he asked, a little impatiently.

“Yes, hello, is this Mr. Stark?”

Tony’s brows rose.

“Yes.” ‘No shit.’

“This is Midtown Technical High School. It’s on file that May Parker listed you as an emergency contact while she is out of town.”

Tony nodded, that made sense. Still, his chest tightened; why was the school calling?

“Peter’s been staying with me,” he confirmed.

“Okay, well, I’m sorry to disturb you, but we need someone to come to the school to pick Peter up.”

“Peter—what’s wrong with Peter?” he demanded loudly, standing up from his work bench.

“He collapsed in—”

“I’m on my way!” Tony shouted, already running to the elevator.

The elevator began to descend the moment the doors closed—without him having to specify, bless Friday.

Tony sped out of the garage in a panic. Peter had collapsed at school? Was he sick? Was he poisoned? What if his injury wasn’t healing right? He’d looked a little peaky this morning—he should have pushed him more on what was the matter. Should have made him stay home.
‘Dammit!’

He made it to the school in what had to be record time, bursting through the doors in a flurry. The slamming of the doors startled the janitor, who was mopping up a spill. Tony looked around and made his way to the office. The secretary gaped up at him when he burst inside it, but Tony didn’t have time for her gawking.

“Where’s Peter?”

“Um, I’m sorry, what?” she said, blinking up at him.

Tony rolled his eyes.


“Oh! I’m sorry—I hadn’t realized that you were that Tony—he’s in the Med-Bay. He passed out during his physics class.”

“Jesus—”

“Our resident nurse checked him over. He’s suffering from exhaustion, but will be okay with rest. If you’ll follow me, the principal is waiting to have a word.”

The woman stood and Tony had to restrain himself from making a biting comment. He didn’t want to talk to the fucking principal, he wanted to see Peter and have someone he trusted look him over.

The woman walked over to a side door that had “Principal Morita” written on the front and knocked. Tony heard the man inside answer to enter.

Tony walked into the small office, and looked the man over.

“Hello, Mr. Stark, I’m—”

“Morita, yes, I saw the sign,” Tony cut in. “Listen, I just want to see to Peter.”

“I understand your anxiety, Mr. Stark, and you will see him momentarily, I just want to discuss a couple of things before you sign him out.”

Tony sighed, but nodded.

“Please have a seat.”

Tony crossed his arms but sat, narrowing his eyes.

“Peter is a smart kid, and I understand that he’s gone through some rather difficult times, which have really affected his school career. However, in the last little while, he’s really made an improvement in his work ethic. He’s been attending all of his classes, and doing well in them. Now, I can understand if he’s just been having an off day—it happens to everyone; however, I can’t help but be a little concerned.”

“I understand, and I share that concern, which is why I’d like to take Peter home.” He was a little frustrated.

“I understand. However, with Peter’s history here, I wanted to check in, especially with his aunt gone, and his rather poor performance in class today.”
“Peter was feeling a little sick the other day,” Tony said. Being nearly tased to death counted as sick, right? “I assure you we’ll be talking it over later tonight, after he’s rested. Was there another incident besides the one in—physics, was it?”

Morita nodded. “Well, according to our staff here, Peter also failed to take his test in chemistry.”

“Peter’s always been good at chem. I’m sure it’s because he’s not well,” Tony said, his worry growing. “Is there any way he could retake the test?”

Morita nodded. “That would be up to his teacher.”

Tony sighed. It was going to be one of those days.

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The first thing Peter became aware of was how comfortably warm he felt. The next was the rather discomforting, clinical smell around him. Next was the throbbing pain and pressure in his head. He felt himself frown. If this was him waking up, he’d rather stay asleep, thanks. But soon he became aware of other things as well. Another scent met him—fancy cologne and motor oil and something he couldn’t quite place—but it made him feel safe, despite the other, clinical smells of the room. Then, there was a relaxing feeling of a hand gently stroking over his hair, helping, however little, to soothe that terrible throbbing that beat against his skull.

He was convinced now, more than ever, that he didn't want to wake up. He wanted to drift back into sleep with the comforting presence next to him.

“…ter… …eter…”

Sound filtered into his ears, and the comforting petting stopped, Peter grumbling his protest.

“Peter. Peter, you gotta wake up.”

Peter knew that voice. He opened his eyes a crack, but then promptly closed them again, as the bright lights burned his eyes.

“That's right, rise and shine.”

Peter tried again to open his eyes, despite his entire body fighting him on the simple action. His vision swam a bit when he finally got them to open, and he had to blink a few times to clear away the bright halo effect that seemed to cling to everything in the room, making it nearly impossible to see. When he did, he breathed a sigh of relief at the first thing to come into focus.

It was okay, his dad was here. He was safe.

“There you are. Good morning—or should I say afternoon?”

Peter frowned. Afternoon? He glanced around the room. He was on an uncomfortable cot in the corner. Across from him was a sink, and on the blank walls were cabinets and health and safety posters, and a tacky picture of a kitten dangling from a branch with one paw that said, “Hang in there!”

It was a far cry from the professional and pristine med labs in the compound and the tower.

Slowly, bits and pieces of memory flickered back to him—his recent lack of sleep, long nights out as Spider-Man, the Hydra attack, his rather stupid all-nighters, and finally—oh, OH. Shit.
“Yeah, there you go.”

Peter turned back to his—to Tony. He turned back to Tony. Peter felt residual embarrassment at his own internal slip-up, and thanked his lucky stars he hadn’t opened his dumb mouth.

Still… what harm was there in thinking it?

“So, let’s get you out of here and back home, where you can rest and explain to me just what the hell happened today,” Tony said, with a smile that didn’t match the worry in his eyes.

A part of Peter was ashamed that Tony had been called in to his school. He knew how busy he was lately, but still, he did show up—he could’ve just sent Happy to pick him up, but he didn’t. Peter felt a swell of something decidedly good when Tony said they were going home—not to his place, not to the tower—home. Because the tower had become a second home for Peter, just like Tony had become family.

Peter looked away, still feeling mixed up. “Oops?”

“Uh huh,” he heard Tony reply, unimpressed. “Gonna have to do better than that,” Tony paused, and sighed. “Can you get up?”

Peter pulled himself up, pushed off the scratchy blanket, and stood. Tony stood up from the chair he was sitting on and placed a steadying hand on his arm when the room tilted dangerously again.

“I’m okay,” Peter insisted, trying to step back.

He’d caused enough problems already. A part of him worried that if he was too much of a nuisance, Tony would send him away. Though, it could also be argued that if that were the case, Tony would have already sent him away. He tried to push the thoughts down—his head hurt enough as it was.

“You know, you’ve said that a few times to me now, and I’m feeling less and less inclined to believe you,” Tony said, giving him a shrewd look.

Peter didn’t quite know how to reply to that, so he didn’t. He fixed his gaze on his shoes and only looked up when Tony let out a heavy sigh.

“All right. Here, here’s your coat.”

Peter looked up at the rustle of fabric, and saw Tony holding open his coat. His cheeks heated as he stepped forward.

“I can put on my own coat,” he said, even as he let Tony help him into it.

“Zip up, there’s a breeze today,” Tony replied, grabbing Peter’s newest backpack off the floor.

“How did—?”

“Your friend Ned dropped it off. He’s… something else.”

“You met Ned?” Peter asked, feeling a little afraid that he hadn’t been awake, in order to act as a buffer against Ned’s—

“Yeah. He’s very… enthusiastic.”

Peter groaned, and Tony smiled.
“Seems like a good kid,” Tony finished.

Tony held open the door and let Peter exit first. Peter could feel Tony’s eyes on him as he navigated toward the school entrance, and felt his shoulders slouch under the gaze. He wasn’t looking forward to trying to explain this one off.

He was still trying to wrack his brain for an answer by the time he was getting into the backseat of Tony’s car.

“You can sit upfront, Peter,” Tony said, getting behind the wheel.

“Sleepy,” Peter mumbled, resting his head against the window.

Honestly, sitting up front would put him in the perfect spot to get the, “I’m disappointed in you” look.

“How are you feeling?”

“Tired, a little sick to my stomach,” Peter said after a pause, deciding to answer honestly. “Head sorta hurts.”

He saw Tony nod and then cast a glance at him through the rear-view mirror—shit, he forgot about that.

No wonder Tony didn’t want him driving.

“So,” Tony began, after a brief silence. “You going to talk, or am I going to have to prod it out of you?”

“I just didn’t sleep all that well last night,” Peter said.

“Peter,” Tony began, reproachfully. “What’s going on? I know you were up a little late last night with the team, but you had more than enough time to get a reasonable amount of sleep. And yet, you fell asleep during a test and fainted in physics? Peter, that’s not normal. You’re extremely lucky I was able to talk your chemistry teacher into letting you retake that test!”

“Wait, you got him to allow me to retake the test? He never allows retakes.”

“Yeah, well, I’m Tony Stark, so you’d better be ready Thursday during lunch.”

“Okay. Um… thanks.”

Peter saw Tony nod his head.

“I’m not dropping this, Peter,” Tony said, after another bit of silence.

Peter groaned. He had almost managed to fall back to sleep.

“Seriously, are you sick? Is it from the fight? Tell me what’s going on, Peter. You went to bed around 11:30—what time did you go to sleep?”

“Late,” Peter said, surly.

Tony glared through the mirror at his change of tone.

“If I may, Boss,” Friday spoke through the car speakers. “Peter was up finishing homework from
11:48 PM to 2:12 AM, and was absent from the tower between 2:25 AM to 6:21 AM.”

“What?”

“FRIDAY, WHAT THE HELL!” Peter yelled.

“WHY THE HELL WASN’T I NOTIFIED?” Tony demanded—loudly.

“You asked me to notify you of any changes to Peter’s schedule; however, my recent observations have shown him to have been keeping a similar schedule to this for some time. Also, he asked me not to, though that was before it was this detrimental to his health,” the AI answered smoothly.

“Yeah, well, your coding and I are going to have a god damn meeting later! And what do you mean, this is normal? Peter, where the hell were you going at two in the morning?” Tony demanded angrily.

“Can’t believe Friday sold me out,” Peter muttered.

“No, none of this mumbling shit! You answer my god damn question, Peter, where the hell were you?”

“Out,” he said, defensively, while his higher mind screamed at him in the background to stop.

Unfortunately, that was mostly drowned out by the throbbing in his head.

Catching the rather furious look Tony shot him through the mirror had Peter slouching impossibly further down in his seat, regret pulling at his stomach.

“Friday, do you know where Peter was last night?”

“Yes, Boss.”

Tony shot another look at him through the mirror.

“Peter, you have exactly three seconds to fess up before Friday does it for you, and trust me when I say, you’re not going to like what happens if you make me wait.”

Peter glared down at his lap, stubbornly.

“Fri—”

“I was out on patrol.”

“I’m sorry, what was that?”

Peter took a deep breath. “I was out on patrol.”

Peter winced at the white-knuckled grip Tony had on the steering wheel.

“How long has this been going on?”

“What?”

“Peter, I am not in the mood.”

Tony stopped at a red light, and took the break to close his eyes and draw in a steadying breath.
“How long have you been forgoing sleep like this?” Tony asked, in a slightly calmer voice.

Peter shrugged.

It wasn’t that he wanted to fight with Tony. Very much the opposite; he hated that he was in trouble, but the burning shame he was feeling at disappointing the man was somehow fueling the defensive anger that he couldn’t quite get a hold on.

“How long have you been forgoing sleep like this?”

“A couple of weeks! Okay? What do you want me to say? I’m just trying to help people! I’m not doing anything wrong!” Peter heard himself snapping.

“I thought we already went through this, Peter!” Tony exclaimed in frustration and... something else, that Peter couldn’t quite place. “You need to take responsibility for your own health!”

Peter clamped his jaw shut and glared fiercely out of his window. He didn’t have the time to be worrying about himself right now. People were in danger, and he could stop it—he had to stop it.

“Well?” Tony demanded. “Are you going to tell me what the problem is?”

Peter remained resolutely silent, glaring out his window.

“Oh what, are you ignoring me now?” Tony let out an aggravated huff. “You choosing to ignore me isn’t going to make this go away, Peter!”

Tony frowned in the rear-view mirror as the teen in the backseat continued to pout. All he wanted was to get to the bottom of whatever the hell had caused all of this. He tried to tell himself to remain patient, but the worry clung tightly to his chest, and the anger at Peter’s petulance was burning in his gut.

He gritted his teeth as he pulled into the garage. His anger increased when Peter stormed out of the car, slamming his door the moment they were parked.

“Hey!” he yelled while running to catch up. “Don’t just walk away from me!”

Peter glared up at him, face flushed from his own stewing emotions.

“Will you cut it with the attitude and work with me here!” Tony demanded on the way up to their floor.

Peter shoved himself as far away as he could in the lift, and was now glaring at his shoes instead of at Tony, but the man knew it wasn’t an improvement at all—he could practically taste the angry waves coming off the teen.

The elevator opened silently and Peter rushed out, Tony hot on his heels.

“Peter, don’t walk away from me!”

Peter stopped, but kept his back to him.

“I’m warning you right now, if you keep this up, you’re not going to be seeing the outside of your bedroom for a very, very long time,” Tony continued. “Last chance.”

Peter turned, and for a minute, Tony felt a breath of relief—until he saw the same stubborn, angry look still plastered on his face. Then, he watched as Peter’s jaw twitched and his eyes narrowed
defiantly, before he turned on his heel and stormed off, the loud slam of his bedroom door echoing down the hall.

Tony stood, lips parted in partial shock, before another burst of anger took hold—how dare he?

He made to storm after Peter, but a hand on his arm stopped him.

“What—hey!”

Tony turned, and saw Bucky looking back at him, his expression confused.

“What was that all about?” Steve asked, next to Bucky, staring at him in concern.

Tony growled angrily and began to pace.

“Wouldn’t I like to fucking know!” he spat. “Can you believe him?”

Steve and Bucky shared a look, and a moment later, Steve was leading Tony to sit next to him on the sofa, while Bucky poured a glass of something strong that he found in the bar.

“Why isn’t he at school? What happened?” Steve asked, voice careful.

“I got a call from his damn school to come pick him up because—thank you,” he accepted the drink gratefully, taking a long swig, “—because Peter apparently nosedived out of his seat mid-lecture!”

“What?” Bucky questioned.

“Kid passed out in the middle of class—after sleeping through a chemistry test!”

“He fainted?” Steve asked, shooting a concerned look in the direction of Peter’s temporary bedroom.

“What lead to the fight?” Bucky asked, sitting on Tony’s other side.

Tony leaned back into the cushions, rubbing at his temples.

“I tried questioning him about what was up. Apparently he hasn’t been sleeping—too busy sneaking out at night to play hero! I don’t get it, I thought he was past pushing himself like this!”

“Did he tell you why?”

“Nope! He completely shut down on me! Most I got out of him was a few pointed glares. I just—I don’t get why he’s acting like such a—such a—” Tony waved his hands, sharply and vaguely.

“Like a grumpy, sixteen-year-old kid?” Bucky tried.

Tony huffed, then muttered, “One way to describe it,” before taking another drink.

“Let it go for now,” Bucky said.

“But—!”

“Give both of you some time to cool off. Peter’s obviously not interested in talking about whatever’s bothering him right now, and you fighting with him isn’t going to make him fess up. You can try again later tonight.”
Tony deflated with a nod. He knew Bucky was right. Still, the whole situation wasn’t sitting well with him. He could feel his fingers twitch against the glass tumbler in his hands with the instinct to fix. He took no enjoyment from fighting with Peter, he’d just found the teen’s lack of cooperation infuriating and lost his cool a bit. Tony sighed. Now that his anger had passed, the worry he’d been feeling continued to grow.

“Friday, is Peter okay?”

“Peter is currently asleep. His injury sustained on Saturday has almost completely healed, though his healing abilities have slowed, due to his recent exhaustion. He should continue to improve with rest.”

“Bring up Peter’s suit log. I want to see just how bad this is,” Tony said, picking up the StarkPad from the side table.

He scanned over the spider-suit’s logged hours, and balked at the information. He scrolled through the data and felt a burst of anger—this time, at himself. How had he not noticed this?

Tony groaned. Between the Accords, Bucky’s impending trial, and Hydra…Tony rubbed a hand over his face.

Steve leaned over and glanced down at the logs, his brows raising in surprise.

“I thought he looked tired, but… wow.”

“How did I let this happen?” Tony muttered.

“I… I think it’s time we instill some rules,” Steve said, glancing at Tony as he did. “Actually sit down with him and lay out what’s acceptable and what’s not.”

“I guess we’ll have to,” Tony let out a huff. “I haven’t even begun to think up… household rules.”

“Well, obviously we’re going to have to start.” Bucky said.

“How did I let this happen?” Tony muttered.

“Actually sit down with him and lay out what’s acceptable and what’s not.”

“Okay, so, homework before patrolling as Spider-Man,” Bucky suggested.

“Maybe…” Bucky began, hesitantly. “At least, for now, make it so you’re notified whenever Peter’s out, and if he spends over a designated number of hours daily in the suit.”

Tony nodded. “His schoolwork has been affected by this, too. I was able to arrange for Peter to take a make-up test for the one he slept through, but…” Tony trailed off with a frown.

“Okay, so, homework before patrolling as Spider-Man,” Bucky suggested.

“We should also agree on curfew times,” Steve said.

Tony sighed. He doubted Peter would be thrilled about this.

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Peter groaned. Waking up was like fighting his way through dense cotton. His head was still throbbing slightly, and his mouth and throat felt dryer than desert sand. He forced himself to sit up and rub the sleep from his eyes. He felt completely disoriented and confused.
“Friday?” Peter grumbled out.

“Hello, Peter. Are you feeling better?” the AI spoke.

“Uh, I don’t know yet,” he replied, rubbing his head.

“Would you like me to contact help?”

“No!” Peter yelped. “I’m—I’m okay, just—never mind.”

There was a moment of silence, where Peter wondered if Friday had bothered to listen to him, but finally, the AI spoke up again.

“Mr. Stark wants you to be in the dining room no later than 6:00 PM for dinner.”

Peter grabbed his phone to check the time. He had just over forty minutes. He sighed, and decided that a shower might help him feel a little more human.

Usually a shower would have worked. As it was, the moment Peter began to feel even a little bit like himself, his thoughts drifted back to his fight with Tony. His insides burned in shame and hurt pride. Anxiety clawed at him, and grew stronger as time ticked by. He wanted to hide in the bedroom and not have to face anyone—especially Tony.

A part of him knew, without a doubt, that he had acted childish, but he didn’t know what else to do. He was tired and worn out and stressed, and how was he supposed to just come out and explain why?

If Tony wanted him to show up for dinner, that probably meant he was planning on talking again, whether to try and push Peter to divulge what was upsetting him, or to kick him out, or to—Peter didn't know. He hated not knowing. He hated the thought that Tony was angry or disappointed in him, but he knew that it would be so much worse if he was truthful.

He kept telling himself it was sad and more than a little pathetic, but he was genuinely scared of losing his new expanded family—most of all Tony.

Peter sighed and turned off the shower, and began toweling himself off. He took longer than necessary choosing an outfit to put on, as if it would help drag out the inevitable. Peter paced, then forced himself to sit at his desk, fiddling around on his phone for a few minutes, answering text messages from Ned and MJ.

“Dinner will be ready promptly,” Friday spoke softly.

Peter still startled slightly, his anxiety putting him on edge, despite his pitiful attempts at distraction.

“Thanks,” he said quietly, after taking a calming breath.

Peter pocketed his phone, but hesitated in front of the door. He tried again to calm his nerves through deep breathing. No use putting it off.

He opened the door and peeked out into the hall. Faintly, Peter could hear the clattering of dishes—he couldn’t hear any voices, though. Maybe it was just Tony? Peter didn’t know if that made him feel better or worse. On one hand, he wouldn’t have to sit in front of others, feeling awkward because of what was most definitely going to be a tense meal; on the other hand, having others there could work as a distraction or a buffer.
The faint scent of what Peter thought to be Thai food met him, and his stomach rumbled painfully.

He felt starved.

Cautiously, Peter walked into the main room, and continued on into the kitchen, where he immediately saw Tony opening up an array of take-out containers and arranging them on the counter with serving spoons. Steve was setting out a jug of juice, and Bucky was grabbing the glasses. Peter noticed that he had been right about the food. Tony licked a bit of stray bit of sauce off his thumb as he turned and finally noticed Peter, who realized he had just been hovering awkwardly.

“Oh, Peter, did you sleep okay?” Steve asked.

Peter shifted on his feet, nervously.

“I, uhm—yeah, yeah—it was okay,” he silently cursed his stammering.

“Here, grab a dish and grab what you’d like. I ordered from that place you mentioned you and May like to eat at, so it should be okay,” Tony said, picking up one of the plates he’d set out earlier and holding it out to Peter.

Peter finally stepped forward and accepted the plate.

“Thanks,” he said, soft and quiet.

Tony nodded, and motioned for him to help himself first. Peter began filling his plate, all the while keeping an eye on the other three, who began to do the same, once Peter had picked through the first containers. Peter was desperate to know what Tony was thinking, as the silence prevailed again.

He piled the food high onto his plate, setting it aside to pour himself a glass of juice from the jug Steve had put out next to the food.

“You sure you’re feeling alright there, kid?” Bucky asked.

Peter nodded. “Headache, but it’s okay.”

The conversation trailed off there, as Peter found his seat and shifted uncomfortably in the heavy silence.

Finally, Tony released a deep sigh, as he looked up at Peter from where he sat across from him.

“Peter, I want to apologize for earlier,” Tony began, cutting the silence.

Peter’s head shot up to look at Tony in surprise—that hadn’t been what he was expecting.

“You—you do?” the words came quiet and unbidden from Peter’s mouth.

Tony nodded. “I’m sorry for yelling. I shouldn’t have lost my temper so quickly with you.”

Peter glanced down at his plate, then back at Tony.

“I’m—I’m sorry, too, for the way I acted. I—” Peter bit his lip nervously. He still wasn't sure how much he wanted to divulge.

“It’s okay if you don’t want to talk about it yet. I can wait, but that doesn’t mean it’s going away.
Eventually, we’re going to have to talk about what’s going on, and what started this,” Tony said, saving Peter from explaining further.

Tony sent him a look that clearly asked, Okay? and Peter nodded.

Tony seemed satisfied with that, and turned back to his plate. Peter felt relief crash over him.

Movement to his left reminded him that they weren’t alone in the room, and Peter’s cheeks flushed at having an audience. He frowned a bit, though, when he caught Steve sending Tony a very pointed look.

The two shared a silent conversation that Peter didn’t have a hope in hell of ever understanding, but it ended with Steve raising his brows, and Tony huffing quietly in defeat.

“Listen, Pete,” Tony began, again turning to face him. “What I said before still goes—if you’re not ready to talk, then you don’t have to. Not yet, anyway.”

He paused, briefly before continuing.

“But some things are going to have to change.”

Peter tensed as his wariness returned with a vengeance. He put down his fork, directing all of his attention on Tony, and what he was about to say.

“This probably should have been something I implemented a long time ago…” Tony sighed and shook his head, before adopting a very stern expression and continuing. “There are going to be house rules. Rules you are going to be expected to adhere to.”

Peter frowned. He didn’t like where this was going. And the logical part of his mind that was telling him Tony had every right to create a set of rules to be followed in his own home could go get hit by a bus.

“First off, your schoolwork is going to hold priority—more than training, workshop time, or being Spider-Man. I had a talk with your principal earlier before getting you, and he insinuated that you used to skip classes and were falling behind. I realize that was in the past, however, I’m making it known that that won’t be acceptable in the future. If your grades nosedive, trust that I’m going to know about it, and there will be consequences. Any homework you get is included in this, of course. Homework will be completed before you go out to patrol. No exceptions.”

Peter continued to frown, but he wasn’t outright glaring. After all, he didn’t want his grades to start sliding again, either, which was why he had completed his homework the night before. He remained silent, though; he figured it was safe to assume that Tony wouldn’t appreciate that being pointed out, at the moment.

“Next, this whole sneaking-out-at-night thing has to stop. You’re pushing yourself past your limits. It’s completely unacceptable for you to be hurting yourself like this. So, as of now, you’re under curfew.”

“What?” Peter yelled.

“School nights, you will be back here no later than ten. That doesn’t mean you start coming back at ten, or you’re climbing up the tower at ten—it means at ten o’clock sharp, you’re to be inside this tower. Now, weekends are a bit diff—”

“That’s completely unfair!” Peter interrupted. “I need to go out at night! I—”
“What you need is some bloody sleep!” Tony cut him off firmly. “You can’t keep—”

“You have no right to get in the way of me being Spider-Man!” Peter loudly exclaimed.

“Peter…” said Steve, with a warning tone in his voice.

“The hell I don’t!” Tony said, sharply. “You’re staying under my roof, and that makes you my responsibility, and part of that responsibility is having to put my foot down when you start making dumb choices! So this is me putting my foot down, enough is enough!”

Peter felt anger burn up in him, red hot and fiery. It wasn’t fair!

He pushed his seat back with a loud scrape as he stood.

“No! You can’t stop me from helping people!”

“Peter, you’ve run yourself so ragged that you passed out today! You can’t help anyone in that state of exhaustion! Furthermore, I am not going to sit around and watch you harm yourself anymore with this shit! It ends tonight!”

“You can’t tell me what to do!” Peter said.

Well, everyone knew that was a lie.

“Oh yes I can, you are staying under my roof!” Tony replied.

See?

“Well then maybe I’ll just leave! I don’t need to be babysat in the first place!” Peter shot back, and began heading toward the elevator.

“Peter Benjamin Parker, I swear, if you take one more step, I’m calling your aunt!”

Peter froze at the use of his full name, wincing at the threat. His very skin felt aflame with his emotions. He turned back around to face Tony, who was also standing now. Peter was struck suddenly by the weight of his own words and actions, and it made him grimace. He was beyond angry, and sure, he felt slighted, but—almost storming out of the tower? That was a little dramatic, even for him.

He clenched his teeth together as Tony made a “come hither” motion with his hand, but obeyed, and walked back toward him.

Tony said simply, “After dinner, you’re to go straight to your room.”

“Consider yourself grounded,” Steve added, Tony nodding along. “No video games, and no suit. You’re going to go to bed and get some rest.”

Peter huffed, hating that he was outnumbered. It was bad enough that Tony was trying to limit his access to his suit, but now Steve was grounding him? What the hell!

He looked around the room, but knew that arguing was going to help exactly nothing.

Definitely not pouting, Peter took his seat, and began picking at his food, glumly.

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Tony watched as Peter quietly headed to his bedroom, shoulders slumped. The man deflated with a heavy sigh.

“Well, that went well,” Bucky remarked, still working away at his Khao Pad.

“Don’t talk with your mouth full, Buck,” Steve replied absently, then turned to Tony. “It’ll be okay. You did the right thing.”

“Then why do I feel so bad?” Tony grumbled, poking at his food.

“Because Peter’s a good kid. You’re not used to having to punish him.”

“I just wish I knew what was up with him,” Tony sighed again.

“Give it time.”

Tony nodded, and went back to picking at his meal.

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Peter sat at his desk, watching the bold digital numbers on his clock mark the time. The lights in his room were turned down low, as to not raise suspicion. After the rather uncomfortable dinner, Peter had gone back to his room, resigned to his fate. However, after letting himself collapse onto his bed, he found sleep eluded him. It wasn’t a matter of exhaustion—he was tired in every sense of the word, so much so that he felt slightly ill. It seemed that his mind didn’t much care about his physical wellbeing, though, because it would. Not. Shut. Up.

So he sat at his desk instead, ignoring the growing tightness in his chest, because he was not having an anxiety attack over this, thanks.

No matter how hard he tried to distract himself, his mind wandered back to Spider-Man, and his responsibility to the city. How could he do nothing? The last time he did nothing, someone wound up dead, and—

Peter took a deep breath. He had no choice. He had to patrol. He wouldn’t be able to rest until he did anyway, so…

Luckily, though Tony had banned him from going out tonight, the man hadn't taken his suit. Peter checked the clock again—12:13 AM—it had been an hour since things had totally quieted down. He hesitated.

It had been such a shitty day already, and on one hand, Peter knew he’d already pushed his luck with his earlier outbursts. However, it was impossible for him to just do nothing. Sighing, Peter changed into his suit.

A couple of hours wouldn’t hurt.

Peter peeked his head out of his door. The hall was pitch dark. He froze, listening for any noise, but apart from the hum of the refrigerator, he heard nothing. Quietly, Peter closed the door behind him, making sure to turn the handle all the way to prevent the click of the latch.

He swallowed, and it sounded loud in his ears. His anxiety was humming in his veins, strong enough that he knew it would interfere with his spidey-sense. He crept out into the main room, and headed toward the balcony.
Just a quick patrol around the area, and then he’d be back.

Peter unlocked the patio door, and—

“Going somewhere?”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for reading and let me know what you guys think!

If you'd like to stay up to date on this fic or have questions please consider following me on my Tumblr
Chapter Twenty-Six

Chapter Notes

Oh my god,
so first off I want to apologize for how long it took for me to upload!
Life was just really kicking my ass these last few weeks and it was impossible to find the time to write in large bursts like I normally would.
There were a couple of times I was tempted to upload this chapter ahead of when it was ready but I didn't want you guys to have to wait for something that ended up being sub par so I took my time. I think it was the better choice.
I'm going to try to be a little bit more on top of my writing and thus upload times but I can't fully promise in good faith that I'll be able to get a chapter out every week like I was doing- there's just a lot going on now and more than anything I want to give you guys good content I can at least be marginally proud of!

Also I wanted to say thank you all SO MUCH for the love and support! I love reading all your comments on every chapter and it really helps keep me inspired! ALSO We reached 2000 Kudos?! I could never have imagined that this fic would take off like it has so again thank you all so, so much!

Mentions of anxiety and emotional turmoil in this chapter

So without further ado, please enjoy this next installment!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Going somewhere?”

Peter yelped as his heart jolted behind his ribs almost painfully. A second later, he was halfway up the side of the wall, looking out over the room with wide eyes. The room was still bathed in darkness, but Peter could make out the shadow of a figure standing in the entryway to the kitchen.

“Jesus, you bring a whole new meaning to the term ‘jumpy,’ don’t ya?”

“Bucky?” Peter asked, relaxing slightly. “What the shit are you doing hanging out in the pitch dark?” Peter said, climbing back to stand on the floor.

“Oh no, we are not turning this on me. The question is, what the hell do you think you’re doing? Because to me, it looks like your already-very-grounded ass is trying to sneak out off the balcony.”

Peter shuffled nervously as Bucky stepped forward, out of the shadowed archway and into the partial light cast from the city around them.

“I was just going to get some air,” Peter tried.

“In your suit.” It wasn’t a question.

Peter winced and replied, “Yeah.”

“At… half-past midnight.”
Peter nodded.

Bucky huffed. “Wow, kid. You’re—you’re such a shit liar.”

Peter huffed back and had to stop himself from protesting. That wouldn’t exactly help him out here.

“So, you gonna explain why you’re sneaking out way past your curfew?”

Peter shifted uncomfortably as he started going over his very limited options.

“Well?” Bucky prompted, arms crossed.

Peter groaned. “I needed to go out. I wasn’t going to be gone long, just—maybe an hour!”

“It doesn’t matter how long you’re intending to be out, Peter, you’re not allowed out at all.”

“I need to patrol!” Peter pleaded.

Bucky frowned and uncrossed his arms, resting his hands on his hips disapprovingly.

“I—I—” Peter sighed in frustration. “Even if you force me to stay in, I’ll just be pacing or lying awake all night! I have the energy, I just need to—”

“Peter,” Bucky interrupted.

Peter stopped to look at the man addressing him. His voice had taken on a very firm tone that made Peter instinctually nervous.

“You can’t go out there. You—Tony put these rules in place for a reason. You’re just going to have to get used to them now.”

“But—just an hour, you don’t have to tell Tony!”

“Let me get this straight, you want me to not only allow you to break curfew, but also lie to Tony about it?” Bucky raised a brow.

“Please?” Peter tried.

“No. Go to bed, Peter.”

“Just an hour!”

Bucky was silent long enough for Peter to get his hopes up.

“You’re really not going to be sleeping, huh?”

Peter shook his head, and then Bucky nodded.

“Fine. Come on then,” Bucky said and began to walk away.

“What?” Peter asked.

“Follow me.”

Peter hesitated, confused.
“Don’t make me come back there and carry you.”

Peter was quick to fall into line behind Bucky, who led him into the elevator. He wanted to ask where they were going, but he also sort of wanted to disappear into the wall. Especially seeing the displeased look on Bucky’s face. He wouldn’t admit it, but… it was sort of intimidating.

The elevator finally came to a stop and opened up at… the gym?

“What?” Peter asked again, quiet and hesitant as he followed Bucky into the room.

“All right, Spider-Man. Drop and give me a hundred.”

“What?”

“You heard me. You have all this energy to burn, right? Well, get started.”

Peter blinked incredulously, wondering if Bucky was serious. He looked very serious.

“Get started, kid.”

Peter huffed, but did as he was told. He’d play along for now. Eventually, Bucky would let him leave, and he could get out after.

---

Tony woke unusually slowly and with a rarely-felt contentedness. He sighed and snuggled closer to the firm warmth next to him, and felt strong arms wrap more tightly around him. ‘Steve,’ Tony’s brain supplied helpfully. He relaxed impossibly further into the embrace; it felt good to be held again. It was also a relief that, so far, his clinginess didn’t seem to bother neither Steve nor Bucky. It was just something he did instinctually—even when he went to sleep making a mental note to keep a marginal distance away from his bed partner, most mornings, he’d wake up latched around them regardless.

It was nice not to have to worry about accidentally hurting someone because of a particularly bad nightmare—well, that was a lie, he still worried about eventually lashing out, because he knew he’d feel bad, super-soldiers or not. Honestly, Tony was a little surprised last night hadn’t been one of those bad nights, considering the stress with Peter the day before.

Only a few moments later, his thoughts were able to expand, and he became more and more aware of his surroundings. Steve must have sensed him waking up, because just then, Tony felt a gentle kiss pressed to the top of his head.

“Good morning.”

“Mmm, mornin’,” Tony replied, voice thick from sleep. He blinked his eyes open against the sunlight pouring in from the wide windows.

“What’re you still doing in bed?” he asked. “Don’t you usually get up at an ungodly hour?”

Steve hummed agreeably. “Did get up. Went for a run, came back and you were still sleeping. Looked too adorable, so I decided I couldn’t just leave again.”

Tony snorted in amusement, more awake now, and sent Steve a shrewd, disbelieving look.

“What? What’s that look for? It’s true.”
“Uh huh, okay, sure,” Tony replied, sound very unconvinced.

Steve scoffed. “You didn’t see yourself.”

Tony rolled his eyes, then blushed as Steve kissed him again, his cheek this time. Honestly, Tony was surprised he was feeling as good as he was—or that he’d had a decent night. He’d been convinced it was going to be another sleepless—or near-sleepless—night for him.

However, after admittedly-way-too-much time, some pacing, and asking Friday every ten minutes if Peter was still okay, Steve and Bucky had ganged up on him to force him to try and sleep.

“Where’s Bucky?” Tony asked as he noticed the other missing.

“He was up before I was,” Steve replied.

Tony frowned, concern building. Had it been a bad night for him?

“Is he okay?”

“Hm? Oh, yeah, I checked in, he said he’s fine,” Steve turned and fished his phone from the nightstand. “Here, said he wanted to meet you when you woke up.”

Steve unlocked his phone and brought up the messages for Tony to skim over. They didn’t look particularly concerning, but…

“Okay, thanks. Guess I’ve lied around long enough,” Tony said, and began extracting himself from the comfortable bed.

Steve nodded and followed suit, saying, “Yeah, I have to get ready for my appointment, anyway.”

“You’re having another one?”

Steve nodded. “I was able to reschedule since our last appointment was… interrupted. We need to meet at her office, though.”

Tony huffed a laugh. “I don’t blame her for wanting to switch locations after that.”

Steve muttered something quietly under his breath—that sounded suspiciously like a curse against Hydra—making Tony smirk.

“All right, I’ll see you later,” Steve said as he gathered up his wallet, phone and keys.

Tony leaned up and pressed a kiss to Steve’s lips, sighing happily when the man returned the gesture.

“Text me when your appointment’s done,” Tony said when they parted.

“Will do.”

---

Tony was pouring himself a cup of coffee when he got the call that the penthouse was once again habitable. He perked up a bit at the news, and made a mental note to check the floor over before moving Peter back up. He had to make sure everything was as good as could be.

“Tony.”
Tony turned and smiled as Bucky approached.

“Hey, good news, the tower’s repairs are all finished!”

Bucky looked marginally surprised. “That didn't take very long,” he noted.

“They’re well-paid.” Tony shrugged. He studied Bucky closely, noticing that, though he was trying to hide it, he was obviously tired. “Did you get any sleep last night? Steve—Steve said you were already up when he got up for his run.”

Bucky hesitated. Tony didn’t like the uneasy look crossing the other man’s face.

“I was up all night with the kid,” Bucky finally said.

Tony’s brows shot up in surprise. “Peter?” he asked, feeling a little incredulous.

Bucky nodded. “I, uhh—may have caught him making a poor attempt at sneaking out.”

Tony stared. “I’m sorry, what?” he demanded hotly.

“Listen, before you get mad, hear me out,” Bucky said.

Tony had to force himself to take a couple of deep breaths, before he nodded for Bucky to continue.

“I got up last night for a drink, and found Peter in his spider-onesie, attempting a prison break.”

“For fuck’s sake—why wasn’t I notified?!”

“I told Friday I’d handle it. Listen, I confronted Peter, and—I wasn’t able to get much outta him, he kept coming up with excuses—also, he’s a shit liar, we might have to work on that later, but—anyway, it was real damn obvious that he was nearly crawling out of his skin with anxiety. Something was really making him believe that he had to be out there last night.”

“You didn’t let him go, did you?” Tony said sharply, to which Bucky shot him a ‘do you think I’m stupid?’ look.

“Of course not. You laid out rules last night, rules that he needs to learn to respect. But it was obvious that he wasn’t going to let himself sleep anytime soon, and that as soon as I turned my back, he’d try sneaking out again, so I brought him down to the gym to, A: make him never wanna break your rules again, and B: to help him work off all that pent-up nervous energy. And there was a lot.”

“Jesus, how long…?”

“He finally wore himself out around 5:30 A.M., and I carried him back to bed. I just checked on him, he’s still passed out.”

Tony groaned and scrubbed at his face.

“I know I probably should have woken you up earlier, but… Peter’s not the only one who’s been lacking sleep.” Bucky said quickly, looking a little worried. “And you both needed time away from each other to cool off—”

“It’s—it’s okay, I get it,” Tony said, waving off Bucky’s concern. “I’m not mad at you, I’m—I’m just frustrated at the situation in general.”
Bucky nodded. “I think you need to talk to him later. He’s holding something back, and it’s really affecting him. But I don’t think you’re going to get anywhere fighting with him—he’s already shown that he isn’t very responsive to confrontation.”

Tony nodded wearily and checked his phone. “All right, well, it’s almost eleven now, so he’s been asleep for a few hours…”

“Good luck.”

Tony huffed a laugh and nodded. “Thanks. You go have a nap, I’ll make you a smoothie later to help bring up your energy.”

Bucky smirked. “Thought you couldn’t cook?”

“Can’t. I’m horrendous. Throwing stuff into a blender is not cooking, I make a mean smoothie.”

“All right then.”

“Seriously, go lie down for a bit. I’ll wake you up in a few.”

Bucky smiled crookedly, but nodded in agreement. “Okay, okay, I’m going.”

“Sure you don’t wanna join me?” Bucky teased as he pulled back.

“Ugh, don’t tempt me like that, Barnes.”

“All right, all right. See you in a bit,” Bucky said as he made his way toward the bedroom.

Tony sighed as his mind quickly refocused onto Peter, and how he was going to handle this situation. He couldn’t believe Peter tried to sneak out—well, actually, if he really thought about it, it really wasn’t all that surprising. This was the same kid who hacked his multi-million dollar super-suit to turn off its safety features, and tried to take on a group of illegal weapon manufacturers after being explicitly told not to. Jesus, for a kid as bad at following rules as Peter seemed to be, you’d think he’d learn how to spin lies as skillfully as his webs…

Tony contemplated what to do, but it seemed to always round back to the same solution. He was just going to have to sit Peter down and talk with him.

---

Peter groaned as something roused him from his sleep. His head didn’t hurt quite as much as the day before, but there was still a bit of pain. Not to mention the ache in his muscles. Bucky had him in the gym for literal hours, running, jumping, training, lifting weights—just about everything—until Peter literally just fell asleep on one of the machines. Waking up in bed was a little disorienting.

A soft knock at his door caught his attention. That must have been what woke him up in the first place.

“Yeah?” he called sleepily.

The door opened and Peter watched as Tony stepped in. He felt uneasy, wondering if Bucky had already told him about the night before.
“Hey Peter, time to get up.”

Peter nodded and sat up with a stretch.

“Steve’s not here to spoil us with breakfast, but there’s muffins and cereal in the kitchen, as well as fruit. That’ll be okay, right? I’d offer to cook you something myself, but I’d probably end up accidentally poisoning you.”

Peter smiled at Tony’s little joke, but he couldn’t muster up the same level of enthusiasm he usually would have. He was still rather tired, but more than that, he felt a heavy guilt pool in his stomach. Both for his temperament the day before, and for immediately trying to go against the rules Tony had instilled. He’d felt a bit guilty while trying to sneak out, but he pushed it down, convinced it would go away when he was patrolling and helping. That was last night, before he got caught. Now—now he felt differently.

May would be horrified if she ever found out how disrespectfully he’d acted.

“Hey, what’s that look for? Do you want something else? I could always order something.”

Peter looked up again at Tony. “No, it’s okay!” he insisted.

Why was he acting so nice to him? Did he not know? God, what if he didn’t? Maybe Bucky hadn’t had a chance to talk to him yet. What if—what if he wouldn’t want Peter around anymore? He couldn’t even follow one rule; he tried to break it mere hours after it was implemented, even. He was obviously too much trouble, and—and he needed to calm down, before he had a complete breakdown in front of Tony.

“All right then, get dressed and I’ll see you in the kitchen,” Tony said and, with another quick smile, left.

Peter sighed, pushing his comforter and sheet off himself, then frowning—he was still in his damn suit. He quickly stood and changed, but wrinkled his nose at his own smell… oh, that's right, he hadn't exactly showered after being put through the paces. 'Great.'

After a quick shower and a small round of self-bolstering, Peter left his room to meet Tony in the kitchen. He found the man sitting at the kitchen island, staring intently into a cup of coffee, brow furrowed at an invisible problem.

“Hey,” Peter said, approaching.

“Oh, hey, there you are. Come sit down,” Tony said, even as he stood up.

Tony then proceeded to grab a bowl of fresh cut fruit from the fridge and placed it in front of Peter’s usual spot, along with a bakery box full of assorted muffins. “Here, help yourself.”

“Thanks,” Peter said as he sat down in front of the goods.

Tony also got him a fork and napkin and poured him a cup of orange juice, before settling back down in his own chair with his coffee.

“How are you feeling?” Tony asked, and Peter felt another pang of guilt at the genuinely concerned look on the man’s face.

“Quite a bit better.”
“Good. So, I talked to your school, and had your teachers put together some work booklets for you so you don’t have to worry about falling behind.”

The rest of Tony’s sentence faded out as Peter got lost in his own thoughts. He couldn’t understand how Tony could be so nice to him. Tony had woken him up nicely, got breakfast ready, and made sure to deal with his school, probably knowing how stressed he would be, worrying about his grades dropping again. He didn’t deserve this. He didn’t—

“Hey, are you listening, Peter?”

“Why?” Peter asked in a trembling voice.

“Huh?”

“Why… why are you…” he stopped, feeling his voice about to break. He had to speak before he started crying. “I’m sorry!” Peter burst out, unable to contain the guilt he was feeling. “I broke the rules, or I tried to—and I know I shouldn’t have, and—”

“Whoa, hey, hey, hey! Peter—Peter, look at me,” Tony began, no doubt startled by his emotional outburst. “I know about last night.”

“You—you do?” Peter asked, eyes wide. ‘Then why?’

“Bucky told me.” Tony sighed deeply. “I can’t say I wasn’t a little bit disappointed.”

‘Oh god.’

“But, I also feel like I know you well enough at this point to know when something’s not right with you. You’re a good kid, Peter, and I know that the only reason you’d do this is if you felt you had to for whatever reason. That doesn’t excuse it—I set that rule for a reason, and it’s not going away—but Peter, please, I need to know what’s going on.”

Peter looked at Tony, who was fixing him with such an earnest gaze, and felt himself begin to give in. All the stress since his birthday washed over him, and he just wanted to tell Tony everything. He could feel his eyes burn and his lips tremble as tears sprang to his eyes. He swallowed them back—he wasn’t going to cry, he wasn’t going to—

“Just tell me what’s wrong, why you’ve been pushing yourself and staying out late and—I want to help, but I can’t unless you tell me,” Tony continued, his voice strained with something.

‘Damn it!’

“I’m—I’m sorry,” Peter said again, voice watery as he tried desperately to keep the tears at bay, “but I just—I had to do it!”

“But why? Please Peter, just—”

But Peter was shaking his head. How was he supposed to tell Tony how badly he’d failed? Tony didn’t understand that Peter just wasn’t good enough, that he had to push himself to do better, constantly, his body be damned, because he could not fail like that again. He couldn’t.

“Peter, tell me what’s going on,” Tony tried again. “Why did you have to do it? You’re hurting yourself! Why are you punishing yourself like this?” Tony demanded, and Peter realized that the something he couldn’t identify before was desperation, and that there was a lot more of it in Tony’s voice now.
He looked down guiltily and bit his lip.

“I—I just—I need to do this!” Peter tried to explain, as he fought back the sudden pain in his eyes and throat that warned him of oncoming tears.

“But why, Peter?”

Peter gritted his teeth together, swallowing down the lump in his throat. He couldn’t answer. How was he supposed to tell Tony that a boy was dead because of his negligence? If only he had—

“If I’d done better—I have to do better, I have to be better!” Peter said, and no, no no no, he wasn’t going to start—shit—

He sniffled and wrapped his arms around himself, protectively.

“Pete, why is this so important right now? What’s—” Tony cut himself off and frowned at him, but it wasn’t an angry expression, more contemplative. “What happened?” he finally asked again, studying Peter closer.

Peter shifted. He felt raw and vulnerable under Tony’s gaze, and it wasn’t helping him and his fight against his tears.

“I—I—” Peter gritted his teeth again as he warred with himself over what to or what not to say. It was just so much, and he was so, so tired. Not just physically, but emotionally, and—

“It’s my fault!”

“What’s your fault?” Tony prompted, his voice taking a gentler tone.

“Jason! He—I wasn’t there! I should’ve been there, but I wasn’t, and now he’s dead!”

Frowning again, Tony silently got up and Peter felt his heart shatter. This was it. He shivered slightly, and couldn’t hold back a couple of tears that slipped down his cheeks. Was Tony just going to leave? Did he finally drive the man away?

He startled when Tony stopped next to him and spun his barstool around so that they were face-to-face.

“Peter—Peter, look at me,” Tony said in the same gentle tone he’d adopted earlier.

Peter sniffled again and tried to rub away the tears from his cheeks, but he realized that it was a losing battle now. So he did as he was told and moved his gaze up to Tony’s face.

“Who’s Jason, Peter?”

“A—a boy who goes—who went to my school. He’s—he’s dead now,” Peter stammered out.

“Why do you feel it’s your fault?”

“I—I could’ve gone out—should have patrolled, but—I didn’t, and—they found him five blocks from our apartment in Queens! I—” Peter couldn’t hold back anymore and let out a sob. “I walk past his memorial at school every—every day, and—and it’s just a reminder that—that I failed, and—”

“Hey, hey, hey, shh—come here.”
Peter felt strong arms wrap around him and pull him into a tight hug. It was a simple gesture, but one that Peter needed so badly. He clung to Tony and continued to cry into the man’s chest. Tony hugged him tight, his hand rubbing his back soothingly as he whispered comforting words.

Peter wasn’t too sure how long Tony held him for as he cried, but eventually, his body simply ran out of energy and his sobs died down.

“It wasn’t your fault, Peter. I’m so sorry that happened, but it wasn’t your fault.”

Peter wasn’t sure if he believed it, but the words were nice to hear. He still felt awful—and exhausted, impossibly even more exhausted than before. It was useless to try and keep his eyes open any longer.

“M’tired,” he mumbled into Tony’s chest.

“It’s okay,” Tony said, soothingly. “You can nap. I’ll wake you up in a bit, and we can talk a little more. It’s okay.”

Peter sniffled and clung to Tony, and the last thing he heard was his dad's deep baritone, humming softly.

---

Tony sighed as he looked at Peter’s sleeping form. Quietly, he closed the door and wandered over to the couch, collapsing onto it. It killed him to see Peter so distraught. He tried to get his thoughts together; he knew Peter was going to need his support in this, and honestly, he was having trouble trying to find the words that might help.

“You look like you’ve seen better days.”

Tony looked up to see Natasha entering the room. She sat down on the opposite side of the couch. “Is Peter okay?”

Tony raised a brow.

“Heard he was sick or something.”

“Or something.” Tony sighed. “He’s… resting.”

Natasha nodded. “Good. You should, too.”

Tony shook his head. “I actually slept okay. I’m fine, think I’m going to check over the penthouse.”

“There’re no bugs or cameras, I checked. It looks good, though.”

Tony raised a brow.

“Can never be too careful.”

“Uh huh,” Tony said.

Natasha rolled her eyes. “Anyway, where’s your boyfriend—the gloomy one. We had plans.”

“Bucky’s sleeping.” At Natasha’s surprised look, he continued, “He was up all night with Peter. He caught junior sneaking out and decided he could work off his extra energy in the gym, which
apparently took almost six hours.”

Natasha snorted a laugh. “Of course it did.”

Tony smiled, crookedly. “He’s stubborn.”

“You all are,” she huffed.

Tony shrugged. He couldn’t really deny it.

“How long has he been asleep?”

“Little under an hour—that’s if he passed out right away.”

“Damn,” Natasha sighed. “Guess I’ll go bother Clint.”

“Hey, you could try waking him up,” Tony joked.

Natasha laughed lightly, they all knew what Bucky was like after waking. “Not likely,” she said as she stood up and walked past him. “I’ll leave that to you and Steve.”

She paused, then reached over and placed a light hand on Tony’s shoulder. “Don’t worry so much, Tony. Peter will be okay.”

Tony nodded. “He’s just going through a rough time.”

Natasha hummed as she pulled away.

“Why don’t you take him to that networking thing you have tomorrow?”

“What?” Tony asked, confused. He couldn’t remember any—

“Weren’t you supposed to attend that science expo?”

He nearly slapped himself. ‘Of course!’ With all the drama happening with Peter, the expo had totally slipped his mind.

“I completely forgot about that,” he admitted.

Natasha smiled ruefully. “I’m sure Pepper would love to hear that.”

Tony groaned.

But then he started turning the idea over in his mind. The expo was just an excuse for him to get some networking in, but Peter—Peter might actually enjoy looking around at all the booths and demonstrations happening.

“That’s a good idea, though. Taking Peter, I mean. I’ll run it past him later.”

Natasha nodded. “All right, go relax. I’m gonna take off.”

Tony nodded and bid her goodbye as she left, then pondered over the expo, and how he was going to have to get Peter an entirely different kind of suit.

---

Tony toured the now remodeled penthouse and had to admit to being satisfied with the outcome.
He’d picked up the new computer he had built for Peter to replace the damaged desktop, as well as packages from the lobby of different things he’d ordered to stock in Peter’s room. Not that the decorators didn't do a great job, but there were certain things he knew they wouldn't have thought to include—like the new Spider-Man Lego set, because yeah, that was an actual thing now (and, okay, maybe Tony paid to have it commissioned, but that was beside the point). He took another look around the room, and decided that it was good. There were enough things that it didn’t feel too sparse, but there was also still room left to add things to.

Tony left the room and picked up the briefcase he’d left sitting on the coffee table in the living room, bringing it to his new office. It was nice, but a little bare for him, though it wasn’t as big a deal to him to fix and personalize as Peter’s room had been, so he left it alone. He sat the briefcase on his desk and opened it, pulling out Peter’s guardianship papers. He’d been uncomfortably relieved to discover that his desk had survived the explosions, along with all its contents. However, he’d had all his important documents removed from the penthouse before the remodeling began, and that included these papers. He unlocked his top desk drawer and put the papers back, as well as some other important documents. The top drawer was his good drawer, his ‘too important to completely forget about, but too intimidating to give full thought to right now’ space.

A rap on the door made him look up, and he grinned when he saw Steve standing in the doorway, leather coat still on, holding shopping bags.

“Hey,” Steve said with a smile.

“Hey yourself. How was your appointment?”

“It went well, I think, I’m, uh, still getting used to the process.”

“That’s not surprising, this is only your second appointment.”

Steve nodded, then flashed another grin. “No one tried to blow me up this time, anyway.”

Tony laughed lightly. “Small miracles,” he said, then gestured to the bags Steve was holding.

“What’s all that?”

“Huh? Oh, uhm, well—Anna—that's my, uhh, doctor—suggested that I try and invest more time into getting back into art. I picked up a few sketchpads after I first woke up, but, well, I’m going to put more effort into it again. I used to really enjoy it, and Anna seems to think that it might help. So, after, I stopped at an art store and picked up some things—colored pencils and paints and—uhh, sorry, I know it's kind of silly…”

“No, it's not,” Tony said, “I think it’s a great idea.”

Steve looked relieved. “I don't know if I’ll be any good, but—I’d like to try.”

“Hey, it’s been awhile. I think you’re allowed to be a little rusty,” Tony said.

Steve nodded, and Tony was happy to see his self-conscious look was mostly gone.

“Oh, that reminds me! I wanna show you something,” Tony said, and led Steve from the office to the master bedroom.

“Now, my room was fairly trashed, so, since I had to get it redone, I decided to make a few changes.”

Tony walked over to his closet, where Steve noticed a bit more room had been made.
“I know I have a lot of stuff to replace but, I thought—in case you or Bucky wanted some extra room—well, those dressers there will be empty, and those—”

Steve cut him off with a kiss.

“Thank you, Tony,” he said when he pulled back.

Tony blinked his eyes open, not totally sure when he’d closed them, and smiled.

“Yeah—yeah, of course.”

Steve placed his bags down against one of the dressers Tony had gestured to earlier, and shrugged off his coat to hang up in the closet.

Tony didn't know why the simple action made him feel so fluttery, but there was something about seeing Steve’s things there in his closet that made him feel good.

“Oh, did you talk to Buck?”

Tony nodded. “Oh, right, yeah I did, and thanks for reminding me, I actually have to go wake him up—”

“He’s sleeping? But it’s nearly 2 P.M.!” Steve said.

Tony nodded. “Yeah, but he didn't get any sleep last night, so I suggested he have a nap.”

Steve’s face broke out into concern.

“But… he told me he was okay this morning. He’s always been honest when he’s had a bad night —” Steve cut himself off, his face turning distraught.

“No, no, no!” Tony was quick to jump in, seeing where Steve’s thoughts were spiralling to. “He was fine last night—it didn’t have anything to do with that, actually. He was up all night because of Peter.”

Steve went from sad to confused in the blink of an eye. “Peter?” he questioned.

Tony nodded, and then began to recount what Bucky had told him, and then his rather sudden breakthrough with Peter.

Steve sighed when he finished.

“Yeah, that’s about where I’m at trying to figure all this out, too.”

Steve smiled. “You’re a genius, Tony, and Peter loves you.”

Tony sighed. “I’m going to invite him to this science expo I’m going to tomorrow.”

“That's a good idea, it might help take his mind off things,” Steve encouraged.

“Natasha’s the genius there. I totally forgot it was happening,” Tony admitted.

“Regardless, I think it will be good for Peter to get out and enjoy something. Though, what about school?”

“I had his teachers put some work together, and I already called May yesterday, so she knows
Peter’s a little under the weather.”

“Okay then. But we should probably go wake him up. He needs to get his school work done, especially if you’ll be gone for most of the day tomorrow.”

Tony nodded. “Yeah, I want to show him his new room anyway, see if there's anything he’d like to have changed.”

Steve smiled knowingly. “He’s going to love the room, Tony. Now, have you eaten yet? Well then, why don’t you go get Peter and Bucky up, while I make us all a late lunch.”

---

Peter couldn’t stop bouncing in his seat the entire way to the convention center. He was beyond excited that Tony was allowing him to come along to the expo. He’d been so worried that Tony wouldn’t want him anymore that it’d nearly torn him apart, and yet, the opposite seemed to be true—Tony had been so sympathetic and understanding and—okay, Peter was still grounded, as in, he wasn’t allowed to hang out with his friends after school, which meant he’d had to call Ned and explain that their Friday movie night was cancelled. Which, hearing Ned’s, “What do you mean I can’t meet Iron Man and Captain America because you got grounded?!” had kind of sucked, but both Steve and Tony said that they could reschedule once Peter’s grounding was over.

Tony was also busy making changes to the suit, adding what Clint had jokingly called, “Parental Locks,” which also sucked. Now Tony was issued alerts if Peter spent more than so many hours in the suit, and the suit wouldn’t function without Tony’s master code if Peter tried to use it beyond so many hours a day.

Peter wasn’t overly fond of that, but at the same time, he was just happy that Tony was letting him keep the suit.

The car pulled to a stop, and finally they were there. Peter looked over at Tony, who was giving him a mildly amused grin.

“Keep breathing, Peter,” he joked.

“Sorry! It’s just—I’m really excited to be here!” Peter admitted.

He was going to a science expo—he was going to a science expo because he was invited by Tony Stark!

“Good,” Tony said, laughing lightly. “Hopefully there are some interesting exhibits this year.”

Tony stepped out of the car, waiting for Peter to follow suit. He waved to Happy as he drove off, and then he and Peter entered the building.

“Now, I’m going to go meet with the people in charge of organizing SI’s part in all this and make sure it’s not a complete disaster. You can either follow, or go explore.”

Peter was suddenly a little nervous as they entered. There were a lot of people in sharp-looking suits—professionals—and he suddenly felt like a kid playing dress-up. The suit Tony had bought him fit perfectly of course, but—he felt intimidated.

“What’s that look for? You couldn’t shake your enthusiasm a few seconds ago.”

“What if people ask me questions? I’m a high school student, I’m not supposed to be—!”
“Hey, it’s okay!” Tony said, gently pulling Peter to the side. “Listen, yes, you’re still a high school student, but you’re one of the smartest kids I’ve ever met. You don’t have to answer any questions you don’t want to—hell, you don’t really even need to talk to anyone. But, if you do end up wrapped in a conversation, then you can always tell people the truth.”

“The truth?”

“That you’re here with me as my intern.”

Peter’s eyes widened a bit more at that.

“Kid, relax!” Tony said, laughing again. “You’re here to have fun!”

“Fun, right. I can do that,” Peter said, taking a deep breath.

“Okay, then, go explore. Text me or come find me if you need anything.”

Peter nodded, and watched as Tony headed off. Go have fun… piece of cake.

After another calming breath, Peter headed further into the convention hall. It was busy and somewhat loud, but also, he found himself quickly forgetting his momentary anxiety at the interesting displays and booths set up all around him, showing off companies’ latest projects or discoveries. So far, no one had been overly nosy about what someone as young as him was doing wandering around, which was a relief. Most of the people running the booths were more interested in answering his questions—one woman had remarked that he seemed well-educated and asked good questions, and she, in turn, had asked what he was doing there, but seemed satisfied with Peter’s “Oh, uh, I’m an intern,” response.

It wasn’t until his stomach started growling pointedly that he realized just how much time had passed. He took his phone from his pocket and brought up Tony’s number, firing off a quick text.

Peter: Hey, we have plans for lunch?

A few moments later, his phone buzzed, and Peter smiled at the message promising food. He looked around, trying to find a good descriptor for where he was when Tony asked, and just ended up sending him a selfie.

He made a mental note to stick close to the area in his picture as he moved to the next booth. He didn’t want to irritate Tony too much by sending him on a wild goose chase.

Peter was quite interested in a booth that was advertising recent breakthroughs in the biochemical field—including some very interesting work in DNA manipulation and splicing, something Peter was more than curious about—for rather obvious reasons.

After watching a brief presentation, he got the attention of one of the people running the booth to ask some follow-up questions.

“Peter? Peter Parker?” a voice interrupted.

Peter turned to regard the person who seemed to know him. He couldn’t have been much older than Peter himself, and Peter frowned. He recognized him, but—he couldn’t exactly place from where. He was wearing an expensive-looking dark blue suit, which Peter really couldn’t help but notice brought out his eyes.

Still, Peter was sure he didn’t know anyone like the boy in front of him. None of his friends were
quite so—oh, right, he had to say something, didn’t he?

“Uhm, hi?” Peter replied smartly, and immediately started mentally berating himself as the other boy’s lips quirked up in amusement.

“I’m hurt, truly,” the boy said, placing a hand over his heart. “And here I thought we were such good friends.”

Now Peter was thoroughly confused. There was no way he’d ever forget—

“I mean, sure, it’s been awhile—like, what, seven, eight years or so? Still, a promise is a promise, and I very clearly remember you saying you wouldn’t forget about me.”

Peter’s eyes widened. No way—there was no way!

“How?” Peter asked incredulously.

In front of him, the boy’s—Harry’s—grin broke out into a full-fledged smile.

“Hey, Petey.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for continuing to read!
I hope you all enjoyed this chapter please consider dropping a kudos or leaving a comment to let me know what you thought!

Please follow my Tumblr account where I'll often post updates or just Marvel content I find enjoyable! My message and asks boxes are always open if you have questions or just want to say hi!

I hope you all have an awesome weekend <3
Chapter Twenty-Seven

Chapter Notes

Thank you all so much for your comments and kudos on the last chapter! I'm sorry again for slowing down updates but I've just been very, very busy, especially now that finals are here!

Now I feel like I need to place a trigger warning here, there is a scene later on in this chapter that heavily features anxiety!

That being said I hope you enjoy this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Peter gaped as Harry smiled at him. He couldn't believe it—Harry was finally back! He had thought they wouldn't see each other again after he'd been shipped off to boarding school. Peter felt a huge smile break over his face, and in the next moment, he was wrapping his childhood best friend up in a hug.

“Oh my god! Harry, when did you get back?” Peter asked, full of excitement.

Harry laughed and clapped his back.

“No, too long ago, actually. After I graduated, I traveled for a little while, and now here I am.” Harry answered, pulling away.

“Are you staying?”

“Yeah, I'm going to be going to university here. Dad wants me close so he can start prepping me to take over, I think—he's sending me to enough of these damn networking conferences, anyway—but how about you, you're not looking much like a high-schooler. I mean, look at this suit. You clean up nice, Parker.” Harry looked him up and down appraisingly. “Expensive taste. What, you got a sugar daddy hooking you up or something?” Harry laughed.

“A what?” Peter asked in confusion.

“Peter! There you are!”

Peter turned at the familiar voice and smiled as Tony made his way through the crowd.

“Holy shit,” Peter heard Harry mutter. “I was joking!”

“Next time I ask you where you are, a little more than a selfie with no description would be good, thanks,” Tony huffed good-naturedly when he finally made it over. “So what were you thinking for lunch? We can get whatever you—oh, am I interrupting?”

“Oh, uh, no! To—uh, Mr. Stark, this is Harry—he was, like, my best friend growing up!”

Peter smiled at Harry, who was looking between them with an odd look. Then, seemingly
regaining himself, Harry threw on a charming smile and offered his hand, which Tony took easily.

“Harry Osborn,” Harry introduced himself.

Peter’s brows pulled together when he caught a sudden, but subtle, tension enter Tony.

“It’s… nice to meet you.” Tony said, smile not reaching his eyes. “We should be going, Peter. Don’t want your aunt accusing me of starving you.”

Tony placed a hand on Peter’s shoulder and began trying to lead him away.

Peter looked startled for a moment, before calling back, “Oh, uhh—I guess I’ll see you later, then?”

“Oh, wait up one second!” Harry stepped forward and pulled something from his jacket pocket, then grabbed a pen from one of the booths. Peter watched as he quickly scribbled something down, and then offered Peter a small card. Peter took it and looked it over—a contact card—but on the back, Harry had scribbled an entirely different phone number.

“That’s my cell number. Give me a call or text sometime and we can catch up!”

Peter beamed. “Totally! Oh, uhm, I guess I’ll see you later!” he called over his shoulder, as Tony tugged him along.

“Bye Peter!”

---

Peter was finishing up the last of his homework when his phone buzzed next to him. The buzz was followed immediately by a little chirping beep, and Peter watched in amusement as his little robot rolled across his desk to where his phone sat, and tried to pick it up. Peter watched as the small bot struggled to try and lift the device almost as large as itself. It made what Peter could only describe as a frustrated beep as the phone slid from its small clamps.

“It’s okay, I got it,” Peter said, reaching out for his phone.

He stopped though, hand hovering in mid-air, as the little robot let out a series of frantic sounding beeps and whirs.

“Okay, okay, you got it,” he said, taking his hand back.

Peter watched the robot try once more, before it finally seemed to learn that picking up the phone simply might not be one of its talents. Instead, he watched as it got hold of the device and then dragged it over, laying it in front of Peter with another series of beeps.

“Good job, buddy! That was great!” Peter encouraged happily.

He still couldn’t believe how well his bot was doing. It didn’t know much yet, but it showed promise. The fact that it showed problem-solving intelligence was incredible to him. He couldn’t help but feel proud.

“I still need to give you a name, though,” Peter mused as he unlocked his phone to check his messages.

His bot twirled on its wheels, before moving back to the corner of his desk where it’d been previously, playing with paperclips.
Ned: Hey, you’re coming back to school tomorrow, right?

Peter: Yeah I’ll be there, how bad has the rumor mill been?

Ned: Well not too bad, though Jessica from the yearbook committee asked me if they should design a memorial page for you

Peter: omg

Ned: Yeah it was kind of funny actually. Also, a couple of people are saying they swear they saw Tony Stark in the halls

Peter: Have you said anything

Ned: No but it’s been hard not to! I mean that WAS Tony Stark coming to pick you up from school. You had Tony Stark pick you up from school dude!

Peter sighed and rolled his eyes.

Peter: Please don’t make it worse.

Ned: Don’t worry man I won’t
Ned: But how crazy is that?! Tony Stark!

Peter let out a groan, but he also smiled, because Ned wasn’t exactly wrong.

Ned: You sure I can’t come over Friday?

Peter: Yeah sorry :( Not this weekend. I’m honestly surprised Tony brought me to the expo today.

Ned: Yeah how did that go anyway?!

Peter: Good, saw some pretty cool stuff! I’ll tell you more about it tomorrow, I g2g though and finish this homework before Tony checks in.

Ned: Okay dude have a good night!

Peter: You too

Peter sighed and flipped through his text conversations. MJ had sent him a vaguely nice message and a drawing of their math teacher looking miserable. He had a few messages from Tony (including a picture of a new project down in his workshop with the caption, “Too bad you tried to sneak out and can’t come see in person”), but most of his text messages were from Ned. He had one conversation that only had a few messages in it:

Peter: Hey!
Peter: It was nice seeing you again!!
Peter: This is Peter btw

So far, Peter hadn’t heard anything back from Harry. He was trying not to be too disappointed about that, though he couldn’t help but feel worried that maybe Harry wasn’t going to message him back after all. Then again, if he didn’t want to talk to Peter, why would he have given him his personal phone number?
Peter sighed and tried to concentrate on finishing up his English homework. He just had to finish editing his book report. Shakespeare wasn’t Peter’s favorite subject—especially not Romeo and Juliet—so it was taking him a bit longer to get through than his other work had. He always found it exceptionally hard to concentrate when bored. Still, he’d promised Tony he would be able to get everything done before tomorrow, and he wasn’t keen on disappointing the man twice.

Especially not when he’d been so… great. Tony had sat with him the night before to try and talk about everything that’d been weighing on Peter’s mind. Peter had been nervous at first, but after a while, it’d felt good to keep talking about everything that had happened. It’d been such a vast relief to know he wasn’t alone, or that he didn’t have to be. Tony had been so understanding the whole time that Peter really felt like a weight had been taken off his shoulders. Then going to the expo today had really helped to elevate his mood as well—yeah, it sucked that his weekend plans with Ned were on hold, but Peter found that he really couldn’t complain, all things considered.

A knock on his door broke him from his contemplation.

“Yeah?”

Peter watched as the door opened and Steve poked his head inside.

“Hey, was just checking how things were going. Dinner will be ready in a few minutes.”

“Oh, awesome. Yeah, I’m almost done here. What are we having?” Peter asked.

Steve shrugged. “Bucky’s calling it, ‘Ultimate Grilled Cheese.’”

“That sounds pretty great!” Peter said, and his stomach rumbled in agreement.

He glanced at his essay, and decided it could wait until after dinner. He only needed to finish editing, anyway. Peter stood and reached over to grab his robot, when he caught the look Steve was sending him.

“Oh, come on, please?” Peter asked.

“No, Peter, you know the rules. No robots at the table.”

“But—but it’s not like I’d be working on it, it’s already built.”

“No, no more robots, finished or not,” Steve said.

“Fine,” Peter said to Steve, sighing, then he turned to address his bot. “Okay, buddy, don’t get into any trouble, okay?”

The robot looked at him with its camera, the facial display Peter programmed showed a slightly sad face, and Peter immediately wanted to find a way to smuggle it to the dining table.

“It’ll still be there when you get back,” Steve reasoned with a slight roll of his eyes, though his smile let Peter know he wasn’t actually annoyed. “Hurry and go wash up for dinner, it will be ready soon.”

With that, Steve retreated again. Peter hummed and looked back to his robot when it beeped questioningly. Peter was happy he had allowed for so many different sounds in the bot’s databanks—it really made it come to life.

“Okay, you heard the boss. I gotta go for a bit.”
Peter smiled at the robot’s whine.

“I’m sorry, I’ll try not to take too long,” he said as he headed to the door. “Don’t get into trouble!”

Peter shrugged off his momentary hesitation, washed up in the bathroom like Steve had asked, and then headed for the kitchen. Even in the hall, he could already smell the cooking food, and it made his mouth water. In the kitchen and dining area, Steve was just setting out plates as Bucky stood over the stove, taking a sandwich from off the pan and adding it to the mountain he’d already fried up, then threw on another.

“Oh, Peter, good.” Steve said when he saw him come in, “can you go down and get your dad? He’s locked in the workshop and hasn’t answered any of my texts.”

Peter opened his mouth to answer, and had already begun to turn when Steve’s words caught up to him, making him freeze.

“Uhhh—” Peter said, smartly.

His brain whirred on overdrive—there was no way he heard that right… right? But no, Steve—Steve had called Tony Peter’s dad. Peter felt blood rush to his face, making him flush brightly as his stomach knotted in embarrassment. Had he been that obvious? Oh, God, did Tony realize how Peter had come to view him?

“Are you okay, Peter? You’re looking a little flushed,” Steve said, walking around the table to stand in front of him.

“I—uhm, I—”

Steve felt Peter’s forehead with the back of his hand. “You do feel a little warm,” he said, voice tinged with concern.

Peter flushed deeper. Why was he acting so casual—right after saying that?!

“I, um, I’m fine—!”

“Are you sure? If you’re—”

“No, no, I’m okay, I’ll go get D—TONY! I’ll go get Tony! I’ll, uh—be right back!” Peter all but shouted, before dashing out of the room and to the elevator.

He slumped against the far wall as the doors closed and groaned loudly, hiding his face in his hands, as if he could simply wipe away his embarrassment. Luckily, if Friday noticed his turmoil, she stayed silent, but the doors did open up onto the workshop floor without him specifying, so Peter gathered the AI had a good understanding of the situation. He hoped she didn’t tell Tony.

Peter made his way into the workshop, wincing at the volume the music was blaring at, and waved to have Friday turn it down. Tony’s head immediately popped up from his workbench, and he looked around with a frown.

“What’s—?” he stopped himself when he spotted Peter, and smiled. “Hey Pete! What’s going on?”

Peter felt all his embarrassment rush back to him now, looking at Tony directly. He could feel himself freezing up, and the air around them turning awkward, and—

“Hey, you okay?” Tony asked.

"Okay. What’s wrong with you?” Tony asked.

Peter laughed, nervously. "Wrong? Me? Naaaw, everything’s hunky dory!"

Tony’s face turned from concerned to bemused.

"Are you sure? ‘Cause I’m pretty sure I just heard the phrase ‘hunky dory’ come out of your mouth, and if that’s not a cry for help, then I don’t know what is,” he replied dryly.

Peter groaned. “It’s nothing—just—” he sighed and shook his head, he did not want to talk about it, least of all to Tony. “Steve’s been texting you, dinner’s ready.”

Tony raised a skeptical brow, but shrugged after a moment.

“Fine, keep it to yourself, then,” he said, and Peter sighed in relief. “So what’s for dinner?”

“Bucky’s making grilled cheese.”

“Oh, sounds good.”

Tony got up and picked up the gauntlet he was working on, then put it on and picked up a few tools to take with him.

“Hey, how come I’m not allowed to work on stuff at the table but you are?” Peter complained.

“Uh, because I’m the adult who owns this tower. I can make and break whatever rules I want.”

“I thought that was Steve’s rule?”

“Same difference,” Tony shrugged as they got into the elevator.

Peter huffed and rolled his eyes, but couldn’t really argue further.

The doors opened up to the penthouse, and Peter and Tony made their way to the kitchen where Peter saw Bucky leaning against the counter, smiling down at Steve with nothing short of a shit-eating grin. Steve sat at the table, head in his hands, but looked up when he heard them come in. His cheeks flushed brightly when he saw Peter, and Peter wondered if maybe it was about earlier. He figured he was right, when Bucky began sniggering and Steve groaned quietly. Regardless, Peter found himself also blushing at the memory.

But something else seemed to catch Steve’s attention, and his face dropped into a bit of a scowl.

“No. Absolutely not,” he said.

Peter turned to see he was looking at Tony, who blinked a bit in surprise. “What?”

“No. No work at the dinner table, Tony, you agreed!”

“That was for Peter!”

“No, that was for all of us,” Steve insisted. “Take it off.”

Tony gaped. “But—!”

“Tony.”
Peter caught Bucky’s eye, and the two shared an amused glance as Steve and Tony had a stare-off. Finally, Tony broke and grumbled as he began removing the gauntlet, all the while giving Steve an unimpressed look. Peter had to bite his lip to stop from laughing.

“Happy?” Tony asked when the tech was placed off to the side.

“Yep, now go wash up,” Steve said, making Tony sigh again dramatically.

Tony seemed to catch Peter’s amusement on his way out of the room, because he rolled his eyes and muttered, “Not a word, kid,” which, of course, was what broke Peter down into giggles.

“Hey, Peter, could we talk for a moment?” Steve asked suddenly, voice nervous.

Peter looked over and nodded, his own nerves flaring up slightly, but he followed Steve into the living room.

“Peter, I, uhm,” Steve sighed. “I wanted to… apologize, about earlier. I hadn’t realized what I said, and—well, I’m sorry if I made things awkward.”

Peter bit his lips again, nervous himself. “It’s okay. I mean, uhm, I—Tony, well—” Peter flushed a bit, before trying to regain himself. “What I mean is, uhm—it’s okay. I—I’m the one who made things—made things awkward—”

“Peter, no—”

“No, it’s okay, it’s just—” Peter paused to think things over.

He was positive he could trust Steve, that he wouldn’t make fun of him for it. Still, he glanced around to make sure they were still alone in the room, and lowered his voice a bit as he continued.

“It’s just that, lately, uhm… especially when I’m tired, or—or whatever—I sometimes slip up, too, and, uhh… in my head, I sometimes think of Tony as, uh, as my dad…”

Peter dared to glance up at Steve, and blinked, surprised. Steve’s eyes were wide, but he had a large, excited grin over his face.

“Please, you can’t tell!” Peter begged. “I—I can’t let Tony know I’ve been subconsciously calling him ‘Dad’! Seriously, I don’t want him to think I’m—I’m too clingy, or—or a burden—”

“Hey, Peter, whoa, it’s okay, take a breath,” Steve said, raising his hands in a placating manner. Peter sucked in a breath he hadn’t realized he needed.

“It’s okay, that’s it. Don’t worry, if you’re not ready to say anything, I’m not going to tattle on you. Though I really don’t think you have to worry so much.”

Peter shifted. He felt exposed and vulnerable, and—and he hated how often he was feeling like that this week. “Really?”

Steve nodded. “Tony cares about you a great deal. He’s not going to think you’re being too clingy or whatever else you’re worried about.”

Peter nodded acceptingly, though his fears weren’t totally gone. The thought of Tony ever finding out was far too intimidating.

From down the hall, Peter heard a door open, and he immediately stiffened and turned in the
direction of the noise. A few seconds later, Tony walked in, wearing a still-casual-but-less-oil-stained outfit.

“Better?” he asked Steve.

“Much. Did you wash your hands?”

“Oh my—yes, Steven, I washed my damn hands!” Tony laughed.

“Hey, watch your language, there are young ears present!” Steve huffed.

Peter couldn’t help but laugh, especially when Steve met his gaze and winked.

---

Dinner was amazing, and Peter inhaled no less than five of Bucky’s Ultimate Grilled Cheese (ultimate because of the mix of other toppings) sandwiches and a large plate of Steve’s roasted potatoes. He was slouching down in his chair now, holding his stomach and groaning.

“So, are you ready for the fair on Friday?” Tony asked Peter with a smile.

“Yeah!” Peter said, perking up a bit more from his food coma. “I’m super excited!”

“Have you come up with a name for your little bot yet?”

Peter paused and hummed. “Well, I was thinking—I don’t know.”

“Hey, it’s okay, what are you thinking?” Tony prompted.

“Well, it’s just—” Peter took a breath, “I was thinking of naming it Ben.”

Tony nodded, considering. “A way to honor your uncle,” he said, and Peter nodded.

“Science fairs were always something we did together,” Peter said in a quiet tone.

“I think it’s a good idea, Peter. If you want to name your robot Ben, then go right ahead.”

Peter looked up, feeling a bit hopeful.

“You think that’d be okay?”

Tony nodded again, and Peter watched as the man seemed to consider something, before speaking again.

“You know, Friday isn’t my first fully-integrated AI,” he began.

“Really?”

“She’s actually relatively new. Before Friday, I had an AI named JARVIS. JARVIS was my first real breakthrough into the world of true AI.”

Peter recognized the name; he was pretty sure he’d read a paper Tony had written some time ago about AI, but he was drawing a blank on the details.

“Now, when people asked me about the name, I’d often tell them it was an acronym which stood for, ‘Just A Rather Very Intelligent System.’ But that—wasn’t entirely accurate.”
Peter frowned. Now that Tony had said it, the acronym really did sound familiar. He noticed that Steve and Bucky were also taking interest in the conversation as well, and Peter concentrated back on his mentor.

“The name actually came from my family’s butler, Edwin Jarvis. He greatly influenced me, and many—if not most—of my happiest memories growing up are with him. He was a constant in my life, all the way up until his death. Looking back, developing Jarvis, the AI, may have been my way of trying to cope with his loss.” Tony sighed. “We find ways to honor those we care about.”

Peter nodded. He felt a sense of pride and warmth at being trusted with the small bit of information. He’d learned over the course of knowing Tony that he was actually a rather private person, and this was the first time he had ever really mentioned his childhood or growing up.

Peter let himself smile. “Ben. I’m going to call it Ben.”

Tony returned the smile, but Peter broke his gaze away before flicking it back up.

“Thanks,” he said, “for—for telling me that.”

Tony held his gaze for a moment, and Peter couldn’t help but feel there was something significant in it. Then Tony nodded in silent acknowledgement, before breaking his gaze to stare at the scant remains of their dinner.

“Guess we’d better clean up,” Tony sighed.

That seemed to kick Steve and Bucky into gear, who, up until that moment, had remained silent and unobtrusive.

“Here, pass me your plates,” Steve said, but Tony was shaking his head.

“No, you both cooked. Peter and I will take care of the clean-up, right, kid?”

Peter nodded. “Right!”

In the end, however, Tony had huffed, annoyed at Steve’s hovering, and allowed him to help put away the leftovers.

---

Peter was lying in bed, just about to drift off, when his phone buzzed next to him. He cursed silently as he was startled awake, though he knew it was his fault for forgetting to put it on silent.

Peter was getting ready to tell Ned off when he unlocked the phone and saw the message.

It wasn't from Ned.

**Harry**: Hey

Peter stared at it a moment, then a huge grin tugged at his lips as his stomach fluttered a little in nervous excitement. *Harry texted him back.*

The phone buzzed again, and a second message bubble appeared under the first.

**Harry**: Sorry for taking so long to respond. I ended up getting pretty busy this afternoon.

**Peter**: Hey! It’s okay! I hope you weren't run too ragged
Harry: Oh man, Dad had me sit through a bunch of boring meetings. It was awful. I was going to text you, but every time I pulled my phone out Dad would give me this LOOK.

Peter: Aw man, not meetings! The TORTURE!

Harry: So you’re still a sassy menace I see.

Peter smiled.

Peter: If either of us were a menace growing up it was you!

Harry: I was a menace cuz people kind of expected it of me, but you were worse because of the surprise!

Peter laughed a bit.

Peter: I have no clue what you’re referring to.

Harry: Lies!

Peter: If I was a menace it was because of your influence

Harry: If I was so bad then why did your aunt and uncle love me so much? :P

Peter: No accounting for poor taste

Harry: -_-  

Peter bit his lip, suddenly unsure if he’d taken it too far. As kids, they had ribbed each other almost constantly for fun, play-arguing like it was a sport. But that had been a long time ago—

Harry: Then what does that say about you?

Peter let out a quiet, breathy laugh in relief.

Peter: That I have undeniable patience.

Harry: Lmao sure!

Harry: So what are you doing this weekend?

Peter bit his lip.

Peter: Busy unfortunately :( 

Harry: Aw, with what?

Peter: It’s the science fair this Friday and then, well, I’m not busy so much as I’m kind of sort of grounded right now.

Harry: Peter! I’m scandalized!

Harry: So what are you in for?

Peter: Reverse B&E
Harry: *YOU GOT CAUGHT SNEAKING OUT? AHAHAHAHAHAHA!*

Peter: *Omg shut up!*

Harry: *Sorry can’t. Too funny.*

Peter: *-_-*

Harry: *:)*

Harry: *So when ARE you free?*

Peter: *I’m actually not too sure? I THINK it’s just for the weekend*

Neither Tony nor Steve had said how long he was grounded for, only that he would have to cancel his weekend plans, but since May would be home after that, Peter assumed he would be let off the hook.

Harry: *Well keep me updated!*

Peter: *I will! :) I’m glad we ran into each other! Sorry I couldn’t stay and chat though*

Harry: *Me too. BTW about that, since when do YOU know Tony Stark?*

Peter stared at the message for a while, debating what to tell Harry.

Harry: *Seriously, like what exactly is up with that?*

Peter: *I kind of work for him now? I intern on weekends and after school when there’s time.*

Harry: *Oh wow! I knew SI did high school internships but I thought Stark didn’t take personal interns?*

Peter: *I don’t think he does. I’m the only one working with him now anyways*

Harry: *Damn. You must still be a giant ass nerd.*

Peter just sent him an emoji wearing sunglasses in response.

Harry: *Yep, major dork.*

Peter: *Always.*

Peter glanced at his bedside clock and sighed. Tony would kill him if he didn’t try and get some sleep.

Peter: *Sorry I g2g. Gotta try and get some sleep.*

Harry: *Sure, keep me updated on your incarceration.*

Peter: *Lol sure thing. Have a good night.*

Harry: *Night Peter*

---
Before Peter knew it, it was already Friday. He woke up with a feeling of great excitement, and Ben whistled and beeped at him as he packed his bag, as if the machine could pick up on his current emotional state. Then again, with the programming and sensory inputs he’d put into it, maybe Ben could. Now that was an exciting thought.

“Come on, Ben, it’s the big day! Your time to shine!” Peter said, holding out his hands for the robot to roll on to.

Ben whistled in question.

“It’s the fair today!” Peter said. “Here, why don’t you take a nap? I have to get through classes before the fair starts, and that’ll be pretty boring for you while trapped in my bag.”

Ben beeped again, before powering down. Peter gently placed it in his backpack along with its charging station. A knock at his door caught his attention, and Peter smiled at Tony when he answered.

“Hey!”

“Hey, Peter. Sorry, I know I said I’d give you a ride to school, but a situation popped up that I have to take care of—but I know May doesn’t want you walking, so I have Happy waiting for you when you’re ready,” Tony said apologetically, while fiddling with securing a cufflink to his shirt.

“Oh—no, that’s okay,” Peter replied, trying to keep the mild disappointment out of his voice. “Is everything all right?”

“Just company stuff. It’ll be fine, I’m sure.”

“Okay, well, I just need to grab my hoodie.”

“And make sure to eat something, even if you only grab a muffin or an apple. Breakfast is important,” Tony said as he hurried off.

“Okay, I will!”

“Have a good day at school!” Tony called out behind himself.

“Bye…” Peter sighed, but did as requested and grabbed an apple and a muffin, before dashing down to the garage where Happy was waiting.

School passed in a flurry of last minute exam prep. Most of the students were goofing off, and classes were a little chaotic with last day cramming. Peter found he, too, was having trouble focusing, though for a different reason than most.

Despite waking up in good spirits, much of that excitement had begun to morph and twist into something a lot less friendly. Peter’s feet bounced as he waited for the bell to ring; his chest felt compressed, and his skin tingled unpleasantly.

He swung between being hyperaware of his surroundings, to losing minutes at a time. He tried to focus on his breathing. At one point, MJ passed a folded piece of paper to him, which turned out to be a picture of him looking wide-eyed and nervous. He sent her a slightly annoyed look, to which she replied by drawing a large question mark and holding it up for him to see, while shooting him a look. Peter only shook his head and went back to staring at the board as their teacher prattled on. It didn’t take long for his thoughts to drift again.
The bell ringing had Peter jolting back to reality, and he blinked, feeling slightly disoriented as he looked around the room. He didn't know where the time had gone, but that didn’t matter now. It was time to get his ass in gear and set up his display table for the fair.

Setup didn’t take very long; all Peter had to do was display his information board, hook up Ben’s charging station, and lay out the puzzles he’d brought for Ben to solve. Peter also had a short slideshow displayed on his laptop screen that flipped through pictures of Ben’s construction.

Finally, he placed Ben out on its charging port, and pressed the button needed to wake it up. He let out a shaky sigh when it was all done.

Ben whistled its start-up noise, and its display lit up. The little robot looked around, before moving itself off of its charging station and over to Peter.

“Hey, Ben,” Peter greeted, holding out his hand to offer Ben his pointer finger.

Ben looked at Peter’s hand, before reaching up to hold onto Peter’s finger, and the two “shook hands.” Peter grinned—it was a new trick Ben had just picked up the day before. He was proud of it, and every time the little robot learned something new, Peter was filled with a sense of accomplishment. But still, he was nervous. Would the judges like Ben? Did it really matter? He’d had so much fun, working with Tony in the workshop and creating Ben, that Peter knew, regardless of the results, he wouldn’t regret the time and effort he put in. Though it was always nice to have your hard work recognized.

Would Uncle Ben have been proud of him? The thought made him stop and frown. Did that thought even matter? Something in Peter ached at that. On the table, Ben’s facial display was showing off a happy face, and Peter let himself smile at the robot, though the action had no real energy behind it.

“Wow, is that it?”

Peter startled, and turned to face Ned, who had sneaked up on him.

“Oh, uh, yeah!” Peter replied.

“It’s so cool!” Ned enthused.

“Here, hold out your finger to it and say, ‘Hello,’” Peter said.

Ned followed his instructions, and gasped in excitement when Ben shook his hand.

“Ahh! Dude! This is amazing! Aw, man, I really should have gotten prepared earlier and made something for the fair,” Ned lamented.

“There’s always next year,” Peter shrugged.

“That’s true! Hey, maybe we could do a joint project or something—then again, it kinda looks like you’ve got a handle on programming now.”

Peter shook his head desperately. “Dude, no way. I only learned, like, the basics, and then whatever else I needed to make Ben work. There’s still a lot I don’t quite understand. Tony helped teach me the programming I needed to implement, but we didn’t have time to do in-depth lessons. We should totally work on something together next year!”

Ned beamed and nodded enthusiastically. “It’ll be so much fun, we gotta! Also, have you put
together that Spider-Man Lego yet? I’ve been waiting for pictures, dude!”

Peter nodded. “I’m halfway through it, but I’m saving the Millennium Falcon one for when you can come over, so we can do it together.”

“Sweet!” Ned fist-pumped. “That’s going to be so awesome!”

Someone called out Ned’s name, and he turned to look.

“Looks like your dad’s looking for you,” Peter said, recognizing the voice from the many times he’d been over to Ned’s house to hang out.

Ned nodded. “Yeah, I’d better go. Good luck tonight, though! We’ll probably circle around and see you before leaving—as long as Dad’s not in a hurry.”

Peter nodded and smiled, even as he felt his mood begin to drop again. “Sure, I’ll see you later.”

“See you!”

Peter sighed, quietly watching Ned wander off. Behind him, Ben beeped, trying to get his attention. Peter turned in time to see the little bot zoom around a stack of blocks it had built up.

“Good job, buddy,” Peter said, distractedly.

Ben made a whirring noise, and its display showed an annoyed face. With a decisive beep, it turned its back to Peter, and began amusing itself once more with the objects Peter had put out for it to play with and learn about.

As Peter watched his robot play, he found himself overcome with an intense and encompassing loneliness. He looked around the gym, at all the other people milling about and finalizing their displays and projects, and most of the students had family helping them, with many more still to show up. This time last year, Uncle Ben had been with him, going over their checklist and chasing away Peter’s nerves with his encouragement. This time, Peter was alone, and he felt it more strongly now than ever. He gulped in a deep breath as his head began to throb dully, and a wash of anxiety passed over him. He was tempted to grab Ben and run from the room. Did he really need to do this? Who was he kidding, why had he thought he could do this again?

A few people moved in front of his field of vision, and Peter looked around the room in surprise. When—when had the fair started? He gulped and threw on a smile as some students and parents asked about his robot and what it could do. Peter went through the motions of explaining, just like he’d practiced, and only stumbled over his words a few times. He tried to breathe calmly as the first group of people moved on, after expressing praise at his project. He could do this. It was just for a couple of hours.

Almost forty-five minutes later, Peter was beginning to doubt himself again. The noise of the place was encroaching upon him; the talking, the laughter, the projects and game booths—all mixing together into something overwhelming. He felt trapped. He needed to get away, find somewhere to just escape. He wished, desperately, that Uncle Ben was there with him, he wanted someone there, he needed something to ground him, he—he wanted his dad.

The thought made Peter’s throat constrict more, until it felt like he couldn’t breathe. Tony would know what to do. He always made Peter feel better, and—and he needed to get out of here, before he had a complete breakdown in the middle of the crowded gymnasium. God, he’d never live it down if he did. Peter turned to look at his display. He didn’t feel comfortable leaving Ben here on its own. He also didn’t know when the judges would be by to ask him about Ben, and—Peter bit
back a whimper. What if he missed them while he was out of the room and missed his shot completely? Then he’d have to go back to the tower and tell Tony that he’d screwed up, and then Tony would be disappointed in him, and he’d already made such a mess of the week that—Peter closed his eyes and gulped in another shuddering breath. God, he was such a disaster, how—

He jolted when a hand landed on his shoulder. Peter opened his eyes and spun around, then gaped.

“Hey, kid, the display looks great!” Tony beamed.

Peter continued to stare. Tony was right there, right there in front of him.

“You okay, Pete?”

Peter blinked and shook himself, though his feeling of awe didn’t really die down. He didn’t even notice the people staring and whispering excitedly.

“You—you came,” Peter said softly, in wonder.

Tony frowned, bemused, and then smiled. “Of course I did, nothing would have kept me away. Well—maybe a world-ending disaster, but that’s about it.”

“What about work!”

Tony shrugged. “I sorted out most of that mini-meltdown. If they can’t handle the rest, then I’m paying the wrong people.”

“Wait, it wasn’t an actual meltdown, was it?” Peter asked, concerned, thinking about the reactor.

“Oh no, no, no, nothing like that. Don’t worry about it. Though, you didn’t answer my question before—are you okay, Peter? You were looking a little peaky there for a minute,” Tony said quietly, in case of prying ears.

“I’m—I’m okay now. Sorry, I just—” Peter looked up and met Tony’s eyes and sighed. “It was just getting to be a bit much for a minute, and—and I wasn’t sure if I’d be able to do this,” he admitted honestly.

Tony nodded. “Listen, Peter, if you’re no longer feeling this, then that’s completely understandable and okay. All you have to do is say the word, and we’ll pack up and go home. The judges should be around within the next ten minutes if you want to stay until then, but I don’t want you hurting yourself over a trophy.”

Peter looked at Tony, and knew that he was being completely serious. It could actually be that easy. He had his out.

“Whatever you want to do is okay, Peter. You don’t have to do this if it’s too soon. We can go back and throw on a movie.” Tony paused, considering. “Though, technically, you’re still grounded, so I’ll be picking the movie.”

Peter let out a put-upon groan. “Don’t pick something boring.”

Tony gasped dramatically. “Boring? Me? You know what—just for that, I’m going to pick a documentary about grass.”

Peter huffed a laugh, and Tony smiled.

It was a tempting offer. Very tempting.
“I-I think I’ll stick around here then, thanks.”

Tony watched him for a moment. “You sure?”

Peter nodded, and took another calming breath, which he actually felt stronger on the other side of. “Yeah.”

Tony nodded again. “Anything I can do to help?”

Peter bit at his lip again. “Stay?”

“I’m not going anywhere, Pete.”

---

Peter beamed as he took a selfie, holding up his first place medal next to his head, and sent it to MJ, Ned, and Harry. He didn’t get to take home the giant trophy that’d been on display by the judges’ station, but his name was going to be engraved on one of the little plaques that adorned it, before it was put back in the school’s trophy cabinet. Tony had scoffed and offered to pay the school for it, but Peter stopped him before he could make a real offer.

Now back in the comfort of the tower, Peter was more than happy to take Tony up on the offer of a movie night. It felt good to be able to finally relax, and Peter was overjoyed that Tony was taking time away from work to just hang out with him.

He smiled as Tony came into the living room, depositing a large bowl of popcorn in Peter’s lap before taking a seat next to him.

“Lights, Friday,” Tony said, and the room dimmed accordingly, just as the TV seemed to turn itself on.

Peter shoveled a handful of popcorn into his mouth as the movie began, before frowning. ‘What the hell is this—?’

Peter’s eyes widened and he threw a kernel of popcorn at Tony, who cackled, overly pleased at his joke, as the narrator on the screen began detailing the wonderful varieties of grass.

Peter huffed as Tony continued to laugh, rolling his eyes. Peter asked if they could please watch something decent, and the man relented, though he was still grinning hugely.

The two settled into the sofa as the new movie began to play, and Peter couldn’t help but feel so completely content, especially given how close he’d been earlier to breaking down. Peter felt a great sense of accomplishment, not just from taking first place at the fair, but for overcoming his own emotional turmoil—though he knew, the main reason he was able to garner the strength to do so was because of Tony’s support. He was so incredibly grateful. He didn’t know what he’d ever done to have brought Tony into his life, but he felt that it must have been something good. Peter let himself relax against Tony as sleep began to pull at him. He was still incredibly nervous over how temporary this felt at times, but as Tony began making sarcastic jabs and comments over the unveiling plot and ridiculous characters (and especially the movie-science), Peter decided to push his worries and anxiety away, and let himself remain happy.

Chapter End Notes
Thank you so much for reading, please leave comments or kudos to let me know how I'm doing.

Also consider stopping by my Tumblr for fic updates, fandom content, or to leave an ask! :D

I hope all of you enjoyed and I wish you a happy weekend!
Chapter Twenty-Eight

Chapter Notes

I'm back!

Wow, I'm so sorry for the impromptu hiatus! Between work and university finals I was way too busy to work on this fic!

Thank you to everyone who commented on the last chapter! I'm sorry if I didn't get around to replying to all of your comments, I promise to do better this time around now that I have a bit more time.

Warnings for this chapter:

Bad coping methods, alcoholism, and angst.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony bit his lip in a desperate bid to quell the laughter building in his chest. His attempts at remaining serious were only partially successful as his shoulders shook with the silent heaves. He glanced over at the man standing next to him and caught Bucky’s eyes, which glimmered in similar amusement as Steve continued to huff in annoyance.

“No! Just! Stay still and act natural!” the blond directed, from where he’d set up his large canvas.

“You can have either one or the other, Cap,” Tony replied, already feeling fidgety.

Steve sighed and shot them a look. Unfortunately (for Steve), the look seemed far from having the desired effect. Instead, it was as if two lightbulbs went off simultaneously, causing Bucky and Tony to fix each other with conniving expressions. Tony had to bite back more laughter as he shot a quick glance toward Steve, to make sure he was focused on preparing his paints, then he went about wrapping his arms around Bucky’s shoulders, as Bucky pressed a leg between both of his. Tony threw his head back and let out a very exaggerated moan, as Bucky pressed his face to the side of Tony’s neck, half to stifle his laughter and half to sell the look.

There was a heavy second of silence, followed by a loud, growly sigh.

“What in the bloody—” Steve began, before cutting himself off, “—know what? No. Stop it!”

“What’s the matter, Cap?” Tony asked, failing to keep the amusement out of his voice.

“I told you to act natural.”

“Exactly,” Bucky said, turning his head just enough to send Steve a crooked smile. “Can’t think of anything more natural than wanting to immediately ravish such a sweet treat.”

Bucky’s hands travelled down to Tony’s ass, giving it a pointed squeeze, making Tony finally break out into laughter—which he tried, and failed miserably, to quiet by pressing his face into Bucky’s shoulder.
Meanwhile, Steve appeared to be stuck trying his best to look as annoyed as possible.

“Find a new natural,” he directed, then went back to unpacking his paints.

“Fuck, he’s still so easy to rile up,” Bucky whispered fondly. “Of course, pretending to ravish you is a lot more fun than the old ways of getting on his nerves.”

“Well, why stop at pretending?” Tony challenged suddenly, sending Bucky a heated look.

Bucky returned Tony’s gaze, eyes darting down to his lips as his own parted in wanting, before meeting Tony’s gaze again. The two moved together; Tony tangling his fingers in Bucky’s hair, just as Bucky cupped his jaw with one hand and his hip with the other, to pull Tony’s body flush against his own as their lips met. Tony sighed at the first graze of Bucky’s tongue against his lips, and Bucky took full advantage to deepen the kiss, making Tony whimper at the feeling.

Something smacked them both on the side of the head, and they jolted apart in surprise, just in time to watch the paintbrush clatter to the floor.

“Can you two stop acting like horny teenagers for five damn minutes?” Steve demanded from where he was glaring at them.

Bucky huffed. “Spoilsport,” he grumbled, and Tony couldn’t help but agree.

“Go sit on the couch there,” Steve said, picking up a piece of very thin charcoal.

“Oh, good idea, Stevie. C’mon, Tony, let’s get comfy,” Bucky said with a wink.

“No!” Steve snapped. “Just—ugh, sit together nicely so I can map out your form.”

“Honeypot, I’ll let you map all my curves if you come join us,” Tony said back.

Steve stared up at the ceiling, as if praying to God that he be granted peace.

“Okay, okay! Pose nicely, we can do that, right, Buckybear?”

“Yep, totally,” Bucky nodded along.

Steve muttered something that Tony couldn’t catch, but made Bucky huff a laugh.

Bucky pulled Tony down onto the couch with him, and the two relaxed together as Steve studied them.

“Buck, wrap your arm around his—yeah, perfect, like that. Tony, relax, you’re not sitting through a debriefing. Okay, that’s better. Now try to hold as still as possible,” Steve said, then disappeared behind the canvas again.

“Hey, hey, Stevie,” Bucky started sometime later.

“What?” Steve asked, clearly distracted by his work.

“It’s been five minutes.”

Steve’s face appeared from behind the canvas as he fixed Bucky with a confused expression. Taking in both Bucky’s and Tony’s matching grins, Steve’s expression switched to one of realization, and then exasperation.
“You're impossible!” he exclaimed. “The both of you!”

Steve sighed as his complaints were met with laughter.

“Fine! Go, shoo! I got what I needed.”

Tony turned and placed a quick kiss to Bucky's temple.

“So how about—”

“Sorry, Boss, but there’s been a development concerning one of your research projects down in the workshop,” Friday interrupted.

Tony frowned. He hadn’t left any of his projects running; the only thing he had Friday working on was…

He glanced quickly to Bucky and forced a smile.

“Sorry, guess this is going to have to wait a bit,” he said regretfully, pulling himself up from the couch.

“Don’t trap yourself down there all night,” Steve said.

Tony sent him a crooked grin. “Ah, I won’t. Just need to take a look.”

“Natasha is joining us for dinner!” Bucky chimed in. “She won’t be afraid to drag you back up here.”

“I’ll keep that under advisement.”

“Plus, buggin’ Stevie is so much more fun with backup.”

“Joy,” Steve deadpanned.

Tony laughed, but walked over to Steve to give him a placating kiss.

“I’ll see you in a bit,” Tony said, as he made his way out of the room.

“Don’t leave us waiting too long, doll!” Bucky called after him, bringing a smile to Tony’s face.

Tony sighed and tried to brush off the lingering concern he felt. Friday knew better than to interrupt him, unless it was for something important. He also knew it was probably something about the case he was building for Bucky. It was a daunting challenge. The things he’d read, the videos he’d seen—the mere thought of it twisted his heart. He couldn’t believe anyone could survive half of what Bucky had gone through. Yet, Bucky had survived, and more than that, he was trying to pull his life together, rediscover himself, and raise above the pains of his past. Tony felt such strong admiration for the man he’d become so close with. He was truly inspired seeing Bucky slowly but surely break out of his shell, and begin defining his personality; from his wicked teasing and witty humor, to his strong sense of loyalty and protectiveness.

In truth, Tony felt that Bucky and Steve were the best damn thing that had ever happened to him. The fact that he had managed to end up with two of the most incredible individuals he’d ever met was still mind-boggling to him, and there was still this dark shadow of doubt that twisted itself in the back of his mind, telling him that, sooner or later, he was going to do something that would ruin it, like he always did. He tried his utmost to push down the negativity.
He had a support group unlike any he’d ever really had before, and that wasn’t something he was about to take for granted. More than that, though—especially with Peter thrown into the mix—he truly felt, for the first time in so very, very long, that he had something like a family, and despite whatever deeply ingrained insecurities that taunted his mind, Tony wasn’t about to let that go. He was going to protect and secure his little makeshift family, even if it cost him every last ounce of strength in his body.

Tony strode confidently into the workshop, letting the door close and seal behind him.

“Find something else we can use in the trial?” he asked.

“I have uncovered HYDRA information I believe needs to be addressed before furthering any ongoing investigations,” the AI replied, making Tony raise a brow curiously.

“All right then, bring it up on my screens,” Tony said, taking a seat in front of one of his desks as a holo-screen lit up.

“Boss,” the AI spoke in a cautious tone, “I feel the need to warn you that the information uncovered is extremely… sensitive.”

Tony scoffed. “To who? HYDRA?”

“To you,” she replied.

Tony stared at the folder that appeared on the screen, his face crumpling into a deeply etched frown. It wasn’t labeled with a codename, but instead with a timestamp.

December 16, 1991

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Peter went through his room at May’s, tossing a few things into his backpack. Since his bedroom at the tower was so well-stocked now, there wasn’t much need for him to pack much—mostly things like his computer, and camera, and, of course, Ben. It really was like having a second home. Peter had never really had a large family; for most of his life, it had just been May, Ben, and himself. Then, three had turned to two, and for a while, Peter had felt truly lost.

Then, Tony had happened, and soon, it was like Peter’s family had grown a little bigger. The rest of the Avengers had nestled right along in too, and Peter wondered if that was what it was like to have an extended family.

“Do you have everything?” May asked, eyeing Peter’s rather empty-looking backpack as he made his way into the main room of their apartment.

“Yeah! I have a lot of stuff kept there, so I think I’m good,” he replied.

May nodded. “All right, sweetie. Do you need a ride, or is Tony picking you up?”

“I think Tony is supposed to be here soon,” Peter glanced at the clock. It was getting close to the time Tony said he’d be there.

Feeling that there was no point standing around, Peter took a seat next to his aunt on their couch while the TV played.

“Any big projects planned?” May asked. “That you’re allowed to talk about, anyway. I know the
confidential agreements are strict.”

Peter shrugged. “Nothing active right now, but that might change. Tony might have something planned that I don’t know about yet.”

Peter stayed tight-lipped about the fact that he knew his visit was going to be spent training. He’d fallen behind a bit due to finals, but Steve said they were going to get back to it now that Peter had more free time.

“Oh! Steve said he might teach me more about driving!” Peter added in excitement.

May raised her brows. “Really?"

“Yeah!”

“Well, you are old enough to get your license now,” she said.

Peter nodded, smiling. “I need more practice if I want to pass the test, though.”

“Well, we can go out sometime too while you’re here, if you ever want the extra practice,” May suggested.

“Really?”

“Of course!”

“That would be awesome, thanks!”

Conversation trickled out, but the atmosphere remained comfortable and content as the two watched daytime TV. Some time passed, Peter blinked and checked his phone, surprised to see that almost an hour had gone by.

May must have caught his expression, because the woman glanced at the clock and then back to her nephew, saying, “Didn’t you say you were getting picked up soon?”

Peter shook his head. He hadn’t missed any messages.

“Maybe I got the time wrong?” he said, though he was sure he’d heard Tony correctly the last time they spoke.

“Maybe give him a call?”

Peter typed out a quick text and watched the screen, waiting for a reply. A few minutes with no reply, and Peter decided to call. He let the phone ring until he heard Tony’s answering machine kick in and hung up. He frowned. Tony almost always picked up for him, unless he was in a meeting.

May wordlessly flicked the channel to the news, but there didn’t seem to be any reports of Avengers missions.

Peter sighed, suddenly feeling a little more downtrodden. He tried to tell himself that there had to be an explanation, but doubts and worries began to fester as the minutes ticked by. May herself took a somewhat annoyed expression, making a few sharp remarks about making Peter wait. Peter tried to quell his aunt’s protective anger, and decided to fire off another text, this time to Happy. Happy didn’t have the best track record of responding to Peter’s messages—especially right away—but he figured it was worth a shot. He supposed if that didn’t pan through, he could text Steve,
or maybe Bucky.

Peter forced himself to wait ten whole minutes while growing increasingly antsy. May was just threatening to call Tony herself when his phone chirped and buzzed.

Peter sighed in relief.

“Happy’s on his way now,” he informed his aunt.

“Good. Did he say why he’s late?”

“No, I’m—I’m sure there’s a good explanation though, May.”

May still looked a little put-out, but she nodded nonetheless. Peter hoped she didn’t end up calling Tony later.

Peter still felt a little uneasy, even as dashed down the stairs.

“Hey, kid,” Happy greeted as Peter hopped into the vehicle.

“Hey! Thanks for coming to get me.”

Happy grunted, but nodded.

“Uhm, do you—do you know where Tony is?”

Happy frowned. “AI says he’s still in the tower, though I haven’t talked to him in a couple of days. I wouldn’t worry too much, kid, he does this sometimes—drops off the radar for a bit. My best guess is that he’s made some sort of science breakthrough thing and just lost track of time.”

Peter nodded. He hoped that was the case. One, because it would be really cool if it were true, and two, because he wasn’t sure he liked the alternatives he’d been imagining.

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When the elevator doors opened, it became apparent something was up, as he was greeting immediately with raised voices.

“No, James, you can’t—”

“Natasha! We’ve tried every other way, and I’m not gonna just sit here as—”

“You can’t punch your way into Tony’s workshop!”

Peter entered the room, quietly, and immediately saw the standoff. Natasha and Bucky were standing face-to-face, glaring hotly. On the sofa sat Clint, who was having what looked like minor burns on his arms tended to by Bruce. Behind Bucky stood Steve, who wore a deeply troubled expression.

Peter’s head snapped back to Bucky when the man scoffed, following Natasha’s last comment.

“Watch. Me.” he hissed, and Peter’s ears could pick up the distinct sound of gears and hydraulics as Bucky’s metal arm calibrated with his clenching fists.

Natasha let out an aggravated huff.
“Listen, James, I get that you're worried, but—”

“Worried?” Bucky said, incredulously. “It's been two days, I am way past worried! What has he been eating or—or drinking? What if he’s hurt?”

“Sergeant Barnes, I assure you, should Mr. Stark’s vitals become dangerous, appropriate measures will be taken,” Friday chimed in.

“And YOU!” Bucky pointed to the ceiling, angrily. “You've been so fucking helpful—how do we know the computer isn't malfunctioning?”

Friday didn’t grace that with a reply.

“Buck, you and I both keep the mini fridge down there stocked—” Steve tried, but Bucky cut him off.

“Yeah, but how do we know he’s actually eating on his own? He’s never fully cut us out like this before!”

Peter watched as Steve’s face crumpled in concern again.

“You know how he can get!” Bucky continued. “When Tony’s working, he normally forgets to eat, never mind what all this is!”

Peter felt all his worries spike and crash over him.

“Is—is something wrong with Tony?” he asked, not quite able to keep all of the fear from his voice.

A sudden, pregnant hush fell over the room, as all heads turned in his direction.

“Peter!” Natasha finally spoke.

“When—when did you get here?” Steve asked.

God, Peter couldn't cut the awkward tension with one of the knives Bucky gave him.

“Just a few—a few minutes ago.”

Steve sighed. “So you heard all that.”

Peter nodded, hesitantly.

The group shared a look, before Steve nodded and stepped up.

“Peter...”

“Just tell me what's going on,” Peter said.

Steve sighed, but nodded.

“The truth is, Peter, none of us know exactly what's happened. A couple of days ago, Friday called Tony down to the workshop to check something. Later, we found out he put the whole shop on complete lockdown. None of our clearance codes work, and Tony refuses to come out or speak to anyone.”
“We tried… alternate methods of accessing the shop, but none worked,” Natasha added.

“Yeah, don’t use the vents,” Clint said sourly from the couch.

“Nothing happened before he went down?” Peter questioned, after a sympathetic look to Clint.

Bucky shook his head. “He was fine! We were having a great time, and then he just disappeared.”

“Maybe… some tech malfunctioned, and he doesn't want anyone in until its fixed?” It sounded weak, even to Peter.

“Then he would have just told us,” Bruce said quietly.

“I’m tellin’ you, I can break my way in,” Bucky said.

“Do you even know what the shop’s made of?” Clint snarked.

“You said your access codes are all rejected?” Peter cut in again, brain trying to spin out ideas.

Steve nodded.

“I would like to say, that if it were up to me, I would release the lockdown. However, Mr. Stark has put protocol into effect that I cannot break,” Friday added.

Peter frowned, and let himself get lost in his thoughts as the others began to argue once more. With a quiet gasp, Peter ran into the elevator.

“Friday, take me down.”

“Peter, I can take you, but—”

“Listen, Tony said it himself; as long as there’s someone else in the workshop, I’m allowed in whenever I want. Well, I want to be there now.”

It was quiet for a few moments, then Peter felt the elevator doors close and they began to descend.

“Audio and video feed corroborates this,” Friday said, and despite being a program, Peter swore he could detect a hint of relief in the voice.

“Please approach the door and I will unlock it,” Friday said as the elevator opened onto the workshop floor.

Peter dashed over, heart pounding as his nerves lit up in the face of the unknown. He was worried sick that something bad had happened to Tony; Peter didn’t know what he would do without the man in his life. Peter held onto the door handle and yanked it open as soon as he saw the red light turn green, and ran in, only to immediately freeze.

Peter stood stock-still and wide-eyed as he surveyed the scene before him. It actually took his brain a minute to process what he was seeing, and when it did, his fears flared up all the more.

It truly looked like a bomb had gone off. The workshop, which acted as Tony’s inner sanctum, that had always been well taken care of and maintained, was utterly destroyed. One of the large workbenches was overturned, tools, machinery, and blueprints were scattered all over, what appeared to be the remnants of projects now laid torn apart in pieces. Peter took a couple of tentative steps further in. His foot knocked against something with a clatter, and Peter looked down to see a bottle rolling. He picked it up and studied the label, recognizing it as something he’d seen
before in the penthouse bar. He made a face and set it down; looking around again, he saw many similar bottles strewn around—some broken, though all appeared empty.

An uncomfortable feeling washed over Peter as he scanned the room, still not seeing Tony. His eyes paused on the other side of the room when he spotted the desk that he’d begun to think of as his, and saw that, at least from his position, it looked completely untouched. In fact, he could see his toolkit and pencils still where he’d left them last time. Peter swallowed the lump in his throat, more determined than ever to find Tony.

“Tony?” Peter called out, making his way around the shop.

He spotted him all at once as he rounded the turned-over bench. Peter gasped and ran over to the man, who appeared collapsed on the concrete floor.

“Tony! Tony, are you okay?! Oh shit—oh, come on, wake up, please, Dad!” Peter yelled out in fear, as he dropped to his knees next to the man, who remained unresponsive to his voice.

“Friday!”

“Peter, please calm down. Mr. Stark isn’t in any physical danger; his vitals are stable,” the AI tried to soothe.

“Then—then why is he on the floor? Why—” Peter cut himself off when he noticed the mostly-empty bottle clutched in Tony’s fist.

Peter’s throat constricted as he put two and two together. It had never been uncommon to regularly see Tony with a drink in hand; a couple mornings had Peter questioning just how much the man might have drank the night before, but—he’d never seen Tony in a state like this.

“You’re—you’re sure he’s okay—he didn’t hit his head, o-or what about his—his blood-alcohol level—”

“I’ve been keeping a close watch, Peter. I assure you, if Mr. Stark’s BAC level rose to dangerous levels, my programming would have had me contact medical help. Keeping Mr. Stark alive is one of my prime directives. Also, he is not suffering from any head trauma. He is simply sleeping off the drink he consumed some hours prior.”

Peter nodded. “O-Okay.”

He took a few deep breaths, then looked around. Shoved off into the corner was the couch Peter himself had napped on a couple of times. Luckily, it, too, seemed to have escaped the destruction. Tony grumbled unintelligibly as Peter stole the bottle from his grasp and set it aside.

Silently, Peter uttered thanks that he had his enhanced strength, which made lifting Tony up from the floor not too hard a task at all. He brought the man over to the couch and laid him down to sleep off the rest of the alcohol somewhere a bit more comfortable, then sighed. Peter frowned seeing Tony’s face more clearly—the man looked exhausted despite being asleep; he was pale, and had dark circles marring the skin beneath his eyes.

“Thank you, Peter,” Friday said, softly.

Peter nodded and turned away from the man. A part of him wanted to bring Tony out of the shop, but he felt like, until Tony was conscious, that might not be right. He wished he could bypass Friday’s code though, to allow someone else to enter. Steve or Bucky, or maybe even Bruce might have been better equipped to deal with… whatever this was. Peter took a deep breath. Until Tony woke up, it was just him, so he was going to do all he could to make things easier. But first—Peter
pulled out his phone and brought up Steve’s number.

**Peter:** Got into the workshop. Friday still can’t let anyone else in.

**Peter:** Tony’s asleep so I don’t know much, will update later.

**Steve:** How did you get in? Tony’s okay?

**Peter:** Found a loophole in the lockout that excluded me. And Tony’s not hurt.

**Steve:** Please let us know when he wakes up.

Peter sent an affirmative, then pocketed his phone again. Next, Peter went to the supply closet and began pulling out cleaning supplies. He couldn’t fix the things that’d been damaged, but he could at least tidy up the shop a bit.

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Tony groaned, as the first thing he registered was the throbbing pain in his head. He lied where he was for a few moments, assessing how he felt. It wasn’t the *worst* hangover he’d ever had—considering the workshop wasn’t exactly stocked with a bar—but it definitely could’ve been better. At least he was like eighty—maybe eighty-five—percent sure he wasn’t going to vomit.

Considering just how shitty the last couple of days had been, that was pretty much a miracle. His mouth was horribly dry and cottony, though, so Tony blinked his eyes open to try and see how far away he’d passed out from his mini fridge. He hissed at the bright lights that made the pain in his head turn sharp, and took a deep breath and began to try and sit up, and—‘huh.’ He did not remember passing out on the couch. In fact, though somewhat hazy, he was certain the last thing he remembered was sitting himself against the back of his overturned workbench…

A soft rustling noise caught his attention, followed by the softer murmur of a voice. He couldn’t hear what it said, but his head turned in the direction of the noise, and—

Tony’s heart plummeted. Peter was sat, cross-legged on the floor, and appeared to be sorting through his tools to put away.

“The black handled ones go in the red box,” Friday instructed.

Tony watched as the kid nodded and followed her directions. His chest clenched and a tremor started in his hands. What in the ever-loving-fuck was the kid doing in here? God, had he seen everything? Peter was never supposed to be exposed to this.

‘Fuck!’

Peter stretched and rolled his neck to work out some tension, and Tony wondered just how long the kid had been there. A glance around the workshop told him that a majority of it had been cleaned up, from when he’d first opened that file and promptly lost his mind. The revelations inside had just been too much.

“Tony!”

Tony jolted out of his thoughts at the exclamation, and before he could register anything else, he was hit full force by the teen.

“I was so worried!” Peter continued as he hugged Tony.

Tony swallowed and tried to fight off the disorientation.
“I’m—I’m fine, kid,” Tony said, voice raspy.

“Oh, I’m sorry!” Peter said, backing off. “Here, I’ll get you some water.”

Tony watched as Peter scurried over to the fridge and rummaged through it, until he pulled out a bottle of water and a fruit cup.

“Here,” he said, placing the items into Tony’s hands and sitting next to him on the couch.

Tony cracked open the water and sipped on it, then decided the fruit was a good idea and lifted the lid.

“So, um, how—how do you feel?”

God, Tony hated the hesitation in his voice.

“I’m fine, Peter,” he said quietly.

“Everyone was really worried when I got here. They still are.”

‘Oh shit.’ That reminded him—

“Peter, I’m so sorry, I didn’t pick you up, I—”

“It’s okay!” Peter shook his head. “Happy came and got me.”

Tony sighed. “I’m sorry about this, too. You—you really shouldn’t have seen this. How did you even get in here?”

“I found a flaw in your lockout?” Peter admitted.

“Of course you did,” Tony grumbled, though secretly, he was impressed.

“I’m sorry—”

“No. You’re not the one who has anything to be sorry for,” Tony said, in a tone that said there was no room for debate.

Peter nodded. “I just… Do you wanna talk about it?”

Tony blinked. He hadn’t really expected that.

“It’s just—May says talking things out can make you feel better, and you’ve always been there when I needed you, so—I wanna help, if I can, that is,” Peter said quietly.

Tony felt his throat tighten, and shit, he was not going to cry. He’d done more than enough of that already. Christ, what was he supposed to say? There was no way to explain the last couple of days.

There was no way he could just come out and say, ‘Well, you see, I recently found out that HYDRA was responsible for killing both my parents, and the assassin they used was none other than one of the men I’ve fallen in love with, who, by the way, has no recollection of ever having done it, so I had a bit of a complete mental breakdown, as decades of horrible coping methods surfaced like ugly demons.’

Yeah. Right.
“I—” Tony began, then stopped and sighed, and took another drink. “I discovered something very… troubling the other day. I needed some time alone to—ah, work through it.” Tony shook his head. God, that sounded absolutely awful.

He was surprised again when he felt Peter lean against him.

“I’m sorry that happened,” the teen said, and Tony could tell from the pitch of his voice that he was. The kid was genuinely upset over Tony’s grief.

He didn’t even understand the situation properly—there was no way he could; and yet, he was completely willing to accept Tony’s shitty explanation and try to comfort him. Peter was such an amazing, compassionate, and genuine person, and Tony held so much love for him. Which made the whole situation worse. He was completely ashamed.

“I should text Steve. I promised I’d tell him when you woke up,” Peter said.

Tony felt another burst of anxiety churn in his gut, because how the hell was he ever going to face them? It would be bad enough seeing Steve, but Bucky? Tony felt panic rising. Tony had found himself crying over a goddamn sandwich Bucky had left for him in his fridge. He was so emotionally exhausted at this point that he felt like he could sleep for a week, but despite that exhaustion, he could still feel the turmoil rolling inside him, ready to overwhelm him again in an instant. It would be so much easier if he just shut down completely, or could just decide on how he felt, but of course, nothing was ever that easy.

Neither of Tony’s parents had ever been award-worthy, and it could be argued that many of his current issues could be dated all the way back to Howard, especially. Maria had always done her best, and she had loved him fiercely, that Tony knew, and losing her had been what had hurt the most. For years, he had cursed his father, blaming the man’s drinking for the accident, and now, suddenly finding out that was wrong, that the accident hadn’t been Howard’s fault—that it wasn’t an accident at all? That alone was enough to send him over the edge.

Bucky. The Fist of Hydra. Their Asset, as the multitude of documents alluded to him as. Tony had spent months going through HYDRA documents, finding everything he could on the Winter Soldier in order to prove Bucky wasn’t at fault for his actions. He had been brainwashed, tortured for years. He had seen the blueprints for The Chair. He knew HYDRA was to blame, and yet—

“Tony—Tony, are you okay?”

“Yeah—yeah.”

“Maybe—maybe we should go upstairs. You can go to sleep? Eat something?”

Tony nodded. He knew he couldn’t avoid it forever, and he could really use a shower.

The ride up the elevator was mostly silent, but Peter remained a close constant, glued to Tony’s side. He knew he wasn’t going to get over the guilt of undoubtedly scaring his kid any time soon.

Tony hadn’t seen Peter pull out his phone, but he knew he must have alerted the others they were coming up, because Tony hadn’t taken more than three steps off of the elevator before he was bombarded again—this time, by two solid walls of muscle.

Tony heard, rather than saw, Natasha usher Peter away.

“But what if—” the teen began.
“It’s okay, Peter, Steve and James can take it from here. Let’s go down to the common room for a bit, I think Clint’s down there now,” Tony heard Natasha reply, quietly.

He didn’t hear Peter’s response, but a second later, he heard the elevator again, and couldn’t decide if he was grateful or disappointed. He didn’t have time to dwell on it, though, because of the fact that he was currently being suffocated.

“Tony!” two voices said, in almost perfect unison.

“Are you okay?” That was Steve.

“We’ve been worried sick, you punk!” Bucky huffed, voice a little strained.

Tony’s throat constricted, and he felt his eyes start to burn. The two men pulled away from him slightly, keeping their hands on him, gazing at him with matching worried expressions.

Tony’s gaze naturally went to Bucky, and the simmering anger that had been stubbornly clinging to him fizzled out. Bucky’s face was awash in concern that was so open and raw. Tony couldn’t direct his anger at this man, but the anger left a hollow pit behind in him that began to fill once more with grief, that despite his best effort, Tony wasn’t able to mask. Tony watched as Bucky saw it, and breathed out a sympathetic sigh.

“Oh, love, I’m sorry. C’mere,” Bucky said, in a soothingly quiet tone, and gently pulled Tony into his arms again.

Tony felt his form begin to shake slightly with barely suppressed tears that brought an instinctual shame to him. Stark men were made of iron, he couldn’t—but then Steve was there, too, holding both him and Bucky close.

“It’s okay, Tony,” he said.

Tony really couldn’t stop the tears that fell after that, clinging to his lovers and basking in the comfort they awarded him.

Sometime later, while Tony was trying to piece himself back together from the sniffling mess he had dissolved into, Steve finally spoke again.

“Do you want to talk about it? Will that help?”

Tony shuddered and smiled weakly. “I—I don’t think I can right now,” he replied.

‘Or ever,’ he thought.

Steve nodded. “Okay, that’s okay if you’re not ready, but I need you to know that whatever it is, Bucky and I are going to be here to help you however we can, okay?”

Tony nodded and swallowed back his tears. He felt too open and raw and achy for any more emotional shit. He was much too tired. Steve must have seen it, too, because he turned to Bucky and nodded toward the hall.

“Why don’t you start up the shower while I make us something to eat?” he suggested. “How about it, sweetheart?” he asked Tony, who nodded in agreement.

Steve pressed a kiss to the top of his head, and leaned over to press another kiss to Bucky’s cheek.

“Okay, go wash up, and when you’re done, I’ll have some dinner ready for you,” he said to Tony.
Bucky led Tony into the large bathroom and started up the shower, as Tony immediately turned toward the sink to brush his teeth, desperate to get rid of the awful feeling in his mouth. Next, he stripped down and got into the shower, standing beneath the warm spray of water, trying to summon the energy to wash himself. There was a small rush of cool air. Tony turned, and Bucky pressed a chaste, unhurried kiss to his shoulder, then picked up a cloth and Tony’s body wash. Tony let a sigh escape as Bucky began running the soapy cloth over him, occasionally peppering small kisses after.

It was domestic, and relaxing, and comforting all at once, to be cared for. A part of him kept expecting—fearing—that his anger at Bucky would return suddenly, but it never did. After Bucky carefully rinsed the last of the conditioner from Tony’s hair, he wrapped him in his arms once more, hugging him close under the warm spray. Tony let himself tuck his face into Bucky’s neck and soak up the affection. He didn’t know how long they stood there, holding each other, Bucky’s hand stroking over his hair, but Tony was on the verge of falling asleep when Bucky moved to turn off the water.

After toweling off and dressing in the comfortable clothes Bucky or Steve must have grabbed at some point, Tony followed Bucky back out to the main room, where the smell of food cooking made his stomach growl in want.

“There you are,” Steve said with a smile when they entered the kitchen. “How are you feeling?”

“Better,” Tony replied honestly, though he still wasn’t anywhere close to okay.

Steve nodded. “I made stir-fry, here, eat up,” he said, placing a bowl in front of Tony.

“Thanks,” Tony said. “I might head to bed after. I’m tired.”

“That’s fine, you need your rest,” Steve agreed.

Bucky nodded from where he sat down next to Tony.

The dinner was delicious, because of course it was, but Tony could only stomach one bowl before his exhaustion became too much to ignore. After one too many yawns, Steve and Bucky herded him into their bedroom, and Tony was asleep almost as soon as his head hit the pillow.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!

Yikes this was a hell of a chapter to write.

Please leave comments and/or kudos to tell me what you think!

Also consider following my Tumblr for fandom content, occasional updates, or just to stop by the ask box!

Have an awesome week <3
Chapter Twenty-Nine

Chapter Notes

Thank you to everyone who left kudos and comments on the last chapter!
It means a lot to see people reading and enjoying this still
I hope you're all ready for this Tony-centric installment

Warnings: Anxiety, depression, alcoholism

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony wasn’t avoiding Peter. Really, he wasn’t.
In the morning, Steve, Bucky, Peter and Tony had all sat together for breakfast, making small talk while Tony pretended he couldn't see the lingering concern in the glances he received.

Admittedly, he’d postponed their workshop time together, and turned down the idea to take the kid to the park, or anything else that meant they had to be alone together.

He hated the disappointed look Peter got in his eyes before smiling off the rejection. Tony couldn’t fight the stab of anxiety that hit him when given the opportunity to spend time with Peter, just as much as he couldn’t ignore the waves of shame and guilt that seeped over his mind and body. He squeezed his eyes shut as a phantom pain shot up his left arm and behind the scar on his chest.

Dinner was held on the communal floor that night, and Tony took the opportunity to apologize to Clint for the injuries Friday had inflicted. He was well aware that if the AI had, in fact, been targeting to hurt the man, Clint wouldn't have been in even half as good a shape as he was now; however, the fact that his teammate was harmed at all—and by something he created, no less—it didn't sit right with him at all.

The archer, though, merely waved him off, saying it was fine, and that it wasn't serious enough to even be considered an injury in his books. Tony still made a silent promise to build the man another bow, and maybe a larger quiver, and he was definitely going to be adjusting his lockout procedures.

During dinner, Tony could feel eyes watching him again, and more than once, he caught Natasha looking at him thoughtfully. Though her face was mostly impassive, he didn't appreciate her scrutiny. It especially made him hyperaware of just how often he was tempted to tap at his scar or rub at his wrist in gestures he knew to be psychosomatic. Worry filled him, that maybe it had become something noticeable to others, but he emphatically tried to brush it off as paranoia.

He lingered in his chair after the others finished and began to file out to the TV room for a movie. Natasha was the last to leave, and paused next to Tony’s chair, laying a hand on his shoulder softly, gently.

“You okay?” she asked in a voice that matched the gentleness in her touch, and one that never really came to mind when picturing how the woman usually spoke.

Maybe his worries were not completely paranoid after all.
“Always,” he replied, flashing a grin and trying to keep his voice light.

He wondered if she heard the strain he tried to mask, or noticed the way he hid his hands to stop himself from repeating the same gestures he’d been repeating all day.

He felt the hand on him squeeze, in a way that was meant to suggest reassurance or solidarity. Then, without another word, she, too, slipped from the room to join the others.

He still didn’t know if she believed him.

He waited a good five seconds before following the others, taking the empty spot Steve and Bucky saved between them on the sofa.

---

That night, Tony lie awake, the last couple of days blurring together, repeating over and over in his mind; seeing the date on the file, opening it with trepidation—everything that came after. Peter. Peter running to him, trying to take care of him, as if it was the most natural thing to do, as if it wasn’t supposed to be Tony watching out for him, instead. His chest ached awfully, and he closed his eyes and tried to breathe, the same way his ex-therapist had taught him, the same way he had taught Peter. It worked, marginally, enough that the tightness pressing down on him receded slightly, but not enough to let his mind or body rest.

Gingerly, he worked on extracting himself from the bed, which was no easy feat, since he was boxed in on either side by Steve and Bucky. Tony sighed in relief when he made it off the bed without incident, until Bucky grumbled, brow furrowing unhappily as his hand moved over the now-vacant part of the bed. Tony waited with bated breath until the man settled again, before making his way to the bedroom door.

“Tony?” Steve asked quietly.

‘Busted.’

“Yeah, sorry. Didn’t mean to wake you,” he said, matching Steve’s quiet tone.

“Where are you going? Come back to bed.”

“I—I can’t sleep. I’m just going to go down and work for a bit until I tire myself out.”

“Tony—” Steve began, cautiously.

“I’m not gonna disappear down there again,” Tony said, reading his concern.

Steve sighed. “Why—why don’t I make us something warm to drink and we can—we can talk,” he said, pulling back the covers.

“No, it’s—” Tony began, making Steve stop.

“I want to help, but I can’t if you won’t tell me what’s wrong. Something’s eating at you, I hate seeing you like this.”

“Then stop looking,” Tony snapped, and instantly regretted it, hanging his head in shame.

“We all know that’s not gonna happen, doll,” Bucky grumbled sleepily.

“I’m—” Tony began.
“It’s okay,” Steve insisted.

“No, it’s not,” Tony said. “You’re just trying to help. I shouldn’t have said that.”

There was a beat of silence, before Steve spoke again.

“Even… even if you can’t talk to us, can you try to talk to someone? Someone on the team? Sam or Rhodey or Bruce, maybe?”

“Sure thing, Cap,” Tony said, and though he couldn’t see Steve’s face, he could feel the concerned disapproval from where he stood.

Not that he blamed the man; Tony hadn’t tried to make his voice sound very convincing.

“I’ll be back in a bit,” he said then, and quickly escaped the bedroom before another word could be said.

---

Down in the shop, Tony asked Friday to bring up the video-feed from the day before, specifically the time when Peter got access to the workshop. He watched intently, his gut clenching when the workshop door on the screen opened up and Peter bolted in—and promptly froze. Tony watched everything, his breath catching in his chest when the camera caught Peter’s terrified expression after finding him splayed out on the floor. He felt a sick feeling churn his stomach. He didn’t think it was possible to feel even worse but, well, he could. Much worse.

“Tony! Tony, are you okay?! Oh shit—oh, come on, wake up, please, Dad! Friday!” Peter called out desperately.

Tony jolted. He… there was no way he heard that right.

“Friday, rewind. Stop, play from there.”

“Wake up, please, Dad!”

“Stop. Rewind. Play.”

“Dad!” Peter’s voice called out again.

Tony slumped down further in his chair, eyes wide.

Peter had called him Dad. Peter had called him Dad! His heart squeezed in his chest, and his hand shook as he longed to grasp a tumbler of good scotch. He gritted his teeth and replayed the video. Each time he viewed the clip, he ached more and wished for something strong to wet his throat. He watched as Peter cared for him and went about fixing what Tony had ruined, though he couldn’t help but feel like he’d potentially ruined something much more important.

Dad.

Still, the craving thrummed inside him, making his limb tremble with how terribly he wanted. He hated it. Now more than ever, he could see that, maybe, the alcohol had become a problem.

Tony made his way back to the penthouse, the video playing over and over in his mind. He looked down the hall to where his bedroom lay, pausing for a moment, then two, then turned and walked over to his bar. Pouring himself a glass, Tony felt his self-hatred grow. He wasn’t fit to take care of anyone, least of all Peter. He was no better than Howard.
He collapsed on the sofa, cradling his drink. Tony couldn’t say what drew his eye to the shelf at the side of the room, but before he knew it, he was setting his drink down and walking over to it. His hands, still shaking, grasped the spine of a leather book. The one Peter gave him, on his birthday. He took it back to the sofa and flipped it open, flipping toward the back where the newer photos were. Tony began to realize just how many actually featured Peter; there were three whole pages (double-sided) dedicated to Peter’s birthday party. He sniffled back the emotion that welled up in his chest, a small smile touching his face. Peter looked so happy in all of the photos. Like there was nowhere else he’d rather be than spending time around the tower. Peter’s words came back to him, one in particular.

He still couldn’t quite wrap his head around the fact that Peter had actually called him Dad. Tony felt a sudden burst of warmth in his chest that shocked him from just how intense it was. He adored Peter, would do anything for him. He looked down at the photos, at the one of him and Peter in the workshop, both of them looking excited. Tony had caught himself more than once already thinking about Peter as his kid, but now, he wondered—wondered what it would be like if Peter could be his. His son. His mind shot to the papers in his desk that had been sitting there; all they needed was a signature. Sure, he wouldn’t be adopting Peter, May would remain his primary guardian, but the responsibility would still be there. Tony stood up, closing the album as he did. He was going to do it. He’d sign the papers and show them to Peter, and then—

As Tony sat the album down on the coffee table, he saw his half-full glass. He’d—he’d forgotten about it as he looked over the photos. It really was incredible how quickly a good feeling could be extinguished.

Tony sat back down and rubbed his hands over his face. Who was he trying to kid? He couldn’t do this. Peter deserved so much more than Tony could give him. Even if he did sign those papers, who was to say Peter even wanted that? After the stunt he pulled, after Peter had seen—

God, Tony felt sick. The pain in his chest was acute and persistent and he took shuddering breaths to try and calm himself. How could he have ruined one of the best damn things to walk into his life?

The couch dipped next to him, startling Tony a bit.

“Sorry,” Bucky said.

Tony shook his head. “It’s fine. You should be sleeping.”

Bucky grunted, then grumbled, “So should you.”

Tony sighed, long and weary.

“Are you sure this isn’t something you can talk to us about?” Bucky asked, hesitantly.

Tony didn’t answer right away, taking his time to try and formulate the proper response. Finally, he shook his head and replied.

“I’m sorry. I realize this is probably hard on you and Steve, and maybe it seems a bit selfish of me to be keeping you in the dark, but—” Tony sighed.

Bucky nodded, then wrapped an arm around Tony to gently bring them closer together. Tony let himself be pulled and rested his head against Bucky’s shoulder.

“I understand. I’m not gonna lie, it’s hard seeing you like this, it really is, but I get it. Some things you just can’t talk about, not right away, maybe not ever. Neither Stevie nor I think you’re being
Tony huffed, but a small smile tugged at the corner of his lips, and he burrowed closer to Bucky’s side.

“But Stevie was right earlier, too. If you can’t talk to us, maybe you should find someone you can talk to about it. Neither of us wants you hurting yourself by stewing in… whatever this is.”

“Honestly, I’m sort of surprised Steve hasn’t locked me up and tried to force it out of me,” Tony joked.

Bucky snorted. “Oh, don’t underestimate how worked up he is. He’s chomping at the bit right now holding himself back. Patience has never been his strong suit.”

“Oh, really? I never noticed,” Tony said, voice laced in sarcasm.

Bucky smiled, and Tony felt his shoulder shake in a quiet laugh. It was quiet for a while, comfortable, companionable. Though, after a bit, Tony frowned. Bucky said he understood, about not being able to talk. Tony figured as much, but he’d been so focused on himself, maybe he had missed something, too. He pulled away, just enough so that he could look at Bucky.

“How—how are you? Really, I mean,” Tony asked, just as hesitant as Bucky had sounded earlier.

“I’m all right. Some days are better than others,” Bucky said with a slight shrug, then continued. “I write a lot, as you know. It helps organize this shit-show.” He tapped at his temple. “I also talk about what I can. Different things with different people. I trust you and Steve, but there are some things… some things I can’t bring myself to talk about to either of you. For those things, I have Natalia or my journals.”

Tony nodded, not commenting on the name. He could see what Bucky was implying with his admittance. He was afraid that Bucky and Steve might feel cheated or slighted that he couldn’t talk to them about this, but did he, himself, feel jealous or upset that Bucky admitted to being able to talk about more things with Natasha? No, not in the slightest. In fact, he was glad that Bucky had a confidant. Natasha was Bucky’s Rhodey.

‘Rhodey!’

He didn’t know why he didn’t think of it before. Maybe it was time for another bar night. Tony promised himself to call Rhodey later and see if his friend would be in the area.

He felt Bucky place a kiss to the side of his head.

“Ready to come back to bed?”

Tony thought for a moment, then nodded. He was starting to feel tired again—talking with Bucky, however briefly, had helped relax him a bit.

“All right, c’mon,” Bucky coaxed as he took Tony’s hand and stood up.

Tony followed obediently with a small smile. He’d deal with this disaster in the morning. For now, he had two very attractive men in his bed, all too eager to wrap him up in snuggles.

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The next morning, the first thing Tony did was text Rhodey.
Tony: You still in town?

He waited ten minutes before his phone buzzed.

Rhodey: Yeah. Why, you got something in mind?

Tony: I need my honeybear.

A moment later, his phone rang. Tony answered, but wasn’t able to say as much as a hello before Rhodey was talking through the line.

“Do I need to hurt somebody?”

Tony smiled wide.

“No. No, nothing like that,” he assured.

“You sound tired.”

“Haven’t been sleeping well,” Tony admitted.

Rhodey hummed through the line, and muttered something Tony didn’t quite pick up.

“So, what level of crisis am I preparing for?” Rhodey asked.

Tony considered what to say. There was no way in hell he wanted to mention anything about what he discovered about Hydra and his parents over the phone, but—

“Peter called me Dad.”

There was a beat of silence that was broken suddenly by loud, raucous laughter.

Tony pulled the phone away from his ear and glared at it, wishing, suddenly, that Rhodey had video called so that the other man could fully see his ire.

“Hey!” he finally snapped.

“Wait, you ain’t kidding?” Rhodey said, laughter dying down finally.

Tony huffed and rolled his eyes.

“No,” he said. “Peter called me Dad, but he doesn’t know that I know that he did.”

Rhodey huffed. “Tony, just—all right, listen, let’s meet up tonight, have a couple drinks, and you can bitch all about it.”

“I don’t bitch, I explain.”

“Uh huh, well, you can explain as much as you want tonight.”

“Nine-thirty sound good?” Tony asked.

“Uh huh. See you then.”

Tony hung up after saying his goodbyes and sighed. It was going to be hard getting through the day waiting for tonight.
He quickly got dressed as he decided to spend some time in the shop. He needed to work out the kinks for his lockdown procedure.

A tentative knock sounded at the door, and Tony pulled on a shirt before giving the okay.

Peter poked his head in and smiled, nervously.

“Hey, uh—Steve said he’s got time today, so he was going to give me a driving lesson.”

“Oh, sounds good, kiddo,” Tony said.

Why did Peter look so nervous? Was Tony making him feel that way? Of course he was, after the other day.

“Uhm, did you wanna—wanna come with us?”

Tony blinked. Did Peter want him to come along? No, of course he didn’t. His—the kid was just being polite.

He shook his head. “I’ve seen my life pass before my eyes one too many times with you behind the wheel already.” He kept his voice light and joking.

Peter smiled. “Yeah, that’s fair,” he conceded with a small laugh. “Uhm, will I see you later, though?”

“Definitely.”

Peter’s smile grew a bit, and Tony watched as he nodded before disappearing. Tony sighed. He didn’t know what to think anymore.

He was finalizing the design for Clint’s new bow when his phone buzzed, letting him know that Rhodey was on his way. He hopped up and told Friday to shut down the lab. Up in the penthouse, he ran into Bucky, Steve, and Peter, all in the lounge watching TV.

“I’m heading out for a bit. Don’t wait up,” Tony said with a smile.

“Oh?” Steve questioned, while Bucky raised a questioning brow, and Petercocked his head.

“Meeting Rhodey,” Tony said.

“Say hi!” Peter demanded, grinning.

“Will do.”

“Call us if you need a ride back,” Steve said, Bucky nodding along.

“Okay,” Tony agreed. “But seriously, don’t wait up. I don’t know how long we’ll be.”

After the general agreement, Tony changed quickly, and then was on his way to the garage, and the bar he’d be meeting Rhodey at.

It didn’t take him very long to get there. The building wasn’t very busy at this hour; a small, hole-in-the-wall kind of place. The bartender and owner didn’t give a damn who you were, as long as you didn’t start shit, so it was a good place for Tony to lay low. He finally found Rhodey occupying a table, shoved in the far back of the establishment, but Rhodey wasn’t the only thing he saw. Tony stopped, his jaw dropping, before marching over.
“What the actual fuck, get those outta here!” Tony snapped, gesturing to the helium balloons floating next to Rhodey.

There were three of them, all light blue, one read, *It’s a boy!* another, *Congratulations!* and the third, *First Baby!*

Rhodey was wearing a shit-eating grin as he looked between the balloons and Tony.

“Hey, just showing my support! Thought the day would never come!”

Tony pulled his hood further over his head and looked around the bar. “I can’t believe you right now.”

“Oh, relax! Sit down, Tones, no one gives a shit.”

“I’m disowning you,” Tony said with a groan as he sat down, heavily.

“Sorry, man, I really couldn’t help myself. Here, first drink’s on me, what d’you want?”

“Whiskey,” Tony grumbled.

Rhodey nodded and got up, clapping Tony on the shoulder as he walked over to the bar. Tony glared up at the balloons, feeling his cheeks flush.

A few minutes later, Rhodey was back with two drinks, and… a pair of scissors.

He passed Tony his drink, then took hold of the balloons, pulling one down at a time so he could make a small cut near the bottom to deflate them. Once done, he set the flattened balloons off to the side on the table.

“Oh, so… Peter. Tell me about that.”

Tony rolled his eyes, but sighed and took a sip of his drink.

“I—it’s been a rough couple of days,” Tony admitted. “I’ll get into the whys later, but—God, I ruined everything. Rhodey—ugh,” Tony groaned. He was a walking contradiction of both wanting to and not wanting to open up.

“You said Peter doesn’t know you know,” Rhodey prompted.

Tony nodded. “I saw it on surveillance. I—Peter—I had a couple bad days and locked myself in the lab—”

“Oh, Tones—”

“I know, I know! Usually I don’t keep alcohol down there ‘cause, well, even I know that’s a bad idea, but it just so happened there was overstock, and—it doesn’t matter, I got, well—”

“Shit-faced?”

“Completely trashed. I told Friday to perform lockout protocols. And that was that, until—my goddamn kid somehow convinced Friday he was exempt!”

“Smart kid,” Rhodey remarked, making Tony scoff.

“Of course he is,” he said, defensively. “Anyway, so the kid gets into the workshop, and—” Tony
hunkered down, looking shame-faced.

“What, did you say something to him?”

“Didn’t have a chance, he—well, he found me fucking passed out cold on the floor.”

“Jesus, Tones.”

“I know, okay! I know!” Tony exclaimed in frustration.

“So you weren’t aware of this.”

“No, not until I woke up later on my couch. I watched the video footage, because I wanted to see what happened, and—” Tony’s head fell into his hands. “He looked so—so scared, Rhodey—he saw me lying there, and as he ran over, he—he called me Dad.”

Rhodey whistled, long and low.

“Tony, listen. I know you’re taking this kinda hard, and probably overthinking it, but listen—literally everyone was expecting something like this.”

“What?”

“Tony. You practically have joint custody at this point. Peter doesn’t have a male role model in his life, then you come along with this mentorship—of course he’s gonna latch on. It’s not just that, though.” Rhodey pressed on, talking over Tony’s denials. “Whether you admit to it or not, you’ve stepped up in ways that go way beyond the purely professional. You go above and beyond for that kid! And don’t even try to tell me you don’t feel like Peter is—”

“Don’t!” Tony said, voice taking a slightly desperate tone.

Rhodey fixed him with a look.

“No, I will! ‘Cause the amount of times you’ve slipped up and called him yours is in the double-digits. ‘My kid this, my kid that.’ Tones. Come on.”

“That—doesn't matter.”

“What do you—of course it matters! Tony, do you see Peter as a son, yes or no?”

“Well, it's com—”

“No, forget the other shit right now. Just yes or no.”

Tony stared at Rhodey. He knew what he wanted to say, but—

“I will know if you’re lying to me.”

Tony sighed and rubbed at his face.

“Yes,” he said, finally. “But that's not enough; Peter needs someone reliable. Plus, I already ruined everything with the stunt I pulled.”

“Has Peter given you any reason to think that, or is this just your own turmoil getting in the way?”

Tony paused. He… wasn’t sure.
“Now, what happened definitely wasn’t the best case scenario, but—”

“He should have never have seen that!” Tony said, vehemently.

“And so, next time, you can do better. You need to talk to Peter. May, too, even.”

At the mention of May, Tony’s mind immediately went to the papers in his desk.

“May, she—she already knows.”

Rhodey quirked a brow. “Oh?”

“I haven't told anyone this, but—at Peter’s birthday, May took me aside, and, well—she offered to give me guardianship privileges. Gave me the paperwork and everything. I—uh, told her I’d consider it.”

“And have you?”

Tony looked into his glass of whiskey, then nodded.

“I’ve been tempted,” Tony said, then laughed. The noise sounded hollow. “I almost signed them last night, but—” Tony tipped back his glass, drinking deeply.

“So, what’s actively stopping you right now?”

“Oh, come on, Rhodey. I’d be awful.”

“I don’t know, man, you’ve been doing pretty good so far. Sure, you slipped up, made a mistake the other day, and Peter got a little freaked out, but as far as I can tell, no serious damage was done.”

Tony was quiet for a long moment.

“I don’t want to turn into Howard,” he finally said, quietly.

Rhodey’s eyes softened, and he grimaced in sympathy. He’d seen first-hand just how cold the man had been toward Tony during his MIT days.

“Tony, you’re nothing like that,” Rhodey said.

Tony gestured to the empty glass in his hand. “You sure about that?” he replied, not meeting Rhodey’s eyes.

He looked up when Rhodey stole his glass.

“Damn sure. Tony, you adore Peter. I’m not even here all the time and I know that. You talk about this kid like he’s God’s own gift to humanity, you make sure that he wants for nothing, you’ve built a home for him, not just at the tower, but in your life, too.”

Rhodey looked down at the glass he stole, then back to Tony, who met his eyes. Tony felt open and raw as a deep emotion rose up in him at his best friend’s words.

“And, if—if you think this,” Rhodey nodded to the glass, “has become a problem, then there are options to help with that. I’ll help you however I can, but that’s gotta be a decision you make for yourself.”
Tony nodded, swallowing thickly. He wanted to, but the thought of those bad nights made his resolve tremble. He wasn’t sure he was ready to take that step yet. Still, his friend’s support meant the world.

“So,” Rhodey finally started the conversation back up, “you gonna tell me what set you off enough to lock yourself up in the shop?”

Tony groaned, then nodded to the empty glass. “I’m going to need another round if we’re going there.”

Rhodey frowned, but nodded. “Fine, but you’re getting the next one.”

“Deal.”

Rhodey nodded, walking back over to the bar.

As Tony waited, he glanced over at the balloons lying deflated again. This time, a small smile graced his lips at the sight. He picked them up; they crinkled in his hands as he studied them. God, Rhodey could be an ass. Tony thought about the papers in his desk again, face softening. He folded up the balloons and stuffed them in his hoodie pocket before Rhodey got back.

“So,” Rhodey prompted, while setting another glass of whiskey in front of him and sitting back down.

Tony took a sip from the glass.

“I found Hydra documents about my parents.”

Rhodey paused, glass halfway to his lips.

“What?”

“They—” Tony swallowed again and sniffed. “It wasn’t an accident, Rhodey. It was an assassination.”

Rhodey was silent for a moment, lips parted and eyes widened in shock.

“Jesus, Tony,” he finally breathed. “You’re—”

“I’m sure,” Tony said. “It—it was all there. Dad created a serum, close to what they gave to Steve, Hydra wanted it, they set up the hit. It was supposed to be just him, but—but Mom was there, and—and they couldn’t leave a witness.”

Tony tried to keep a lid on it, but he couldn’t fully stop how choked up his voice got when talking about Maria.

“It was just supposed to be him.”

“I’m so sorry, Tones, fuck.” Rhodey shook his head, still looking somewhat in shock.

“He—they killed them. All this time I thought it was an accident, that Howard had too much to drink, but it was Hydra all along.”

Rhodey was frowning. “You said ‘he,’ Tony—do you know who was responsible?”

Tony paused. “They—they made him do it.”
Rhodey’s eyes narrowed, and then widened, all at once.

“No.”

“I—”

Rhodey pushed his chair back with a screech, face twisted in rage.

“I’m gonna kill him.”

“NO! Sit down!” Tony demanded, standing himself.

“You’re seriously defending him?” Rhodey demanded. “You—Jesus, Tony, really?”

“You haven’t seen what I have. He wasn’t in control! Hydra killed my parents, Rhodey. He was just the weapon they used.”

Rhodey sat down, but he still looked angry. “What, and he just kept all this from you, despite everything?”

“He doesn’t know.”

“What? What do you mean ‘he doesn’t know’?”

“The shit Hydra did to him scrambled his brain; he’s still missing big chunks of memory.”

“Fuck,” Rhodey groaned, slumping down in his chair.

“Yeah, that… that about sums it up.”

“So… you haven’t told him?”

Tony shook his head. “I can’t. It—it would destroy him. Rhodey, he’s trying so hard, and the guilt he already carries from all the other shit that wasn’t his fault that he does remember is bad enough. I couldn’t do that to him.”

“Have you told anyone else? What about Steve?”

Tony shook his head again. “You’re the first—and only—person I plan to tell. I don’t know what Steve would do, to be honest, but I know it’d fuck with him, too. So I’m just going to keep this locked up, nice and tight, as just another Stark family secret.”

The two sat silently for a while, working on their drinks. Finally, Rhodey sighed and shook his head.

“Really don’t blame you for going on a bender. Every time I go thinking your life can’t get any more fucked up… You got any leads on any more Hydra bases? ‘Cause, seriously, I need to shoot some people. Someone needs to get shot.”

Tony shook his head, as he broke out into a light laugh that grew and grew. Rhodey chuckled lightly, but then sighed when he noticed how Tony’s eyes brimmed with tears, and that the laughter had choked off and become something different. Rhodey got up and moved around the table, sitting next to Tony so he could throw his arm around him and drag him into a hug.

Tony leaned into the touch gratefully as he sniffled, letting the tears die down again.
“Thanks, Rhodey,” he said, quietly.

“Anytime,” Rhodey replied. “Come on, let’s get you home.”

“Burgers first?”

“All right, sure. Comfort food it is.”

---

Tony made it up to the penthouse at a little past midnight. All was quiet, though Tony wasn’t too surprised, considering Steve liked to try and sleep relatively early, and Bucky usually just followed suit. Tony could see a faint light coming from beneath Peter’s bedroom door. He hesitated a moment, before screwing up his courage and knocking lightly.

It only took a few seconds before the door opened.

“Oh, hey, you’re back!” Peter smiled, and opened his door wider, letting Tony step into his room. “Sorry, I know it’s late, but Ned and I got caught up playing a game.” He gestured to his computer screen, which was lit-up with some kind of fantasy-esque world.

“It’s okay, you’re on vacation. Still, don’t stay up too late, please. I don’t want you walking around like a zombie tomorrow,” Tony said, smiling kindly.

Peter grinned. “Okay, I won’t, promise! Uhm… was there something else?”

“No, was just checking in,” Tony paused, then grasped on to his remaining courage, hoping desperately Rhodey was right and that he could still fix this. “Would you like to work in the shop for a bit tomorrow, you and me?”

Peter’s entire face lit up, as he sucked in an excited breath.

“Really? Can we?” the teen asked, absolutely radiating hope and excitement.

Just like that, Tony’s reservations were gone. Rhodey had been right; Peter didn’t hold what happened against him. Tony felt an invisible weight leave his shoulders, and he couldn’t help the smile that appeared on his face that matched Peter’s.

“Of course. I’m sorry I was too busy these last two days. I’ll make it up to you tomorrow.” Tony vowed to himself he would. “Workshop, then a shopping trip.”

“You—you don’t have to buy me anything!”

Tony scoffed. “It’s happening, so don’t stay up all night!”

“Okay, I won’t,” Peter said.

“All right, good. Goodnight, kiddo,” Tony said, stepping back out into the hall.

“Goodnight!”

Tony shut the door softly behind him, and turned to head toward his bedroom, when he shoved his hands in his pockets and felt the crinkling of the foil balloons. He turned and went back into the lounge, heading straight for his bookshelf. Taking out the album, he opened it up and neatly folded the balloons safely inside the protective pages, then he closed the book and headed off to bed.
Phew that was a ride!
I hope all of you enjoyed reading this chapter <3

Please follow my Tumblr for updates and fandom content or drop by my ask box if you have any questions!

Comments and kudos give me life : 3

I hope you all have great weekend! <3
Chapter Thirty

Chapter Notes

I'm alive!

I know it's been a long wait and I'm very sorry! I recently fell into some bad luck and got hit by a bunch of stuff all at once.
I had a flu that last like 3 weeks, had to move, midterms, and well...Infinity War happened. . .

BUT I'm back with a brand new chapter and a longer one at that!

Warnings for teen rebellion and creepy rich assholes.

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See the end of the chapter for more notes

Peter had been thrilled when Tony appeared at his door. The invitation had really gone far to raise the boy’s spirits. He wasn’t a dumb kid; he knew Tony had been acting slightly off since what happened in the workshop, and Peter had begun to fear that he’d vastly overstepped his bounds when he intruded on the lockdown. Maybe he had, but he hadn’t done so with any ill intention; he’d just been worried. Seeing Tony in that state had turned his worry to fear quickly, but now, looking back, Peter felt a touch of relief that he was able to get to him and help.

The days that followed had been a touch awkward, but both Steve and Bucky reassured him that Tony wasn’t angry or disappointed in him, and explained that the man just needed a bit of space and would come back around soon. He was glad they were right. The thought of Tony no longer being a part of his life made his chest constrict and his skin crawl with anxiety. It wasn’t a scenario Peter wanted to face, even theoretically. Luckily, he didn't have to, because soon, he would get to spend an entire day with Tony.

When Peter finally curled up in bed, he fell asleep smiling.

That’s not how he woke up. In fact, any thoughts of a slow, relaxing day were immediately put into question as he was jerked awake by a loud knocking at his door.

“Rise and shine, kiddo! We’ve got a big day!” Tony said, bursting into his room.

Peter blinked, groggily. “Wha—?”

He looked to the clock on his dresser, which shone brightly back at him, mockingly.

“D—” Peter began, then snapped his mouth closed. ’Shit, that was way too close…’

“It’s six thirty in the morning!” he tried.

“And daylight’s burning!”

Peter let his head fall into his pillow with a groan. “What daylight?” he grumbled, unintelligibly.
“C’mon, up, up, up! Get dressed and ready, we’re leaving in thirty minutes!”

Peter watched as Tony left his room in a flurry of chaotic energy. The teen groaned again and turned to stare up at his ceiling, checking the numbers on his clock occasionally to mark how much time he had before Tony burst back into the room. With fifteen minutes left to spare, Peter finally rolled out of bed and threw on the first things he picked up from his closet floor, then brushed his teeth while combing his fingers through his hair.

He was just exiting the bathroom when Tony knocked. Peter opened the door, and Tony beamed at him. It looked like the man had made the most of his time, dressed semi-casually in an outfit that Peter was sure cost more than he was comfortable knowing.

Tony looked him up and down, unimpressed.

“All right, breakfast and groceries first, but we are getting you some new clothes later.”

Peter frowned and looked down at himself. His jeans were a little faded, and the sleeves of his T-Shirt were beginning to fray, but it was fine.

“Come on, I want to beat the morning crowd,” Tony said, turning to walk off.

“Wait. Did you say ‘groceries’?”

“Yes!”

“But—don’t you usually get that delivered?”

“Yeah, but it’s Cap’s birthday on the fourth—which I’m still not convinced is real, by the way, because really? Captain America’s birthday just so happens to be the Fourth of July?” Tony shook his head. “Also, Thor sent word that he’s visiting later, and we’re out of pop-tarts. A few other snack foods too, actually, and since the next delivery isn’t scheduled for a few days yet, I figured we should pick up what we need.”

“You woke me up… to go grocery shopping?” Peter said.

“Oh hush, I want to give Steve’s birthday a personal touch. Plus, you can throw whatever you’d like in the cart.”

Peter sighed, but followed Tony, regardless.

The slight jolt of the car parking snapped Peter back into consciousness, and he yawned hugely. He was beginning to regret not logging out of his and Ned’s game as soon as Tony had left his room the night before. Tony was grinning at him knowingly, and Peter sighed in annoyance, but unbuckled as Tony got out of the car.

The grocery store was mostly empty, and Tony was quick to nab a cart. He fished in his jeans pockets and pulled out a crumpled piece of paper and unfolded it. On it appeared to be a list of sorts, though the handwriting looked nothing like Tony’s messy scrawl. Tony scanned it, rolled his eyes, then crumpled it back into his pocket.

“Come on, Pete, let’s just go down the aisles. Feel free to throw in whatever catches your fancy,” Tony said, before pausing, taking in Peter’s sleepy-eyed face. “First, let’s get you some coffee.”

On a regular day, that offer might have excited Peter. As it was, he was simply too tired to really put forth the enthusiasm. At the back of the store was a small café, and Tony steered Peter into a
seat before going up to the counter to order for them. Peter was almost asleep when Tony sat a large take-out cup of coffee before him, and a little plate with a bagel breakfast sandwich.

“Eat, drink, liven up a bit, kid,” Tony instructed, before taking a big sip of his own beverage.

The food was actually pretty good, and the coffee made him feel warm, though the caffeine hadn’t quite kicked in by the time Tony was ushering him back up and steering their cart down the first aisle.

Peter almost missed it when Tony snapped a picture of him while grinning.

“Hey!” Peter said, definitely not pouting.

Tony shrugged, unapologetically. “Another good one for the album.”

Peter sighed, but relented and pretended he didn’t notice Tony texting the picture to someone. It didn’t actually bother him, and he was pretty confident that if it did, and he said something, Tony would have deleted the picture. It was another way Peter felt safe around Tony; he knew the man wouldn’t ever purposefully do anything that would make him uncomfortable.

Peter held onto the cart as Tony paused while in the snack aisle, before tossing all manner of boxed snacks into the cart.

The entire grocery trip passed by in a haze. Peter had vague recollections of Tony asking his opinion on things occasionally, and pointing to stuff when asked what he wanted, but he couldn’t for the life of him remember what any of it was.

Outside the store was none other than Happy, who was pulled up to the curb, standing next to one of Stark Industries plain black cars, the trunk popped open.

“Morning, Boss,” Happy greeted. “Kid,” he nodded to Peter.

“Happy! My knight in shining armor!” Tony said.

“Did you get everything on the list this time?” Happy asked, eyeing the two carts full of bags.

Tony shrugged. “Got lots of stuff,” he replied, and began helping transfer said bags from the carts to the trunk.

Peter jumped into action, helping the two men with the task. Between the three of them, it was over quickly, and Happy was walking back round to the driver’s side.

“If you need anything else, just let me know,” Happy said to Tony, then turned to Peter. “Enjoy your shopping trip, kid.”

---

Peter stood a little awkwardly. Tony eyeing him scrupulously as the man went back and forth between holding up two different shirts in front of Peter. Eventually, Tony just shrugged and threw both into their cart, before going back to the racks. They had already visited Tony’s personal tailor, who was now working on putting together two new suits, as well as a couple dress shirts for semi-casual wear, but apparently, that hadn’t been enough, because after they left, Tony had muttered something about replacing Peter’s casual wardrobe, and away they went. As the day wore on, the more and more Peter was noticing just how… insistent Tony was over buying him anything and everything. Sure, Tony always seemed to enjoy throwing his money around given the opportunity;
however, he seemed fairly heavy-handed about it, today in particular.

Peter had tried to speak up a couple of times, but after seeing an almost panicked look flash over the older man’s face when he thought Peter didn’t like something, the teen decided to just roll with Tony’s quirks. He thought maybe he could puzzle out the weird shift as the day progressed, but so far had come up empty.

Despite the odd underlying air, Peter was having fun. He always enjoyed spending time with Tony.

“Oh come on, Pete, you don’t have to look completely bored,” Tony stated, breaking the teen from his thoughts.

“Oh—no, no! It’s fine—I’m not—!” Peter began, with a bit of panic himself; he didn’t want Tony to think he wasn’t grateful.

But Tony only smiled, crookedly. “It’s fine, kid. Come on, we’ve been in here long enough, anyway. Let’s go get you something fun.”

“You’ve already gotten me a lot of stuff, you really don’t have to—” Peter began, hesitantly.

The same odd look passed over Tony’s face, quick as a flash, before he was smiling again. Peter might have even missed it, if he wasn’t watching for it.

“Nonsense. I told you I was taking you shopping. Now come on, I know there’s a new console in stores with your name on it.”

Tony grabbed the cart and started toward the checkout before Peter could get in another word edgewise. Peter shrugged and followed. He did feel a little awkward accepting so many gifts at once, but he would be lying if he said he didn’t feel a bit of a thrill at the promise of a new console.

They were in the gaming shop when he felt his phone vibrate.

Harry: Hey!

Peter: Hey!

Harry: What are you up to today?

Peter glanced at Tony, who was looking around the store, studying the geek merchandise.

Peter: Shopping and then workshop hours at SI

Peter: Why, what’s up?

Harry: Hmm. Tomorrow?

Harry: Was thinking we could hang out finally, maybe check out the carnival?

Peter smiled wide.

Peter: Sounds like fun!

Peter: Let me double check with Mr. Stark quickly to make sure he doesn’t have something booked.

“Hey Tony, do we have plans tomorrow?”

Tony paused, as if mulling it over.
“I don’t think so, why?”

“Can I go out tomorrow?”

Tony shrugged. “Don’t see why not. Just remember your curfew.”

“Thanks!”

Peter began rapidly typing out the confirmation.

“And make sure to let me know where you’re going to be,” Tony said, like an afterthought.

“Oh, uh, sure! We’re thinking of checking out the carnival.”

“Sounds fun,” Tony said, then held up an Iron Man themed backpack with a glint in his eye. “Lost that bag Sam got you yet?”

Peter groaned and flushed. He definitely had.

---

Later that night, Tony finally kicked Peter out of the workshop after the teen had yawned one too many times. Peter himself wasn’t about to protest, despite the fun work he was doing. Even though he was tired, he was mostly content as he entered his bedroom, full now of bags and boxes of new stuff. He felt a bit guilty. Maybe he should have tried harder to say no? Was he taking advantage? He didn’t think he was—after all, he hadn’t asked—and yet the feeling lingered. It didn’t help that Peter knew this was only half of the stuff Tony bought him. The other half was stored safely in the kitchen after their little grocery trip; most of which, Peter had been too tired to pay attention to what he was pointing at or agreeing to wanting, so now there was a bunch of random things, all with sticky notes attached labeling them as ‘Peter’s’ in Tony’s messing scrawl.

He was distracted for a bit by a call from Ned, who seemed all too enthused about Peter’s new Nintendo Switch. Peter made a note to finally have his friends over for that movie and game night he promised all those weeks ago. The distraction didn’t last long before it ended, and Peter lied on his bed in contemplation.

Then his phone buzzed, grabbing his attention again.

Harry: Hey, so is it okay if I come by and pick you up at 12:30?

Peter: Oh totally, though I’m staying at Stark Tower right now, so pick me up there?

Harry: Your aunt is okay with that?

Peter: Yes?

Harry: Uh, okay. Anyway, I’ll see you tomorrow?

Peter: Definitely!

Harry: Goodnight :)

Peter: Night! :)

Peter put down his phone with a grin. He was so happy that he was lucky enough to run into his old
friend. He hoped that they would still be able to get along. Nervousness bloomed in his chest; it’d been a long time, and people change, as do their interests. The Harry Peter remembered might no longer exist. Would that be a bad thing, though? Sure, he had great and fond memories of them spending their childhoods together, but Peter knew he wasn’t the same person he was then, either. He took a deep breath while deciding to stay optimistic, and not let his excitement twist into anxiety.

His phone buzzed again, alerting him to another message.

**Unknown:** Yo Spidey, listen, it’s all good if I help myself to this protein powder of yours, isn’t it?
**Unknown:** I know your name’s on it and all, but I figured taking some would be harmless if I only took a bit
**Unknown:** But now I’m being held hostage by Sergeant Killjoy’s murder glare

**Peter:** Yeah, help yourself!
**Peter:** Err, this is Clint right?

**Unknown:** The one and only! Thanks kiddo!

Peter quickly saved the number in his phone, not that it mattered—Clint seemed to have a new number every other week. Then, Peter flicked through his contacts up to ‘B’.

**Peter:** Hey, Clint can help himself to whatever, I honestly don’t remember asking for half of what Tony got me.

**Bucky:** I’m aware.
**Bucky:** Barton just makes it too easy.

**Peter:** It’s because he stuck fridge magnets to you, isn’t it?

**Bucky:** Yes.

Peter laughed quietly, remembering the pure malice Bucky had exhibited that morning. He went to reach for his charging cord, but stopped when he saw Ben holding it up for him in his clamp. Peter smiled brightly.

“Hey, thanks bud!” he said fondly, as the robot’s display flashed back with its own smiley face. Ben zoomed around in a circle, beeping in a cheery tone, happy to have been helpful.

“All right, all right. Let’s get to bed,” Peter said.

Ben whined sadly.

“Don’t give me that. Up on your charging station. If you behave tomorrow, maybe Dad will agree to keep you in the lab with the other bots while I’m out.”

Peter felt like biting his own tongue, even as Ben beeped in excitement. It probably wasn’t a good sign that his bot already knew exactly who Peter was talking about when he said ‘Dad’. Peter groaned.

Ben chirped a little more cautiously, and rolled to the edge of his desk, as close as he could get, and extended his hand. Peter smiled and reached out, touching a finger to Ben’s ‘hand’.

“It’s okay, bud. Let’s head to bed.”
The bot didn’t protest this time, and instead, simply guided himself over to his charging station, beeping once more to Peter.

“Yeah, goodnight to you, too.”

---

Peter’s gaze darted around, scanning the streets for any sign of Harry. It wasn't quite the time they agreed upon meeting yet; however, Peter had already been standing on the street for the last ten minutes, feeling like a dork. A cab pulled over at one point, seeing if he needed a lift, and Peter had stuttered over himself in denial, unsure about how to tell someone, ‘No, I'm fine, just anxious and slightly socially awkward.’ The cabbie must have gotten the drift, though, because he shot the teen an odd look before merging back into traffic.

Peter scuffed his shoes against the pavement and continued to gaze out into the road, though a voice at the back of his mind told him it was a useless feat, since he hadn't had the forethought to ask Harry what kind of car to look for.

A loud revving engine made Peter jolt, before a gunmetal grey sports car was veering toward him. It stopped, mere feet away, causing the car behind it to honk angrily before driving around. The tinted window of the passenger door rolled down, and Peter saw Harry grinning out at him.

“Heya, Pete!”

Peter felt himself immediately smile in turn as Harry waved him over.

“Nice car,” Peter said, a little lamely, as Harry pulled back into the flow of traffic.

“Thanks, it’s actually pretty new. I’d like to take it somewhere where I can really test it out soon.”

Peter could still pick up the underlying new car smell to the vehicle, and nodded.

“Mr. Stark has a racetrack.” Peter didn’t know why he said it, it was just a bit of trivia that popped into his head. He remembered clearly Clint telling him about it in a conspiratorial tone.

Harry nodded, seeming contemplative, then: “Maybe I should buy one up. Or build one.”

Peter laughed. “Just like that?”

Harry smiled and shrugged. “Might as well do something fun—oh, speaking of fun, do you wanna grab food before the park, or just eat while we’re there?”

“Might as well get the full experience,” Peter shrugged.

“Cotton candy and greasy pizza it is!”

Peter loved that Harry didn’t sound at all disappointed.

---

The park was great. Peter had forgotten just how much fun it could be to actually go out. Most of his hangout sessions with Ned took place at one of their homes, putting together Legos or watching movies—not that Peter found anything wrong with that—in fact, he loved just staying in and geeking out with his best friend, but this—this was a nice change, too.

Harry seemed to be having a blast too, and hadn't stopped grinning since they'd shown up. He’d
insisted on buying them both wristbands so that they could enjoy all the rides, and after a brief argument, Peter had let him. The bright, flashing lights and laughter and sounds from the rides filled the air, making Peter want to dash off in six different directions at once. Harry seemed to notice, and pulled him along to the rollercoaster first, going on and on about how the fastest rides were the best. Peter could admit that he really enjoyed himself; it was no web-slinging through the city, but it was still lots of fun, and he had a feeling only marginally less dangerous.

After they had been on a few rides, Peter insisted on grabbing some food (his metabolism not letting him go long on an empty stomach without complaint), so the two found a food cart selling all manner of questionable but delicious deep-fried foods.

Soon, Harry was tugging him over to the carnival games. Peter looked around at all the prizes and collectables, most of which were just silly or plain weird, however—there was a giant teddy that caught his eye at one of the games. It was a huge dog, black and tan and fluffy; it sort of reminded Peter of a big Bernese Mountain dog. Peter knew he didn’t need it, but he sure as hell wanted it. Harry must have caught him looking, because the next second, Peter was being dragged over to the games stand and Harry was fishing out his wallet.

“Pop the balloons, win a prize!” the carnie shouted.

“Give us a few rounds,” Harry said, slapping money on the counter.

The carnie was quick to exchange the bills for a handful of darts, and backed off to give the teens some room.

“You know these games are all rigged, right?” Peter asked.

“Pssshhh, don’t be such a spoilsport. Watch, I’m gonna rock this and get you the big one,” Harry scoffed, taking aim.

Peter rolled his eyes, but let his friend carry on. Sure enough, the first dart, dull as it was, bounced harmlessly off the balloon, the second one missed, and the third bounced off, as well. Peter wasn’t even trying to hide his laughing at that point. Harry shot him an annoyed look, but it was obvious he was fighting off a smile.

“Shh, you’re breaking my concentration!” he griped.

“Oh yeah, I’m sure that’s totally it.”

“It is,” Harry insisted.

“Uh huh,” Peter replied.

The next balloon popped with a sharp bang, and Harry cheered. Though in the end, Harry only popped a total of three balloons.

“Wow, you’re… awful at this!” Peter laughed.

Harry shoved him lightly, laughing in turn.

“Okay, if you think you can do better, then why don’t you try!”

“Fine! Another set!” Peter dug out his own wallet, ignoring Harry’s protests, and bought more darts.
He tested the sharpness of the dart lightly against his finger, and sure enough, it was horribly dull. Peter aimed and threw, and the dart bounced off the first partially-inflated balloon harmlessly.

“See!” Harry said, pointing.

Peter smirked, and put a little more of his strength behind the next throw, purposefully picking the most inflated balloon he could see. He smiled smugly at Harry as it popped.

“Beginner’s luck!”

Peter’s smile grew and a little thrill went through him as his next two hits popped the balloons, as well. He purposefully missed his next throw—sure, he wanted to show off a bit, but rousing suspicion wouldn’t be good. Harry was still gaping when the carnie told Peter he could pick out a medium-sized stuffie. The selection wasn’t the greatest, but in the end, Peter picked out a stuffed alien with somewhat lopsided eyes that looked like it could use a bit more stuffing. It was ugly and stupid, and Peter giggled as he shoved it at Harry. The older teen snorted and shook it, watching the oversized head flop almost brokenly.

Harry shook his head. “Okay, you definitely deserved to win a big one, like, what the hell!”

Peter shook his head. “What, not happy with… that?”

Harry shook it so the head flopped around again. “Oh no, you can pry this from my cold, dead hands—but seriously, why didn't you tell me you’re awesome at these games?”

“I’m awesome at this game,” Peter corrected.

“So, wanna test out your skills on more games, or go back to the rides?” Harry finally asked.

Peter shrugged and looked around, before dragging Harry off to a ride that looked like it was spinning people around and around much too fast.

---

Though Peter was genuinely having fun, after a while, all the lights and noises that had excited him began to get to be a little much. His enhanced senses always bumped everything up to eleven, so Peter wasn’t very surprised when his head began to ache. Some days were better than others. His tolerance fluctuated constantly, but Peter could ignore it to a point, or had learned to. Eventually, though, his discomfort grew to be a little too much, and Harry took notice.

“You okay?”

“Yeah,” Peter said. “Just getting a bit of a headache.”

“Oh! Did you wanna leave? We can totally go somewhere else, or—”

“No, it’s okay, we’re having fun!”

Okay, well,” Harry looked around the park. “Why don’t we try that?” He pointed.

“The Ferris wheel?”

“Yeah, it’s slow and will probably be quieter. Give you a bit of a break from all this.”

“You sure it won’t be too boring?” Peter asked, remembering how Harry had been most excited for the fast and thrilling rides.
“Nah, it’ll be fine. Oh! Wait here one sec, I just need to grab one thing real quick!”

Without another word, Harry dashed off into the crowd of people. Peter sighed but smiled, and took the time to check his phone and reply to a couple of texts. He was so relieved that he and Harry still seemed to be getting along well, even after all these years. The prospect of having another friend excited him to no end.

He was debating whether or not it would be too soon to invite Harry to his movie night when the other boy returned, most of him blocked from view by the huge stuffed dog he was holding, the exact stuffed dog Peter had been eyeing earlier.

“Here, take it!” Harry said.

Peter shook himself of the surprise before replying, “How were you able to get this?”

“By already winning the best game of all,” Harry said.

“Which is…?”

“Capitalism.”

“You bribed the carnie?” Peter exclaimed.

Harry shrugged. “Call it what you want, it’s yours now. After all, I promised I’d get you one.”

Peter huffed, but couldn’t really be mad. The stuffie was as soft as it looked.

The Ferris wheel offered Peter the break he needed from the loud noises of the fair. Both Peter and Harry had been mostly silent on the way up, though it never felt uncomfortable, until Peter noticed Harry tense up slightly.

“Hey,” Harry said as the wheel paused. “So, uh, it’s my eighteenth birthday coming up, and, well—my Dad’s going to be hosting this party for me—it’s gonna be awful and stuffy and boring as all hell, but, well—I was kind of hoping you’d maybe want to come?”

“Of course I’ll be there!” Peter immediately promised.

The tension seemed to leak out of Harry instantly. “Okay, awesome! It’s going to be a formal event and—well, I can text you all the details later. I’m hoping to arrange something more fun afterwards, but I don’t know yet—anyway, thanks, Pete.”

“No problem, Harry,” said Peter. “Sooo… what do you want for your birthday?”

Harry groaned. “Seriously, you showing up and saving me from a boring evening will be a gift in and of itself.”

“You sure?” Peter asked doubtfully, but Harry nodded.

“Yeah, I’m sure,” the older teen responded, smiling warmly.

---

Peter entered the penthouse with an extra bounce in his step. He was so happy he and Harry still got along and that he had an honest-to-god chance at rekindling their friendship. He was nervous and excited in equal measure about Harry’s birthday; Peter still wasn’t comfortable at black-tie events, despite Tony’s coaching, and having to mingle with imposing figures didn’t strike him as a
good evening, but—Harry had asked him to come, said he wanted him there, and quite frankly, spending time with Harry would probably make it worth it.

Peter faltered when, coming into the lounge, he saw Tony standing there, arms crossed and looking tense. He was staring at Peter in a way that the teen knew all too well; it was a look May (and at one time, his uncle Ben) had used on him. The ‘I’ve been waiting for you, and I’m not happy’ look. Peter swallowed thickly, something childish and instinctual cowering in him. He clutched his stuffed dog nervously to his chest, then made an effort to relax, mentally berating himself.

Peter tensed when Tony sniffed and shifted his stance.

“So,” the man started, tone already accusatory, “have fun?”

Peter was at a bit of a loss, his mind running through every possible reason he could be in trouble. He wanted to check his phone suddenly, wondering if he missed a call or text, but he also didn’t want to seem like he was brushing Tony off.

“Yes?” he replied honestly.

Tony sighed, uncrossed his arms and pointed to the TV, which turned on with nothing more than a flick of his wrist. On it was what looked like security footage of Peter stepping out of Harry’s sports car.

“I don’t remember hearing about Ned or MJ owning a Ferrari, Peter.”

“Because they don’t?” Peter was thoroughly confused. “I don’t understand—”

“Listen, Peter, you told me you were going out with your friends, and—”

“And I did go out with a friend!”

“—And, I’m concerned! You’ve never spoken about anyone else in your usual friend group. Listen, there are people out there that might start treating you differently if they find out you have connections to me or my company, and I know I brought you to the expo, but—”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa! This—no! Tony, you’ve got it totally wrong!” Peter exclaimed. “I wasn’t out with some random person I don’t know!”

“Oh. You weren’t?” Tony seemed relieved.

“I was out with Harry!” Peter said.

Tony stilled.

“We were catching up after—”

“Osborn?”

“Uhm, yeah?”

Tony suddenly bent forward, hands covering his face, muffling his loud groan.

“Oh my god, that’s so, so much worse!”

“What?” Peter asked, perplexed.
Tony straightened out and fixed Peter with a serious look.

“Peter, I don’t want you hanging out with that boy.”

“What?”

“Listen, that whole family is bad news, and I—”

“No! Harry is my friend! We’ve known each other since we were kids, and he invited me to his birthday!”

“You knew him as kids! People change, Peter, especially when your main influence is someone like Norman Osborn—and there’s no way in hell I’m letting you go to that party.”

“No! Da—” Peter stopped himself, choking back the name, before recovering. “That’s not fair!”

Peter missed the way Tony’s face blanked in surprise at his slip, but the teen took advantage of the silence.

“You can’t just forbid me to go! I promised I’d be there!”

Tony seemed to recover quickly enough, because he interrupted before Peter could get out another word.

“Well you’d better un-promise then, because that’s exactly what I’m doing!” Tony said, voice rising.

“You can’t do that!” Peter yelled again. “You don’t know anything about Harry or—!”

“You’re not going, Peter, and that’s final!” Tony shouted back.

The two stared at each other, breathing heavily. Peter could feel his eyes burning as he swallowed back tears. He was so angry, he couldn’t understand why Tony wouldn’t just listen to him, why he was so judgemental—he didn’t even know Harry! Seeing that Tony wasn’t backing down, Peter stormed down the hall, straight past Steve, who looked a little shocked, and into his bedroom, slamming the door behind him.

---

Tony deflated the moment he heard Peter’s door slam closed. He sat himself down on the sofa with a sigh, shooting the TV a scornful look.

“That sounded like it could have gone better,” Steve said, a little hesitantly as he entered the room, glancing back briefly to where Peter had flown past him, teary-eyed.

Tony’s only response was a groan, until Steve sat himself next to him and brought him close by wrapping an arm around his shoulders.

“I’m not trying to be mean, I just don’t want him to get taken advantage of or hurt!” Tony said in frustration. “Those Osborns are not good people, Steve. There’s a reason why Oscorp and SI haven’t collaborated in anything.”

Steve frowned. “Oscorp does what again?”

“They’re another research and development company, but while my company specializes in tech, Oscorp leans more towards biological and chemical studies, though they have been known to
dabble in robotics, as well.”

“Okay, so it doesn’t sound like your companies are competing too much, and honestly, this sounds a little more personal than that.”

Tony stiffened, but nodded. He pulled away from Steve, his eyes distant.

“Before—well, when I was still making weapons, Norman Osborn approached me with a deal. A multi-company project. Stark weaponry armed with Oscorp’s biological capabilities. We… I jumped at the opportunity.”

Tony trailed off, his mind jumping back to the files, the video, what he’d—

“Tony?”

Tony blinked back to himself. “I got in over my head, Steve, got involved with stuff I did not want to be involved in. I backed out of the project, destroyed all our work—but it wasn’t enough.”

“What were they doing?”

Tony remained silent for a moment. “I found—files, recordings of… experiments. When I tried to gather evidence to take Osborn to court… everything I had found and compiled just vanished. I had nothing, and Osborn walked off scot free.” Tony fell silent again, though he didn’t lose himself like before.

“Was it really that bad—the experiments they were doing?” Steve asked, carefully.

“I’ve seen a lot of shit, before and certainly since, but what Osborn was doing—that was pure evil, and I can’t—I won’t let Peter anywhere near it.”

Tony turned to look Steve in the eye.

“Whether it’s from Norman Osborn himself or that spoiled spawn of his, I don’t care. I’m going to protect Peter. No matter what.”

---

Peter paced angrily as he vented out his frustrations to the small robot on his desk. Ben beeped questioningly, following his pacing.

“It’s just not fair!” he fumed to the little robot. “Harry’s great—he was perfectly friendly at the expo, and we had a lot of fun today! I just don’t get why D—Tony’s being like this!”

There was a knock at his door, and Peter glared at the wood. He didn’t want to talk to Tony right now.

“What?” he snapped, letting some of his anger bleed out.

“Should I come back later?” Steve said, popping his head in.

Peter sagged, feeling suddenly sheepish.

“Sorry, Steve, I— …sorry.”

Steve nodded as he let himself into the room, closing the door behind him.
“Still sore over your disagreement earlier, huh?”

Peter sighed. “I just—he’s not even giving him a chance!” he exclaimed, letting himself flop dramatically onto his bed.

Steve hid his smile and sat at Peter’s desk, shooting a quick, “Hello,” to Ben, and agreeably shaking the robot’s hand gently.

“I’ve known Tony for a while now,” Steve began, attention back on Peter. “And even though I’m definitely not an expert at reading him yet, I do know that everything Tony does, he does for a reason… even if you don’t understand it right away.”

“Or at all,” Peter griped.

“I think, in this case, it’s maybe a good idea just to trust him.”

“So you’re on his side,” Peter huffed.

“There aren’t any sides, Peter,” Steve tried, but Peter didn’t really want to hear it.

“Maybe he should trust me instead! Instead of just—of just not even listening or—or giving Harry a chance!”

“I know it doesn’t feel like it right now, but Tony has your best interests at heart,” Steve placated. “He’s just trying to protect you.”

Peter scoffed moodily, but Steve only smiled.

“It’s just what dads do.”

Peter tried not to let himself flush. Based on Steve’s grin, he knew he failed.

---

Harry: Hey, thanks for coming out today! It was more fun than I’ve had in a LONG time. :D

Peter looked at the text and winced. That’s right… what was he going to tell Harry?

Harry: Oh btw! The party is the day after tomorrow at a hotel Dad’s rented out. I know it’s short notice, but I really appreciate you agreeing to come

Harry: I can pick you up again and drive you, that way you don’t have to worry about getting an official invite or getting lost. Are you going to be at Stark’s?

Peter: Yeah, probably

Peter: About the party...

Harry: I need to show my face for at least a couple hours before ditching, and I think I’d go mad if I had to suffer through it alone

Harry: Oh... did something come up?

Peter: Just want to know what time to be ready!

He groaned. He was screwed.

Harry: I’ll pick you up at 6:30! :D
Peter: Sounds good!

Peter worried at his lip as panic began to set in. What was he going to do? Harry sounded so excited, he didn’t want to let him down—but both Tony and May had forbidden him from going. Peter had been furious after he had tried to call May to get her on his side, only to discover that Tony must have beaten him to it, as she hesitantly informed him that she wasn’t quite comfortable with the situation, and that he should just listen to Tony for now.

He wanted to be there for his friend, but doing so would mean… Peter felt nervousness churn in his gut. He flipped through his contacts.

Peter: Hey, I’m gonna need your help with something

Ned: Of course dude!

Peter: Okay. I’m coming over, get ready to program

Ned: You’re not gonna get in trouble again, are you?

Peter: Not if we do this right. Hang tight, I’ll be right over.

---

Things had been a little strained between them since their fight, but Peter knew a part of that was because he’d been bugging Tony about changing his mind about the party, which in turn had led to another smaller argument over the phone while at his aunt’s. At least May had been a little sympathetic; Tony hadn’t seemed to budge at all on his anti-Osborn views. If anything, it was the opposite. Peter quieted down later that evening, though. Luckily, he didn’t have to act on how disappointed he felt, since a part of him had been hoping Tony would come around, and he wouldn’t be forced to carry out his plan.

Ned had seemed nervous when he had laid it all out for him, and in a way, Peter could see why, especially considering what had happened the last time he had snuck out.

He knew better now, though.

“Hey, Tony?” Peter asked as he, Tony and Bucky were relaxing in the lounge, cartoons playing on the TV.

Tony looked up from his tablet and raised a brow.

“What’s up, kid?”

“Ned invited me over tonight. I was hoping I could go,” Peter said.

“Again?” the man asked. “Weren’t you just over there last night?” Tony seemed to think about it for a minute, when Bucky perked up from his morning zombification.

“Let the kid go have fun with his friend, Anthony.”

Tony stiffened, then turned to look at Bucky. The two shared a silent conversation Peter had no hope in hell of deciphering, before Tony turned back to Peter.

“Okay, Pete. What time were you thinking of going over at?”
“Around dinner time, so, like, six or so?”

“Are you spending the night?” Tony asked.

“Yeah,” Peter agreed readily.

It wasn’t technically a lie; Peter was going to ask Harry to drop him off at Ned’s after the party.

“Okay, kid, just make sure you have your phone so I can get a hold of you if I need to.”

“Of course,” Peter agreed.

“Okay then,” Tony said.

Peter felt a thrill go through him, as well as something slightly ugly and—no, there was no time for that. He crushed the feeling down and got up to go back to his room.

“Gotta pick what Lego we’re gonna build!” he called back, when Tony questioned his sudden retreat.

Peter packed a bag for Ned’s with a few movies and a change of clothes, then paused. How was he going to get his suit for the party out of the tower without either wrinkling it or drawing suspicion?

Finally, Peter decided he would just have to wear it out. He was going to have to use the code he and Ned built.

“Hey Karen?” Peter asked his phone.

“Hello, Peter.”

“I’m going to need your help. Activate Administrator Protocols.”

“Very well. What are your commands?”

---

Peter hurried out of the tower just after six o’clock. “We have thirty more seconds to be out of Friday’s line of sight, Peter,” Karen told him through his earbuds.

“Got it.”

Peter hurried across the street and around the next curve to wait at the coffee shop he told Harry to pick him up at.

His phone rang, and he fumbled with it, answering quickly.

“Hey! Hello?”

“Hey, kiddo, are you all right?” Tony asked, a little breathless.

“Uhm, yeah? Just left for Ned’s, why?”

“Oh, you didn’t say you were going yet,” Tony said.

“Sorry, you weren’t in the penthouse, sooo…”

“Ok, right, yeah, Friday’s cameras went dark for a couple minutes—oh, found the bug—was just
making sure you were safe.”

“Yeah, I’m okay. I’ll see you tomorrow,” Peter said, feeling only a stab of guilt.

“Okay, talk to you later, kid. Stay out of trouble,” Tony said, sounding distracted.

“I will,” Peter said.

“Okay, bye.”

“Bye!”

Peter hung up just as Harry’s gunmetal Ferrari pulled up and honked. He grinned and dashed over, jumping into the passenger's side.

“Hey, Pete, looking good,” Harry greeted him with a large grin.

“Hey, you too,” Peter said as he buckled up.

The two teens chatted amicably for a while as Harry navigated the city streets easily, swearing and honking once when he was cut off suddenly, but otherwise, the trip was flawless. Peter flushed a bit thinking about his last time behind the wheel. He was improving, but it was still going to be a while before he could drive that well.

Harry pulled up to the hotel, and let the valet take over parking his car as he led Peter in, stopping once to straighten the younger teen’s tie, then taking a deep breath.

“I wanna thank you again, Pete. This is gonna be boring as hell. Honestly, I hate these things, but Dad insists. Says it looks good or whatever.” Harry rolled his eyes. “But good news is, we can probably sneak out after the speeches, and then I’ve kinda planned a little after party of my own that’s gonna be way better!” Harry grinned, cheekily.

“After party?” Peter questioned.

“Don’t worry, I know you said you had plans later tonight too. I’ll make sure you get back to your other friend’s place. I’ll pay for the cab and everything.”

Peter nodded hesitantly, but Harry’s excitement was contagious, and soon, Peter found himself grinning in turn.

“Yeah, okay.”

“Okay. Come on, I think the hall Dad rented out is over this way,” Harry said, taking Peter gently by the wrist and leading him away.

Sure enough, Harry soon stopped in front of a hall where they saw a man talking to the hotel staff. Peter recognized the man instantly as Norman Osborn. The man stopped his conversation when he noticed them, and fixed Harry with a disapproving look.

“Harry, you’re late,” Mr. Osborn said as he strode up to the teens.

Peter fought against a natural instinct that made him want to take a step back for every step forward Mr. Osborn took. The skin on the back of his neck prickled uncomfortably, and Peter kept trying to subtly breathe through what he tried to convince himself was only his anxiety.

“Hardly,” Harry said in response, tone flippant. “Can you even be late for your own party?”
Norman shot his son another look. “Almost all the guests are already here.” His gaze turned to Peter, then. “Speaking of, aren’t you going to introduce your… friend?”

Peter shifted under the scrutiny. He didn’t like the way Mr. Osborn pronounced ‘friend.’

“Father, I’m sure you remember Peter, Peter Parker?” Harry said, voice a little forceful.

Peter watched Mr. Osborn frown, then a spark of recognition lit the man’s eyes.

“Oh yes, of course! Mr. Parker, I was unaware you two were back in contact. It’s good to see you well.” The man smiled at him. It was perfectly friendly, and charming, and—made Peter’s hair stand up on end.

“Thank you, Sir, you too,” Peter said, accepting the hand Mr. Osborn held out to him.

“Polite, too. Maybe you can be the good influence Harry needs.”

Harry rolled his eyes none too subtly.

“Now, I suggest you go out and greet your guests,” Mr. Osborn said, in a voice that made it clear that it was not an optional request. He turned a friendlier look to Peter again. “Please, enjoy the party, Mr. Parker.”

With that, the man turned and disappeared through the doors into the hall.

Harry sighed and let the tension ease out of him as his father retreated. He clasped Peter around the shoulders, sending him an apologetic look.

“Sorry about that,” he said.

Peter felt his own anxiety ease at the friendly touch. “That wasn’t my fault, was it? I hadn’t realized we were running late.”

Harry grinned again. “Oh no, we are on the perfect schedule. My schedule.”

Peter sighed, realizing Harry had wanted to show up late.

“Come on, let’s go see who my Dad wants to rub elbows with this year.”

---

The party was a little nerve wracking, though not as bad as Peter had initially feared. Harry subtly pointed out people and whispered who they were, as well as any dirty gossip the teen had heard about, and for a room full of—supposedly—very respectable people, there was a lot of gossip. It helped ease a bit of Peter’s tension, though he was just glad that Harry didn’t abandon him at any point. Instead, the other teen stuck close, grabbing drinks and hors d’oeuvres from passing staff. Peter had a sneaking suspicion not all the drinks were non-alcoholic, but no one seemed to care as Harry continued on. Peter was thankful again for Harry’s presence as the other continued to pass him food that he told Peter he thought he would like, since Peter himself had little to no idea what most of the fancy little finger foods consisted of. Despite the ornate decorations and the multitudes of people that Peter didn’t even begin to know how to pretend to socialize with, Harry kept him mostly at ease, a consistent camaraderie shared by how much neither of them wanted to be there.

That alone made Peter think about Tony, about the party Tony had thrown for him, and the vast differences between them. Being in this room, seeing Harry work his way from person to person,
smiling and laughing that charming—but-so-very-fake laugh made Peter think about how easily Tony could have done the same thing to him; turned his birthday into some kind of networking conference. Instead, Tony had gone out of his way to give Peter something he knew Peter would love. A warm feeling blossomed in his chest, but it was closely followed by that same ugly feeling from earlier writhing in his gut. He subtly checked his phone, and was relieved to see no missed calls or texts.

“You okay?” Harry asked, quietly.

Peter startled. “Oh, uh, yeah, I’m good.”

Harry nodded. “Okay, sorry, won’t be too much longer. I’ll have to make a speech, thank the guests, blah blah blah—and then we can sneak away.”

“You sure you won’t get in too much trouble?”

“Nah, this is the important bit. Plus, take a look, most of the people here are at least a little tipsy at this point. Open bar across the room.”

“Won’t your dad notice?”

Harry scoffed.

“Let him.”

Peter nodded, hesitantly.

“Okay, Dad’s signaling me over. You gonna be okay for a few minutes?” Harry asked.

Peter forced a smile and nodded. “Yeah, of course!” he said, with a confidence he definitely didn’t feel.

“You know, you’re a terrible liar,” Harry said, smiling crookedly.

Peter sighed, but nodded. “Yeah, I know.”

Harry laughed, then sobered. “Want me to try and get out of it?”

“No, your Dad’s gonna be mad enough after we take off. Go, do your speech—like you said, it’ll just be a few minutes.”

Harry nodded. “Okay, go stand off to the side. I’ll come find you soon.”

Peter watched Harry make his way through the crowd, over to where his father was waiting by the side door to the room. Peter glanced around and made his way to the edge of the room, politely turning away staff offering him some mysterious grey food. He kept Harry within his sights, taking in his friend's defensive posture as he spoke with his father. Finally, he watched as Mr. Osborn took to the podium and began addressing the guests, congratulating Harry on another year older, thanking the guests, and of course, branching off about Oscorp and how Harry was studying diligently to take over after him. Finally, he turned the mic over to Harry, while the attendants applauded politely.

Harry began by thanking his father and talking about what a great party it was. Peter wondered how often Harry had to lie about such things for his words to sound so full of genuine praise. Next, Harry went on to thank everyone for attending, though his eyes seemed to linger on Peter as he said
Peter felt a prickling of warning before someone grabbed his arm, not rough, but definitely firm. He turned with the pulling motion to face a smirking man. He was tall and thickset with, in Peter’s opinion, way too much hair product in his dark hair. He was one of the younger guests in attendance; if Peter had to hazard a guess, maybe in his mid-twenties. His smile was sharp and left Peter feeling on edge. He exuded an air of self-importance and pomposity without even opening his mouth.

“Hi,” the man said, and even his voice rubbed Peter the wrong way.

“Hi,” Peter said, hesitantly. “Can I—can I help you with something?”

He didn’t quite know what it was—something in the way the man was looking at him, maybe—but there was something about this man that made Peter feel small, and somehow lesser. He hated it. The warning prickling at the back of his neck never stopped.

“Hopefully. I must say, Harry might be many things, but he certainly has good taste.”

“Uhh…” Peter didn’t really know where to go with that, his brows furrowing.

“Oh, it’s okay, you don’t gotta play up the role. We all know what Osborn’s reputation is like,” the man winked at Peter. “Though, I haven’t seen you around before, and I definitely would remember a face like yours. So tell me, do you have a personal number? Or even your service’s number would be fine.”

“Uhm, what?” Peter was outright frowning now. Service number? What the actual hell was this guy on about?

Peter hardly even noticed when the rest of the room broke into applause again. He was too uncomfortable and confused.

“Oh come on, whatever Osborn is paying you, I can match it.”

“Paying me?” Peter asked.

“Well—”

Peter never got to hear whatever it was he was going to say, because the next thing he knew, Harry was there, stepping between the two of them.

“I think you should be moving along,” Harry said.

The man sneered at Harry.

“I’m just fine where I am, actually,” he said.

Peter couldn’t see the expression on Harry’s face, but he saw the tension rise in his shoulders.

“I’m sorry, maybe that was too subtle for you. Let me try again. Fuck off, Westcott,” Harry hissed.

The two glared at each other, before the man huffed and looked past Harry to Peter again.

“Think it over, cutie.”
“I’m good, thanks,” Peter said, stomach churning.

The man’s eyes narrowed slightly, before he turned and marched off.

Peter released a deep breath, and Harry immediately turned to face him.

“Shit, I’m so sorry about that, are you okay?” Harry asked, brushing his hands over Peter’s shoulders.

Just like that, the uncomfortable feeling began to fade.

“I’m fine. Who was that guy?”

Harry glared off into the direction the man had disappeared.

“Skip Westcott, a grade A asshole. I didn’t even realize he was here. Fuck, I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine… honestly, I’m mostly confused. I have no idea what just happened, really.”

Harry bowed his head and huffed a quiet laugh.

“Never change, Pete,” Harry said, looking back up at Peter, his gaze fond. “Ready to get out of here?”

“Yes please,” Peter agreed readily.

Within minutes, they were back in Harry’s Ferrari, speeding down the streets to where Harry’s after party was located. Harry hadn’t said much about it, aside from that it was the “not boring” party. Peter was feeling a little nervous; it was still relatively early, but the idea of more socializing with unknown people put him a little on edge. But Harry looked excited, and Peter didn’t want to disappoint him by saying he wasn’t really feeling up to it. He took a steadying breath—who knew, maybe this was a chance to make new friends? Branch out, like May was always saying. Peter looked out the window. They were in a residential neighborhood, an upper class one at that. All the houses were huge and expensive looking, not that that surprised him much. Faintly, Peter began to hear heavy bass, which began to morph into actual music the more they drove, until finally, what was obviously their destination appeared; a house near the end of the block with colored lights and loud music. People littered the lawn, and Peter could see the shadows of more people inside.

“This is more like it!” Harry cheered as he pulled up to the curb, the driveway already full of cars.

Peter felt his phone buzz in his pocket, and he quickly fished it out, only to see a text from Tony.

Tony: Having a good time at Ned’s?

Peter bit his lip as his gut twisted with the same ugly feeling he had been stomping down all evening. Guilt.

Peter: Yeah, totally!

He typed back, then paused. He quickly scrolled through his photos and attached a selfie he had taken the other night when he’d actually been at Ned’s. After a moment more of hesitation, Peter hit the send button and waited.

He didn’t have to wait long.

Tony: Glad to see you’re having fun. See you tomorrow.
Peter: Goodnight

Peter texted back, unable to hold back a wince.

Tony: Night, kiddo. Call if you need anything.

Peter: I will.

It shouldn’t have surprised him that it felt as bad as it did, lying to Tony, and yet…

Peter pocketed his phone again as Harry unbuckled his seatbelt. Peter followed suit as he continued to try and stomp down the bad feeling invading his gut—and the pricking at the back of his neck. It was going to be fine. Everything was going to be just fine.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed this chapter! I hope this was worth the wait!

Please tell me what you thought in the comments below or find me on Tumblr

Thank you so much for reading!
Tony drifted in and out of consciousness, his whole body aching pleasantly for all the right reasons. He felt completely and thoroughly worked over. His shoulders and wrists ached from being held in position by Bucky’s ropes; the flesh of his ass sore and red from Steve throwing him over his lap after Tony had given him a little too much sass. The muscles in his jaw panged in the particular way they did after holding a hard cock in his mouth. His hole was swollen, used, in a way he knew he’d really feel when he woke up the next morning. He loved it. Tony breathed out happily as Bucky’s hand continued to stroke through his hair in a relaxing rhythm, while Steve sat, straddling his thighs, massaging his shoulders and back with talented fingers, pausing occasionally to lay chaste kisses in the wake of his warm hands.

Tony smiled slightly. Warm, that’s how he felt. Warm and exhausted, but it was the good kind of tired. He opened his eyes, met Bucky’s gaze and grinned. He knew he probably looked a little dopey in his post-coital bliss, but in that moment, he couldn’t have cared less. Tony’s heart fluttered as he watched a smile appear on Bucky’s own face, slow at first, then growing in intensity until he, too, was full-on grinning back at him.

It had been so, so long since he’d last felt this unbothered and just good. He knew tomorrow he’d have to buck up and bury himself back into the thick of things, but for now, he was going to let himself drift.

A shrill noise cut through the air, causing Tony to jolt and, regrettably, both Bucky and Steve freeze in their ministrations.

“Fuck,” Tony groaned as the ringing of his cellphone continued.

He was dead certain he had put it on silent before he followed his lovers to bed, which meant that whoever was calling was on his ‘Do Not Ignore’ list. On top of that, it was late, just past two in the morning, which meant that, whatever it was, it wasn’t good. Before he could move to try and find where he’d discarded it, Bucky was up and out of bed to fetch it off the floor.

“Here,” Bucky said, passing it to him.

Tony grabbed it and swiped to answer, without bothering to look at the screen.

“What?” he said, letting a bit of his irritation bleed through into his voice.
Tony frowned. The first thing that his ears picked up was what sounded like much-too-loud music, and a multitude of voices.

“I swear to God—” Tony began, but was stopped when the caller finally decided to speak up.

“Uh, yeah, sorry, is this Peter’s dad? Uhm, sorry to bug you so late, but Harry gave me his phone and asked me to call? Apparently something happened with Peter, and he wanted me to call someone to come get him?”

Tony felt his whole body tense. “What?” he demanded.

That couldn’t be right, no—Peter was safe, he was at Ned’s, he was safe! Tony felt a chill make its way through his body.

“Where?” he hissed, jumping up and throwing on clothes. He was pretty sure the shirt he picked up wasn’t his, but he couldn’t care less as panic began coursing through him. Peter was in trouble—his kid needed him.

The kid over the phone listed off an address, and Tony hung up without so much as a goodbye.

“Friday!” Tony yelled.

“Already uploaded the coordinates into your GPS, Boss,” the AI replied. “I have the garage prepped for your arrival.”

“Tony—” Steve began, but Tony shook his head.

“I need to go get Peter;” he said, running for the door.

He desperately wanted to jump into a suit, he would be able to get to Peter so much quicker if he flew—fuck it. “Friday, prep a suit.”

“Yes, Boss.”

---

Harry looked up as the door opened and Brent entered. Peter whimpered, and Harry hugged the younger boy closer to him—a feat, since Peter was already curled up on his lap.

“Hey, so, I called his dad. He’s on his way, but he sounded mad, dude.”

Harry nodded, continuing to run his fingers through Peter’s hair. He would have done it himself, but Peter hadn’t wanted him to leave, and quite frankly, Harry wasn’t keen on the idea of leaving Peter alone after—well, he was just fine where he was.

“Thanks,” Harry said, before an ugly look overtook his features. “Why the fuck was that asshole here?”

“I dunno, man, it’s not like we have a bouncer at the door,” Brent shrugged, then looked sheepish at Harry's glare. “Sorry.”

Harry sighed, before frowning, perplexed. “Wait… ‘dad’? You said you called his dad?” he questioned.

“Yeah.”
“You mean his uncle?”

“Contact name said ‘Dad’ in his phone,” Brent shrugged as he passed back the device.

“Harry?”

Harry startled, looking down at Peter.

“Hey! Hey, Pete, how you doing? You coming back to me?”

“Head—hurts, bad… feel funny,” Peter said in a weak voice.

Harry swallowed dryly. “Yeah—yeah, here, drink this. It’ll help wash that shit out of your system.”

Harry pointed to a bottle of water on the shelf, and Brent ran to grab it, passing it along. Harry unscrewed the cap and pulled back from Peter enough to press the bottle to his lips, gently.

“Here, take it slow.”

Peter nodded, eyes still closed, but he let Harry help him drink down some of the water. Peter’s eyes opened, and the boy’s face grimaced.

“Hey—”

Peter looked up at him, and Harry saw his eyes widen.

“You’re hurt!”

Harry’s tongue darted out to taste the wound splitting his lip, and the metallic, coppery taste of blood filled his mouth. His left cheek and the knuckles on his hands felt swollen and ached awfully.

“I’m okay,” he said. “Just want to make sure you’re okay.”

This—this was not how he’d envisioned his night going. He’d only wanted to have a good time. Maybe show off a bit. He kept thinking back, trying to pinpoint just when things had gone to shit—

Peter sat up on his own, and flushed a bit, realizing he was seated on Harry’s lap. Harry let him pull away, but he kept an arm around his back to help support him as Peter sat himself down next to Harry.

“Take it easy,” Harry said in concern, when Peter brought a hand up to his head and bent over with a groan.

“What—what happened? My head—my head’s all fuzzy.”

Harry looked down at his bruised knuckles, feeling a surge of anger, white-hot, fill him. “What do you remember?” he tried instead.

Peter frowned. “I—” he began, then paused, eyes widening.

A sudden commotion from outside the room startled them, voices rising in excitement.

Harry frowned and stood up. “Stay here, Pete. I’ll be right back.” He made his way out of the room, sending Brent a look. “Watch him.” And then he closed the door behind him and made his way down the hall.
“All right, party’s over!” shouted a voice.

For a moment, Harry thought that maybe the police had shown up, but he felt like he recognized that voice. He shouldered his way through the crowd gathered around the main room—‘Oh. Shit.’

Tony Stark was standing by the front foyer, looking more furious than Harry had ever seen the man.

“All right, where’s—!” Stark began, eyes scanning the crowd. He stopped short, though, when his gaze fell onto Harry himself. The two locked eyes, and for a moment, everything was silent, and then the man’s eyes narrowed and—oh, no, this was the angriest he’d ever seen Tony Stark.

“You!” Stark said, voice dripping animosity and hatred.

Harry suddenly regretted pushing his way to the front of the pack.

“What did you do?” the man demanded loudly, as he began to advance on him.

Harry could definitely admit to taking a couple of steps backward. He was not enjoying being under the heat of that gaze, nor did he, in any way, enjoy the pure malice emanating from the man advancing on him—especially not when said man was dressed in fully-weaponized armor.

“Where is he? I swear, if there’s so much as a—!” Stark demanded, but stopped short, gaze finally shifting from Harry to something behind him.

“Tony!”

Harry spun around and saw Peter, looking shocked. Peter was half-slumped against the archway frame leading into the hall, his suit coat and tie were missing, and his white, button-up dress shirt was wrinkled and buttoned unevenly. His skin was pale with a sheen of sweat, and he looked shaky and a bit unfocused. Harry was genuinely surprised the younger teen could stand at all.

“Peter…” Stark breathed, eyes raking up and down Peter’s form which, admittedly, had looked better.

Harry gulped audibly when Stark turned on him again.

“What the hell did you do?” the man screamed at him.

Harry opened his mouth to defend himself, but was beaten to it by Peter, who pushed himself up and stepped forward.

“Harry hasn’t done anything wrong!”

Stark’s lip twitched in a barely-contained snarl. “Oh really?” the man said, voice still filled with a vicious lilt.

“I—I—I drank too much, and—”

“Peter, no,” Harry started. “That’s not what—”

“You! Shut. It.” Stark jabbed a finger in his direction.

“But he should really see a—”

“Not another word!” Stark yelled at him, effectively silencing the teen. “Peter, come here.”
No, it’s not Harry’s—"

"Enough! Peter—" Stark took a deep breath. “Come here. We’re leaving.”

“But—!”

"Kid, if you know what’s good for you, you will not test me!"

Peter hesitated for a moment, then, head bowed, began walking toward Stark, who pointed toward the front door.

"Go. Outside."

Harry grimaced at the embarrassed flush that painted Peter’s face.

"Hey, listen, don’t—" Harry tried, but Stark rounded on him in a flash.

"And you! If you ever so much as look in Peter’s direction ever again—!"

"Tony!" Peter shouted from the front door.

Stark looked like he was about to argue, until Peter lurched dangerously to the left and had to catch himself on the doorframe. Stark sent Harry another murderous glare, then turned and made his way over to where Peter stood and ushered him outside.

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Peter felt completely humiliated. He couldn’t bear to meet anyone’s eyes, let alone Harry’s. Not to mention, he still felt like hell, even after drinking most of the water Harry had given him. He was used to headaches—he got them often, with his super senses—but he’d never had a migraine this bad. On top of that, the floaty feeling in his brain, and the numbness just starting to finally fade in his limbs, well—he felt like he was ready to keel over. He jolted when he felt a hand on his shoulder, turning to see Tony. Peter winced when he saw Tony’s face. He’d never seen him look so angry.

"Tony—"

"Peter, come on, step up on my boots so I can get you home."

Peter paused, looking from Tony’s face to the boots of his armor, then back to the man’s face.

"You’re not seriously planning on carrying me out of here—"

"Oh, you’d better start believing it. Now step up, or I swear to God, kid, I’ll toss you right over my shoulder."

Peter gaped. “No! You can’t—"

“You are severely underestimating just how much trouble you’re in if you think you can argue with me right now,” Tony said.

Peter felt a sort of desperation well up inside of him. He was exhausted physically and mentally—

“Peter, now!”

He hesitated. He wanted to argue, but he still felt awful—he couldn’t concentrate, or formulate
“Okay, that’s it,” Tony growled, stepping forward and grabbing Peter, having him slung over his shoulder in seconds.

Peter was shocked and disoriented for a moment. Tony hadn’t hurt him, but the speed in which he’d moved had surprised him. He heard the sound of the suit powering up, and then they were up, and Peter watched as the ground got further away. A wave of nausea churned in his gut just as Tony stabilized, and suddenly, Peter wasn’t staring straight down anymore. He groaned, miserably.

Though the summer breeze was warm, being flown through the air made it feel cold against his heated skin and had the side-effect of helping to clear his head as his body worked to metabolize what he’d inadvertently poisoned it with. Peter’s stomach lurched again, and his mouth began salivating in warning. He whimpered, holding on tightly as Tony flew them back home, focusing on trying to breathe through the waves of sickness that washed over him. He was doing decently, until Tony suddenly veered and went in for the landing pad.

“To—Tony, lemme down—lemme down!” he whined in panic, as he choked down the bile rising in his throat.

“I’m not just dropping you. Hold on.”

Peter swallowed thickly again and again, his body shaking as he held back the need to start heaving. He’d seen Tony fly the armor—he’d seen him maneuver and fly and land a thousand times—Tony always made it look easy as hell, but being carried around by the man, sick as he was, Peter was hyperaware of every lurch and bump. Honestly, he actually thought he was going to make it. They were there, at the tower, but then Tony landed, and that final thud as the boots hit the landing pad jolted Peter’s stomach, and the very next moment, he was vomiting, all down the back of Tony’s armor.

Tony stood stock-still, holding Peter as he coughed and heaved, spilling sick over the ground and the man’s back. Peter’s groans turned into pathetic whimpers when he finally stopped.

Tony gently pulled him away, and stood him on his own two legs.

“Uh huh,” the man said. “You are scrubbing every millimeter of this tomorrow.”

Peter felt himself burn in shame as the armor opened up and Tony stepped out of it, looking thoroughly unimpressed.

“I’m—I’m sorry.”

Tony’s lips were pressed into a thin line. “What were you thinking?” he demanded as he led Peter into the penthouse.

“I just—”

“You went behind my back, lied, and for what? So you could go out with your buddy Osborn and get completely wasted?” Tony scoffed.

“It wasn’t like that!” Peter argued, feeling the stress of the night finally start to hit him. Everything that had happened.

His body burned, but it wasn’t from the sickness—in fact, he was already feeling much better—no,
it was something else; the same wild desperation was welling up inside of him again.

“Oh, so you didn’t lie? Didn’t sneak off to some bullshit party? You didn’t blind Friday? Yes, of course I know that was you!” Tony snapped, at Peter’s expression.

Peter felt his breathing begin to pick up as panic set in. The rational part of his brain that was still working screamed at him to keep his cool, to just apologize—that voice sounded disturbingly quiet compared to the roaring building in his veins.

“Those fucking Osborns!” Tony swore suddenly, teeth clenched as he paced angrily.

“Leave Harry out of it!” Peter snapped. “It wasn’t his fault!”

“Oh, so it wasn’t his party? It wasn’t him you snuck off with?” Tony said, voice rising.

Peter’s senses alerted him to someone else entering the room, but he couldn’t put the care into focusing on it. He was exhausted, and embarrassed, and more and more, he could feel his frustration swelling.

“It wasn’t—”

“And what if something happened tonight?” Tony cut him off, nearly yelling now. “I had no idea where you were! What if no one had called me? Did you even know where you were? Would you have been able to tell me? God, Peter!”

Peter felt himself shrink back as his insides filled with ice. He didn’t want to think about it—he didn’t want to—

“You’re barely sixteen! Jesus, how much did you even drink? What if someone had tried to take advantage of you?” Tony exclaimed.

Peter couldn’t register the tone of desperation Tony spoke in because of the way his own body shuddered as panic erupted inside him. He needed to get away, he needed everything to just stop. He looked up at Tony, suddenly so desperately angry.

“Where do you get off on lecturing me about drinking!” Peter heard himself shouting.

A now-very-quiet part of his mind was begging him to shut up.

“Excuse me?” Tony said, eyes narrowing dangerously.

“You’re such a hypocrite!” Peter snarled, driven on by the sudden rush of adrenaline and confused emotions. “The pot calling the kettle black much? You practically drown yourself in this shit every day! I go to one party and it’s the end of the world, but you act like a friggin’ alcoholic and—”

Peter shrugged flippantly, then turned his gaze to the bar in the corner of the room and pointed at it. “You don’t get to yell at me when it’s completely okay for you to drink until you’re face down on the floor!”

“Peter!” Steve snapped, voice aghast.

Peter froze, the interruption snapping him back into place, killing the volatile surge inside him. He blinked and turned to see both Steve and Bucky near the hallway. Steve looked shocked and a bit horrified—Peter couldn’t get a read on Bucky, but it didn’t matter because—‘oh, god’—the teen choked, feeling his throat constrict as the last couple of seconds replayed in his mind. He had no idea what happened to the anger that’d been fueling him mere seconds earlier, but it had vanished,
and in its place was the pure fear that had been driving it. Slowly, he turned to look back at Tony, and instantly recoiled.

Tony looked—well, he looked shocked, frozen in place as he gazed at Peter, wide-eyed. Peter’s eyes raked over his face, trying desperately to search for—for something. Peter’s heart clenched as panic built up again. For a moment, it didn’t even appear like Tony was breathing, but the next moment, Peter watched as he gasped, quiet and shuddering. He blinked a little too rapidly, and the teen watched his throat work as the man swallowed, and nodded a couple of times in short succession.

In his head, Peter screamed at himself to say something, do something, anything other than stand there dumbly, gaping at his own massive stupidity.

Without a word, Tony suddenly turned and walked over to the bar. He looked at the shelves of bottles on display, and then one by one, began to take them down and place them next to him on the counter.

Peter watched, frozen and mute, as Tony’s hands shook as he worked.

‘I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry—’

Peter opened his lips to speak, but his tongue was leaden in his mouth. His mind reeled, screaming at him, while his body seemed to exist on a separate plane of uncooperative shock.

“You’re right.”

Peter flinched when Tony’s voice broke through the heavy silence. His voice, though strangely soft, sounded deafening to Peter.

“Tony…” Steve said, sounding wounded.

“Though, I—I don’t ‘act like an alcoholic,’” Tony continued, as he began unscrewing and uncorking the tops from the bottles he’d removed. “There’s no—no acting involved. I am one.”

Tony kept his back to the room the whole time he spoke, and Peter’s nose wrinkled and stomach flipped as the scent of the liquor hit him. He shook his head back and forth as Tony froze up again after the admission.

‘No, no, no, nonononono—I didn’t mean it—I didn’t—’

Tears pricked at his eyes as he shuddered, feeling helpless and mournful.

Tony suddenly went into motion again, picking up two bottles, one in each hand, and turned toward the small drainage sink and, without pausing, upturned them, letting the contents pour out.

It was that, of all things, that startled Peter into action, and the teen lunged forward, only to be stopped by a heavy metal hand on his shoulder, gently but firmly pulling him back.

He struggled against the hold, trying to get to Tony, he needed to apologize, he needed his Dad to know he was sorry.

Peter caught sight of Tony’s face finally and whimpered. He looked raw, and there was something a little wild, a little desperate, in the man’s eyes as he reached for the next bottles.

“I think it’s high time you went to bed,” Bucky said, his tone quiet but forceful as he led Peter
down the hall.

“No—no, I didn’t—I need to say sorry!” Peter begged as Bucky opened up his bedroom door and ushered the teen in.

“I think you've said quite enough for one night.”

Peter recoiled, as if slapped, and his eyes welled up again.

“I didn't mean it, I didn't—"

Bucky sighed. “Calm down. Listen, the both of you need some space to breathe. Go to bed, and tomorrow, you can craft the best damn apology we’ve ever seen.”

“But Tony—"

“Stevie’s with him. Go to bed.” Bucky threw him a pointed look.

Peter clenched his teeth and nodded, solemnly, standing stubbornly statue-stiff until Bucky left, closing the door behind him. Peter crumpled, letting out a wet sob. This was it. This was the step too far. Peter couldn't even understand his own actions. Thinking back was like looking back on the actions of a whole other person. Peter felt panicked and ashamed, his regret hanging heavy in his gut. He curled up on top of his bed, wrapping his hands around his knees, still in what was left of his suit. He kept going over the whole night in his head, again and again, all the way up to what he’d done, what he’d said.

It was completely out of line, unacceptable—unforgivable. He felt sick. Peter sniffled and wiped at his eyes, even as tears continued to escape. He needed to apologize, but words wouldn't be enough, he had to do something. Peter sniffed again as his new focus helped calm him slightly. Even if his—even if Tony could never forgive him, even if this was what finally drove Tony from his life, Peter had to at least try. So... he had to plan.

Peter grabbed his giant stuffed dog and held it close. What could he do? Breakfast? He wasn’t exactly Master Chef, but... Tony seemed to like it when he made things... at least, he’d eaten the sandwiches he’d made without making a grossed-out face. How hard could pancakes be? Or French toast? May and Steve made it all the time. Okay, so, breakfast. But what else? That wouldn’t be enough. Maybe he could clean the workshop? No, he wasn’t allowed in alone. Clean the penthouse? He was pretty sure Tony had cleaners, since the place never seemed to get too dusty or dirty. Then again, he hadn’t seen anyone like that. Maybe he had robots? That’d be cool—but off topic. Peter tried to collect his drifting thoughts, he needed to take this seriously. The armor... that’s right. Peter made a face—God, he’d forgotten about how he’d actually vomited on it earlier. Okay, so, yeah, he’d clean that up, too.

Peter laid himself down, still cuddling his dog, as exhaustion crept over him. That’s how he eventually drifted off to sleep, mind still trying to formulate apologies.

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Peter woke early that morning, his head throbbing from the emotional turmoil of the night before, and also possibly from the solid three hours of sleep he’d gotten. Peter groaned, but pulled himself out of bed. He felt gross from falling asleep in his clothes and quickly made his way to his bathroom to freshen up.

The penthouse was quiet when he walked out into the hall. There was a distinct air of sleep around, and Peter made extra sure, almost instinctively, to keep quiet, even though he was pretty sure the
Peter stopped dead when he got to the main lounge and saw the bar sitting in the corner of the room. Guilt rolled through him, making him flinch as he remembered his horrible words. The shelves of the bar were all empty, all the bottles on display were gone. The little lights above the glass shelves were dark. Peter crept closer and saw a big, black garbage bag sitting behind the counter. He peeked inside and saw it filled with empty liquor bottles.

Peter contemplated taking it away, but he didn’t know where he’d put it, and he also didn’t want to overstep. Instead, Peter backed away and went to the kitchen.

He took out his phone and looked up a pancake recipe, and got to work gathering all the ingredients and supplies.

He had just gotten past the step where he actually poured some of the batter onto the heated pan when the coffee machine next to him came to life with a beep, making the teen jolt.

Peter spun around and saw Bucky come into the room. His usual ruffled, somewhat-grumpy morning appearance seemed even more haggard than usual. Peter looked down, cheeks burning, feeling responsible. Bucky didn’t say anything as he grabbed his cup of coffee and went to sit at this usual spot at the island. Peter kept his head down, shoulders slumped. Bucky didn’t say a word to him, but that in itself wasn’t out of the ordinary; the man usually didn’t start speaking until his second cup. Peter was snapped out of his worry and shame by the smell of burning. He jolted and quickly tried to use the spatula to flip the cakes over. He was awful at it—the first one he flipped hit more of the side of the pan than the bottom, and the second one landed partially on top of the first, both cooked sides slightly blackened.

Peter swallowed thickly as he looked down at the pan. He couldn’t even get this right. He sniffled and angrily blinked back tears. Why couldn’t he do this one thing? Rationally, Peter knew messing up pancakes wasn’t worth the emotional upheaval he was feeling, but these were more than just pancakes. They were an apology—or, were supposed to be—but it looked as if they would just be another thing he messed up. That failure stung awfully.

Peter jumped when he heard Bucky suddenly sigh behind him. “Kid, what are you doing?” the man grumbled.

Peter turned to look at him. “I—I wanted—” he took a breath to try and calm his sudden influx of emotion. “I want to apologize. I thought—thought that maybe I could start by making—by making breakfast…”

He looked back to the pancakes and winced as he took them off the heat, dumping them straight into the trash with gritted teeth.

“Of course it’s not working,” Peter muttered, more to himself than Bucky. “I can’t even get this one thing—”

“Hey.” Bucky was suddenly right there, taking the pan from his hands and setting it on the stove. “You got more batter?”

Peter nodded and brought over the bowl he’d mixed it all in. Bucky took the mixing spoon and hummed at the consistency.

“This looks pretty good. Might cook a bit better if you add a tiny bit more milk.”

Peter got the message and dashed to the fridge to grab said milk, then brought it over to Bucky.
“Pour it in, slow, one spoonful at a time,” Bucky instructed, and Peter did as he was told.

Bucky mixed the batter as Peter added the milk, telling the teen to stop when he deemed it good enough. The rest of the process went much the same way, with Bucky instructing Peter on how to cook the pancakes, even going as far as asking if Peter wanted to make eggs, as well. Peter nodded and got out eggs and cheese; he at least knew how to make some good scrambled eggs.

“I thought you only made sandwiches,” Peter said as he grated the cheese into his egg mixture.

Bucky was silent for a moment, before shrugging. “Yeah, well, I’ve been bored, being cooped up in here. I gotta find hobbies—at least, that’s what I’m told.”

Peter nodded. He was dying to question Bucky on just why he was stuck hiding out, why those guys from before were after him, but he could read the tense posture the man had taken as he spoke, and Peter didn’t want to push it. He had enough to apologize for already.

“Hobbies are good,” he said instead, lamely.

Bucky snorted a quiet laugh, but nodded and flipped the pancakes.

“Hey, kid?”

“Yeah?”

“Just, uh—don’t tell Steve I helped you, yeah?”

“Oh, okay. Would—would he be mad?” Peter questioned, nervously.

Bucky shook his head. “Oh no, he’d be thrilled, but his cooking’s way better than mine, and I am not usually functional enough to cook in the mornings.”

He shot Peter a crooked smile, which the teen returned happily. Peter’s smile faltered soon after, though, as his insecurities made themselves known.

“Will—will Tony ever forgive me?” Peter asked suddenly, voice cracking.

Bucky turned to him and sighed. “Kid—”

Peter never got to hear the response, because that next second, a loud alarm was blaring through the tower. Bucky moved faster than Peter could comprehend, pushing him back and standing in front of him protectively as he scanned the room, knife clutched in his hand.

Peter couldn’t see much, apart from Bucky’s back, but he could hear the distinct sound of a door being thrown open and a rush of footsteps.

“Steve?” Bucky called out, voice tense.

The footsteps paused, and Peter could pick up bits of conversation.

“You go ahead, I’ll catch up.” That was definitely Steve.

Peter’s heart pounded in nervousness as the alarm continued to blare. What was happening? Were those guys back for Bucky?

“You sure?”
‘Dad!’

“Yeah, you suit up and get the jet ready.” Steve again.

Peter tried to move out from behind Bucky, but Bucky moved with him, bringing an arm back to hold Peter still as he waited.

He heard the sound of the elevator, and then someone running toward them. Steve burst into the room, still in his pajamas, looking disheveled.

“Buck!”

“What’s going on?” Bucky demanded.

“It’s okay,” Steve said, and just as he did, the alarm cut out.

Bucky looked around, suspicious.

“That’s the assembly alarm. The Avengers are needed. I—I need to go—I don’t know how long we’ll be gone.”

Bucky nodded and, though still tense, set down the knife and moved from his spot in front of Peter.

Steve looked a little surprised, then nodded. “We’ll be back as soon as we can.” He smiled at Peter, then. “Save us some breakfast for later!”

And then he was gone.

Peter stared at the empty space where Steve had just been for a moment, before deflating. He looked to his food on the stove and sighed.

“Never mind, I guess.”

Bucky looked to Peter, then to the breakfast which was halfway plated, and squared his shoulders. He walked over to the cupboards and procured a couple of plates, and began loading them up with pancakes and eggs.

“Here, come on, sit,” Bucky said, placing the plate of food in front of Peter’s usual spot.

Peter hesitated, not looking convinced, but eventually he sighed and sat down in front of the meal, though his shoulders remained slumped and his face somewhat morose as he began picking at his food.

Bucky watched Peter to make sure some of the food was actually making it to his mouth, then dug in to his own plate.

“Not bad, kid, not bad at all,” Bucky said after a taking a big bite of the pancakes and eggs.

Peter smiled and looked up, shyly. “It’s okay?”

Bucky nodded and helped himself to another pancake. “We’ll wrap up what’s left over so Tony can have some when they all get back,” he said.

Peter nodded, then paused with his fork halfway to his mouth, looking contemplative.

“Do you think they’ll be back soon? My spidey-senses weren’t going off before the alarm—”
“Danger must be elsewhere.”

Peter nodded. “So what if they don’t come back today? Old pancakes are never as good, and—and I don’t want to give D—Tony stale pancakes. This—this was supposed to be an apology, it has to be good!”

Bucky was silent for a moment, then he nodded. “I’ll text Steve to tell him to let me know when they’re on their way back. Then I’ll help you make more.”

Peter perked up. “Really?”

Bucky nodded. “Yeah.”

“Thanks, Bucky,” Peter said. “I-I really—” he cut himself off to sniffle back tears; he’d cried more than enough last night, thank you.

“Hey, it’s, uh, it’s okay, kid,” Bucky said, a little awkwardly.

Peter was quiet for a moment, reflecting on all his own anxieties and remorse over the previous night.

“Do—do you think Tony will forgive me? I know—I know I was awful—I don’t know what came over me, I just—” Peter sniffled again. “I’m so sorry.”

Bucky sighed. “Peter, I’m not going to lie to you, you crossed a line last night.”

Peter flinched.

“But, it’s obvious you regret what happened, and that you’re trying to make it better. Tony will see that. Plus, he cares about you a lot, kid.”

Peter looked up, hopefully.

“You done eating?”

He nodded.

“Then let’s pack this up for later.”

---

Peter was lounging on the couch, tired after cleaning off the armor he’d soiled the night before; so when Bucky told him he’d never seen *Star Wars*, Peter knew how they were spending the afternoon. Episode VI was just wrapping up when his phone began buzzing.

**Harry: Hey…**

**Harry:** *Listen, I get it if you never want to talk to me again after last night. I just wanted to make sure you’re okay*

**Harry:** *and to apologize again. That shouldn’t have happened.*

Peter bit his lip as he read over the texts. He didn’t understand what Harry had to apologize for. He hadn’t done anything wrong.

**Peter:** *Harry, you don’t need to apologize*

**Harry:** *Can I call you?*
Peter looked over to Bucky, who was sitting, staring at the TV screen intently. Peter got up and began to leave, as quietly as possible.

“Where you going?” Bucky questioned, not taking his eyes off the TV.

“Call from a friend.”

Bucky nodded, and Peter hurried from the room.

**Peter: Go for it.**

Not five seconds later, Peter’s phone was ringing—his standard ringtone, since he hadn’t set a personalized one for Harry yet.

“Hey,” Peter said, quick to answer.

He heard a heavy sigh of relief.

“Hey, Peter,” Harry said, sounding tired.

“Harry, I’m—”

“Listen, I’m—” they both said in unison.

Both teens stopped, and Peter laughed, lowly. “Uh, you first?” he said.

There was a moment of silence before Harry spoke up again.

“I just… I wanted to say sorry again.”

“You don’t have to though, Harry—”

“Peter—” Harry began to protest.

“No, really!” Peter insisted. “If anything, I should be thanking you. You got me out of a bad situation. If anyone should apologize, it’s me, for ruining your party.”

Harry groaned. “Don’t you dare!”

“But—”

“No.”

Peter huffed, but a small smile tugged at his lips.

There was a beat of silence, before Peter heard Harry begin laughing over the line.

“What? What is it?” Peter demanded.

“Are we—are we *actually* arguing over who is most at fault right now and blaming ourselves?”

Harry’s laughter was a little infectious, and soon, Peter was giggling along with him.

“Well, when you put it like that…” Peter said.

“God, Pete,” Harry said, voice fond.
“Seriously though, Harry, thank you.”

“You don’t have to thank me, Peter. You—I shouldn’t have—” Harry cut himself off with a sigh.

“It wasn’t your fault he showed up and—” Peter started, but Harry cut him off.

“But I invited you there. I should have paid closer attention to make sure you were safe.”

“I shouldn’t have accepted that drink.”

“No, probably not, but that still doesn’t make it your fault.”

Peter was silent for a moment. “Yeah, fine, but if it wasn’t my fault, then it wasn’t your fault, either. It was his.”

“I… I can’t argue with that one,” Harry agreed.

Another bout of silence fell between them, just long enough to become awkward. Harry eventually broke it as he cleared his throat and said, “Listen, Peter, like I said before, if you’re uncomfortable around me at all—”

“Harry, I’m not uncomfortable around you, like, at all, so—shh!”

“Did… did you just shush me?” Harry laughed.

“Yes!”

“All right then, brace-face—”

“Hey! I don’t have braces anymore!” Peter argued in amusement.

“Yeah, okay, fine, but you’re still a nerd,” Harry laughed again.

Peter rolled his eyes in good humor, even though his friend couldn’t see it.

“Anyway, I’d better go,” Peter said, regretfully.

“Yeah, okay. Talk later?”

Peter smiled. “Definitely.”

---

After Peter said goodbye to Harry, he felt marginally better. At least he knew he wasn’t going to lose the friend he’d just found over this. Or… he hoped not. It wasn’t exactly a secret how much Tony loathed anything Osborn. Peter sighed. He’d just have to get May on board—she’d be able to see Harry wasn’t anyone bad.

Peter paused his thought process. Until he could properly apologize to Tony, none of that mattered. For all he knew, Tony could come back and demand Peter pack his things and get out. He felt suddenly nauseated.

No, he couldn’t panic. He had to stay focused.

Peter left his bedroom and went back out into the main room. The movie must have ended while he was on the phone, because Bucky was sitting and watching the news instead. Peter paused before
he sat down, realizing it was a live broadcast of The Avengers. The teen felt a thrill go through him.

“What’s the story?” he asked Bucky.

“Giant robots attacking L.A.”

“Cool.”

Bucky sent him a side-eyed glance.

“Well, not, like—I mean, it’s bad stuff is getting wrecked—no one’s been hurt, right?”

“Dunno yet,” Bucky shrugged, then smirked. “Calm down, kid.”

Peter breathed and nodded. “Do we know who made them?”

Bucky shook his head. “Not yet.”

Peter nodded, settling in to watch.

The camera focused in on Steve, who was mid-grapple with one of the large robots, the machine’s spindly limbs beating against his shield. Peter saw his head pop up, and then he suddenly dove right, just as Sam flew down, blowing off one of the robot’s legs with a well-aimed explosive.

“YEAH!” Peter cheered, jumping up from the sofa with a bounce.

He cheered again as Steve leapt at the robot with his shield, slamming the edge of it into a weak point in its defense.

Bucky glanced at Peter in amusement, but didn’t say anything as the teen continued to watch, wide-eyed, completely focused on the TV.

Peter was immediately absorbed in the fight, his whole body twitching in the direction he thought the current Avenger on screen should move or dodge. He nearly caught himself making explosion noises and sound effects over the actual audio coming out of the speakers.

Steve was suddenly outnumbered as another five robots ran onto the scene. He dove to the right again to avoid an incoming hit; however, another robot tracked his movements and smacked him hard, sending him flying backward.

“You're ambidextrous! Now, you stupid punk, stop favoring your right side, goddamnit!” Bucky hissed, watching.

Peter spared Bucky a quick look, before fixating back on the TV, where Steve and now Clint were working to take out the remaining robots. They were on the last two when the camera suddenly veered up and zoomed in on something in the air. Peter frowned until the camera focused and—he felt his insides turn to ice, even as his skin pricked hotly in feverish panic, the ringing in his ears growing louder and louder until he was deaf to anything else. He was confused and startled; the cameras hadn't captured what had lead up to this moment. Where was Falcon, or Hulk, or—or someone who could—Peter’s whole body shivered, and he couldn't contain the terrified sound that escaped past his lips at the sight of Iron Man falling from the sky.

Chapter End Notes
I'm so sorry...

Please follow my Tumblr for updates and fandom content or drop by my ask box if you have any questions!

Kudos and comments are life fuel!
Chapter Thirty-Two

Chapter Notes

Hey all!
/Crawls out from under protective shields/
The wait is over! Time to shine a little more light on recent events...and cliffhangers...

TW: Emotional turmoil, extreme emotional turmoil, violence.

Please enjoy the new chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony circled over the ground team, scanning the alleys and buildings to communicate incoming robots. He would much rather have taken a more active role in the fight, but the cloaking tech on the bots meant his armor’s radar was blind to them. At the moment, both he and Sam were most helpful relaying information back to the rest of the team.

“Cap,” Sam said. “Dive out of the way on three, and I’ll blast him.”

Tony scanned the ground and saw Steve grappling with a large bot.

“Who made these things, anyway?” Clint complained.

“I have Friday gathering intel,” Tony said. “Should know more by the time we wrap this up.”

He paused when he saw more bots converging on Steve.

“He Cap, you’ve got incoming. Cap needs backup, guys.”

“I’m escorting civilians to the evac zone!” Natasha called in.

“I’m on it!” Clint said, and Tony could see the archer begin running toward Steve’s location.

“How are you on those civilians, Widow?” Tony asked, unable to see the convoy.

“About to leave the apartment complex they were holed up in—the big green one, you got eyes for me?”

Tony spotted the apartment in question and flew in for a closer look.

“Smoke obscuring the left side and roof of the building. Front and right are clear. I can try coming in closer to inspect the obscured areas.”

“I don’t want to move these people into a trap,” Natasha agreed.

“Hang tight. Falcon, eyes wide, I’m going in,” Tony relayed through his com, so that Sam would know it’d be up to him to watch the field.

Tony flew low and circled the tall building hoping to see through the smoke. Friday was able to blueprint what should be there, but that didn't help him figure out if there was anything lurking in
the smoke. He was just going to have to fly in.

“You see anything?” Natasha asked.

“Not from up here. I'm going to have to get up and close.”

“Well, you are the tech genius, as you keep reminding us,” Clint huffed.

Tony ignored him. He was already feeling irritated enough that whoever built these planned around his anti-stealth tech, which meant whoever sent these had planned on the Avengers possibly showing up to try and quell the chaos. He hated it when the bad guys showed brains. Well, sort of. Tony had already pinpointed many weak spots in the robots’ designs and had relayed them to his team to take advantage of; in fact, the stealth tech seemed to be the most advanced part of the robotics, which just struck Tony as a little lazy. Okay, so maybe he was feeling a little salty, as Peter would say.

‘Peter…’

Tony’s chest clenched within the protective armor as he made a sweep down the smoke-filled alley. He was furious, and that kid was going to be grounded probably until his next birthday for scaring him like he had, but Tony also felt an intense shame, because on a certain level, he knew Peter was right. He hadn’t been setting the best example when it came to his drinking.

Sure, at first, Tony had tried not to indulge in front of the teen, but after a while, as they grew more comfortable around one another, that standard slipped and dissolved. Of course, Tony never got drunk around him—not intentionally, anyway, Peter had found him passed out cold, but that’d been special circumstances—no, no more excuses. Tony hadn’t meant for Peter to see that, but it didn’t change the fact that it had happened, that it had happened before and, until last night, had a high chance of happening again. After his argument with Peter, Tony had gone through not just the penthouse, but most of the other living quarters in the tower too, purging any and all liquor he could find, the only exception being Natasha’s personal rooms. Steve was a constant presence at his side the entire time, helping him dispose of everything they found. Bucky, too, quietly joined them after putting Peter to bed.

Tony hadn’t slept last night, too busy feeling pissed off and distraught, at Osborn, at Peter, at himself—especially himself, and the fact that his hands shook from how badly he had wanted to pour himself a strong glass of… well, anything. The loud assembly alarm was the only thing that broke him out of his mental spiral. Even now, Tony felt distracted and twitchy. He knew, logically, that he’d gone much longer without a drink without much thought, but somehow, the knowledge that he was done, the conscious effort and awareness that he’d already sipped from his last glass, brought out his cravings full force. Tony knew it was more psychological than physical at this point (and boy, was he not looking forward to going through the physical withdrawals), but it didn’t help neutralize the craving.

Tony sighed as he made a final pass through the alley.

“Widow, the alley’s clear. Get the civilians on evac before the fire engulfs the building,” Tony said after scouring the alley for hidden enemies.

“Copy, heading out of the building. Falcon, you have a route for me?” Natasha said.

“Head west. There’re some structural obstacles, but the action’s further south now,” Sam replied.

“Got it. Moving out.”
Tony listened to the chatter as he flew up the side of the building, ready to take back his position as the team’s eyes. He just reached the rooftop when Friday alerted him to movement in the smoke, a swirling vortex—a long robotic limb was shooting out through the haze.

It wrapped around his leg like a snake and yanked him from the sky. Before he could so much as register the attack, Tony was being slammed down hard onto the rooftop. He fired off a repulsor blast from his gauntlets and tried to escape, but the robot didn’t let go. Instead, it tightened its grip around his leg, and red warning lights began flashing on his HUD. Tony hissed when he felt his suit giving in, putting pressure on the flesh of his leg—not yet feeling pain, but it was threatening. He fired both repulsors together, driving the robot off of him and forcing it to release him or lose its limb. Luckily, it decided it would rather remain intact, and Tony immediately straightened out.

He noticed the flight stabilizers in his boot were damaged as the suit lurched and wavered in the air. The robot lunged for him, and Tony was barely able to evade.

“Friday, I need this repaired!” Tony said, just before he was struck down again.

“Working on it, Boss! Maybe try not getting hit?”

“Oh ha-ha,” Tony snapped back to the AI as he fired off a small explosive.

The robot twitched and struggled to stand as most of its body was blown into shrapnel. Tony aimed another explosive, but was thrown off when he was hit from behind with a force that sent him spiraling. Something was clinging to him, pulling him down, tearing into the back of his suit. Warnings screamed in his ears and flashed on his screen as he struggled to throw off his attacker. Tony finally wrenched himself free and spun, blasting repulsor fire blindly in the direction he hoped the robot was in. Something wrapped around his leg once more, and Tony turned to blast the struggling remains of the first robot. He fired up his boots just as he was snared again. The second robot used its three long finger-esque claws to crush his foot and drag him down, just as the claws on its other arm snapped together, forming a long, sharp spear.

“Friday! Unibeam repulsion!” Tony yelled.

“Redirecting power supplies!”

He heard the telltale sound of the beam firing up, even as the rest of his suit’s functions began to go offline. His eyes widened as the robot—

Light burst from the arc reactor violently in a concentrated beam that blinded Tony, and for a split second, he hovered in purgatory, unsure whether his attack worked, whether the robot was disintegrated, or—

Friday yelled something at him, but Tony didn’t catch what it was, because all of a sudden, there was pressure at his upper abdomen and—

The light went out, the suit’s power flickered.

The robot barely stood before him, half disintegrated. It staggered, and Tony felt sharp agony. Friday was still yelling in his ears, but he couldn’t quite make out her words. He looked down and—‘Oh.’

Tony wasn’t given the time to pull his thoughts together before the robot was tossing him. A scream echoed as metal was ripped from his body, just as the power in his suit went completely dead.
Then, the sensation of falling.

Tony’s thoughts rushed past him, almost too quick to grasp, but one circled and clung to him, filling him up with despair and terror.

He never said goodbye to Peter.

---

Peter stared at the television, his face a mask of horror as Tony fell, seemingly lifeless, from the sky. He couldn’t move, couldn’t think, couldn’t breathe—he could barely hear anything above the ringing in his ears, echoing through his skull.

There was motion to the left of the screen, as suddenly Thor was there, catching Tony, easing their descent. Peter felt a distressed, unbidden noise leave his throat as Tony seemed to remain limp in the Asgardian’s arms.

It was immediate chaos when Thor reached the ground. It must have only taken a second or two, but to Peter, it felt like a lifetime. The team was assembling; Hulk and Cap were destroying the final robots on the ground, while Hawkeye and Black Widow met Thor to assess Tony. Peter couldn’t see what was wrong with him based from the camera angle, but he clearly saw the way Hawkeye recoiled from whatever he saw.

Something in Peter broke in that instant. An overwhelming desperation took hold of him as he threw himself off the sofa and ran for the elevator—he had to get his suit, he had to get to the team, he had to help—his dad needed him!

Peter mashed the button for the workshop floor where he knew his suit was being kept, breath coming in gasps as he shook with fright.

“Peter, I can’t let you access the workshop without Mr. Stark present,” Friday said.

“No—no, no, no, no! Friday, take me down! My suit’s there!”

“I can take you to the floor, but the doors will remain locked.”

“They need my help!”

Peter burst out of the elevator as it hit the workshop floor, running to the sealed doors and yanking on them, fruitlessly.

“Friday, please!” he begged, throat constricting further as he choked back tears.

“Please calm down, Peter.”

“How can you say that! Tony’s hurt! He needs me!”

“I’m very much aware, Peter—”

Peter snarled and threw himself against the door, pulling with all his strength.

“Let me in!” he screamed, eyes widened and teeth bared in desperation.

“Peter!”

Hands gripped at Peter’s own, pulling him away from the door, urging him to let go.
“Come on, you’re just gonna hurt yourself, kid,” Bucky said, trying to find a balance of gripping Peter strongly enough to pull him away, but without not hurting him.

“Let go of me!” Peter spat through gritted teeth as he struggled. “I need my suit! I need to help!”

“Peter, you need to calm down and start thinking rationally!” Bucky snapped, finally pulling his hands from the door. “There’s nothing we can do! The team is all the way in LA, what happened has already happened, the fight’s over!”

“No!” Peter snapped stubbornly, still struggling against Bucky, though he seemed to have a little less fight in him.

“Peter, stop—Peter, stop it!” Bucky said as he spun the kid around to face him, placing both hands on his trembling shoulders.

Peter finally stilled, but Bucky tensed when he saw Peter’s cheeks, wet from tears, his eyes welling up again with emotion.

“I—I can’t just sit here! He—he’s hurt—”

“Peter, we don’t know what’s wrong right now. Yeah, maybe Tony’s hurt, or maybe his suit malfunctioned, but right now we just don’t know. We need to wait for—”

“No! He needs me!” Peter yelled, again trying to pull away from Bucky’s grasp, unsuccessfully.

“Peter, enough—please stop!” Bucky said, and Peter could hear the strain entering the man’s voice now.

“Why won’t you let me go! Don’t you care?”

“Don’t!” Bucky snapped suddenly, his hands tightening. “Don’t you dare say I don’t care!”

Peter froze, and took the time to really, actually look at Bucky. He’d been so overwhelmed by his own panic that he hadn’t stopped to consider Bucky at all. Bucky held a serious and intense expression, but it was his eyes that were the most telling—they were a reflection of Peter’s own fear back him.

Peter felt his lips tremble as the helpless feeling that’d been building in him finally burst, and he crumpled in on himself with violent sobs. He reached out and gripped the front of Bucky’s shirt, as if it was the only thing stopping him from falling to the floor. There was a pause where Peter simply wept, head bowed, before he felt Bucky move his arms to encircle him, hesitant and slow at first, and then all at once, Bucky was pulling Peter close, ensconcing him in his arms. Peter clung to him, and buried his head against the man’s chest as he continued to cry shamelessly.

“I—I didn’t say s-sorry—what if—what if I can’t ever tell him? It’s not fair—it’s not fair!”

“Hey, shh, don’t talk like that,” Bucky said. “You’ll tell him, and he’ll smile, maybe ground you for a week or so, and that’ll be that.”

Peter shook his head. “He fell, he—what if—” Peter cut himself off, this time with another sob. “I’m cursed,” he mourned, feeling the desperation rising again.

“What d’you mean, ‘cursed’? You’re not cursed, Pete.”

“Everyone I love dies!” Peter yelled, backing out of Bucky’s hold. “My parents died, Ben died, and
now Tony’s—"

“Tony isn’t dead!” Bucky shouted harshly.

Peter flinched and curled in on himself, trying fruitlessly to suppress his tears.

He heard Bucky let out an almost inaudible sigh. “I’m sorry for shouting. Peter, kid, listen—you’re not cursed. None of this is your fault. You’ve lost a lot, and it’s awful, and I’m so sorry you’ve had to suffer through it, but none of it—and I mean none of it—is your fault.”

Peter couldn’t bring himself to look up at Bucky. His words drove into Peter’s chest and felt simultaneously relieving and incredibly painful, the feeling reminding him of when he was a kid, and would bite down on his loose teeth.

“Okay?” Bucky prompted.

Peter nodded, though he wasn’t totally convinced.

“I-I never said sorry,” Peter repeated quietly, tears still falling down his cheeks, though the gut-wrenching sobbing had mostly turned into shivers. “I wanted to so badly. I froze.”

“Peter…”

“I said all those horrible things and didn’t even apologize! Or tell him that he was right! He was right and I was scared, and angry, and I—and I just snapped!”

“What was Tony right about, Peter?” Bucky asked, frowning.

“I was so, so stupid!” Peter moaned, not answering the question, his voice cracking with emotion, his trembling growing worse again. “I want him back. I-I want to say I’m sorry—I want—” Peter broke, letting another sob escape past his lips. “I can’t lose him too—I can’t do it—”

Bucky pulled Peter back against him as the teen continued to repeat his last words like a mantra. Bucky lowered them both onto the floor, and Peter clutched the man tightly, almost childishly. He knew a part of him would’ve usually felt embarrassed over his actions, but at that particular moment, he was only interested in the small bit of comfort and relief he felt with Bucky holding on to him.

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Bucky sat unnaturally still, his phone clutched in his fist. The poor device creaked ominously under threat of being crushed. He’d waited with barely-contained nervous stress until Peter had exhausted himself into a rough sleep, and then he had carried the teen back to his bed and promptly called Steve. The call had led only to Steve’s voicemail, so with a frustrated sigh, Bucky hung up and called again, then again, and again, and—well, he’d been trying to get through for nearly an hour. He didn’t know how much longer he could wait, not knowing what had happened to Tony, what condition he was in. He felt trapped, caged—and was in the middle of debating whether he should just grab the kid and make for California, when the phone in his hand began to buzz and ring.

The phone was to his ear before the first ring ended.

“Steve?” he questioned, standing up, his voice laced with worry. He strained his ears against the silence on the other line.
“Steve?” he tried again, voice growing an octave louder.

There was a burst of light static across the line as Steve breathed out, then, “Buck.”

Bucky paused, taken aback and driven into a near panic at how exhausted Steve sounded. He swallowed thickly and steeled himself, dredging up years of training on how to mask his emotions to help him remain at least outwardly calm.

“Steve, what happened?” he began. “I saw the news, what happened to Tony?”

“I—” Steve paused again, and Bucky’s gut clenched when next he spoke. “The team’s trying to figure that out. The consensus now is that he must have been ambushed, but we won’t know the full story until we’re able to talk to Tony himself, or Friday,” Steve said, putting on his Captain Voice.

“What do you mean, until you’re able to talk to Tony? Why can’t you talk to him—Steve, stop bullshitting me, what’s going on?” Bucky demanded.

“Bucky—Tony, he—it’s bad, Buck,” Steve finally admitted, quietly.

“How bad?” Bucky asked through clenched teeth, trying to keep his turmoil at bay. “And don’t you dare lie to me or feed me half-truths. I want to know what’s happening.”

Bucky heard Steve breathe in deeply.

“When I saw him, I thought—I thought it was already too late, that he was…”

“But he wasn’t—he isn’t!”

“I—no.”

“What?”

“We got him help as soon as we could—I don’t think we could have worked faster, but—he’d already lost a lot of blood, and—the paramedics had to resuscitate him once, right after we got to the hospital…” Steve’s voice wavered and cracked, then he breathed again. “They brought him into emergency surgery, I—we’re waiting for news now.”

Bucky stood frozen. Tony was… Tony’s heart had stopped. He had died.

“I’ll be there as quickly as possible, I can grab a quinjet and—”

“Bucky, no!” Steve’s Captain Voice was back in an instant, firm and commanding. “This place is crawling with government agents, taking our statements and cleaning up the mess we left. It’s way too dangerous for you to be here, you’d be caught and—”

“Tony needs us to—!”

“Tony needs to know that you’re safe! How do you think he’d feel if the first thing he heard is that you’d been arrested?”

Bucky rolled his shoulders back, jaw twitching in stubbornness.

“Please, Buck—I can’t—I need to know you’re safe, too.” Steve’s voice was quiet and resigned, and not at all like how it should sound.
It made Bucky pause.

“You’re gonna have to deal with the kid,” he said finally, with a heavy sigh.

“Peter?”

“The kid and I saw the fight on the news.”

“Is he okay?”

“He—he didn’t take too well to seeing his dad get hurt. It took a while to calm him down. He’s asleep now, but I doubt he’ll stay that way for long, he was in too much of a state earlier.” Bucky paused. “He’s going to wanna be there, Stevie. I don’t think anything you say is going to convince him not to go.”

“How’d he even get here?” Steve mused.

Bucky huffed. “Please. Pete would hitchhike if he had to.”

Steve hummed. “Yeah, that’s not happening.”

Bucky laughed, humorlessly. “I’m not sure he’s gonna listen to anything other than, ‘Yes.’”

“I’ll call his aunt, explain the situation and try to arrange something,” Steve said at last. “I don’t know if this is the place for a kid, but if Peter wants to be here, then I don’t have the authority to stop him. Plus, it’s only natural for him to want to be here for his dad.”

Bucky nodded along to Steve’s words. “You have May’s number?”

“Yeah. Or, well—someone does, I’m sure.”

“Okay.”

There was another pause.

“I’m sorry, Buck. I’m so sorry.”

“For what?” Bucky asked, trying to swallow down the rough, scratchy tone his voice had taken.

“I should have been able to help, to stop it from—”

“No, no, you don’t get to take responsibility for this.”

“I m—”

“I don’t give a shit. Stop it,” Bucky grumbled.

Another heavy silence infiltrate the line.

“Go, call the kid’s aunt. But Steve, the moment—the very second you hear from the doctors—you call me, all right?” Bucky demanded.

“Yeah, I promise,” Steve agreed.

---

Peter jolted awake with a gasp, his heart hammering a rapid beat against his ribs as his instincts
urged him of danger. He was wide awake before he was really aware. Peter tried to take stock of
his surroundings—he was in his room at the Avengers Tower, his head was throbbing something
awful, and his eyes felt swollen and sore, and—Peter’s heart skipped a beat as everything came
back to him. Tony was hurt. He watched his dad fall—

He was scrambling out of bed in the next instant. He had to get ready and find a way to get to
where Tony was.

Peter quickly grabbed his backpack and emptied it of his old schoolwork and books, then began
stuffing it with clothes. From his desk, Ben beeped, curiously.

“Sorry buddy, I can’t bring you with me this time,” Peter said, voice rough from crying.

Ben let out a long, low beep, and showcased a sad face on his display.

“I’m sorry, but I need to travel light, and—” Peter was interrupted by a knock at the door.

“You awake, kiddo?” Bucky’s voice filtered through the door.

Peter hurried over and let the other in. Bucky immediately eyed the bag on Peter’s bed and sighed.

“Listen, I know—” Peter began again, but stopped when Bucky shook his head.

“It’s okay, kid. I talked to Steve—”

“Is Tony okay?” Peter demanded, feeling a desperate panic well up in him.

“He took a pretty bad hit,” Bucky said, honestly. “He’s in surgery now.”

Peter felt his fear grow stronger. ‘Surgery—’

“Steve spoke to your aunt. She’s on her way over to take you to the airport, where you’ll be
meeting Pepper. You’ll both be taking a Stark Industries jet to LA,” Bucky continued.

“What about you?” Peter asked, but immediately tore his gaze away, wincing sympathetically at
the hurt that flittered over Bucky’s face.

The room was filled with a pregnant silence.

“You know…” he started, catching sight of Ben again. “Ben gets real lonesome on his own.”

Peter walked back over to his desk, scooping up the small robot and passing it to Bucky, who
looked marginally startled. The man held Ben awkwardly away from himself, as if he were afraid
the robot might break.

“Could you keep an eye on him for me?”

“Uhh,” Bucky said, obviously thrown off kilter. “So… do I, like, feed it or something?”

Peter felt a slight grin twitch at his lips, despite his mixed feelings.

“No, just talk to him and make sure he gets on his charger at night. It’s this thing right over here,
you can move it to your room if it’s easier,” Peter said, pointing out the charging dock.

Peter nodded back. He felt a wave of guilt over leaving Bucky behind, but maybe Ben’s company would help a bit.

“Sorry to interrupt, but May Parker is on her way up,” Friday said.

Peter jolted, and the feelings of dread descended on him with a vengeance. He grabbed his bag and slung it over his shoulder, then darted for the door.

“You got everything?” Bucky checked.

Peter nodded distractedly as the two made their way to the living room. The elevator dinged, and May rushed into the room when the doors slid open.

“Oh, Peter!” she exclaimed, opening her arms.

Peter couldn’t have stopped himself from hugging her if he tried. The warmth of her embrace and the familiar way she stroked his curls had his lip wobbling as he tried to sniffle back more tears.

“Oh honey, I’m so sorry,” May whispered soothingly. “Come on, let’s get you to the airport, hmm?”

Peter nodded and stepped out of her embrace.

“Thank you for looking after him,” she addressed Bucky, who was lingering by the hall. The man nodded, and May turned her attention back to Peter in an instant.

“Come on, car’s waiting.”

“Thanks Bucky,” Peter said as he was led into the elevator.

Bucky nodded. “See you around, kid,” he said, as Ben waved and beeped from his hands.

“Bye Ben,” Peter said, trying to smile for the bot.

Ben whistled, continuing to wave at him until the elevator doors closed.

---

Happy was waiting for them when Peter and May got down to the garage. The older man had a serious look on his face, and was waiting by one of the black SI company cars, ready to go.

“Hey kid, Mrs. Parker, all ready to go?” the man asked. Peter noted how his usually gruff voice was a tad gentler than normal, though he was too shaken to pay it much appreciation.

May nodded and thanked Happy as he opened the back door for them. She never took her arm away from Peter the entire way to the airport. He was a little surprised when Happy didn’t drop them off in front of the building, but instead, pulled around a sideway, pausing once to show his ID at a checkpoint, and then a few minutes later, they were on the runway heading toward a large jet with Stark Industries painted on its side.

Happy parked some distance away and immediately exited the car to open their door. Peter noticed Happy open the trunk and pull out another bag.

“I’ll bring your bag up for you, Mrs. Parker,” he said, though May shook her head.

“That’s quite all right. Thank you, Happy.” She smiled, politely.
“Bag? You’re coming with me?” Peter asked, feeling confused.

“Of course, Pete,” May said with a slight frown.

“But—but what about work?”

“I took some time off for a family emergency,” May said. “Stop worrying about that now, let’s just get to L.A.”

Peter nodded, though the frown never quite left his brow.

Miss Potts was already on the plane and rose to greet the both of them. She looked like she’d just left straight from a business meeting—in her sharp-looking suit and impeccable hair and makeup—then again, Peter didn’t think he’d ever seen her look anything less than her best before.

“May, Peter,” she said and gave them each a quick hug. “It’s nice to see the both of you again,” the woman paused, and noticeably swallowed and blinked; the only tell on her face before her small smile was back. “Though, I wish it was under more pleasant circumstances. Please, make yourselves comfortable, we’ll be taking off shortly now.”

“Thank you Pepper,” May said, smiling. “We really appreciate you offering to take us along.”

Peter found himself unable to return the niceties, and at any other time, he’d be afraid of May scolding him for being rude, but at the moment, he was simply too overwhelmed and exhausted to put any energy behind anything more than a small nod of acknowledgement.

Luckily, neither of the women seemed to mind, and in only a few moments, they were seated and buckled as the plane began take off.

Peter couldn’t have really said how the trip was. It was both short and yet felt like it took forever before they were descending on LAX airport. Peter had spent the entire time going over variables, weighing theories, and trying very hard to keep a lid on his erratic emotions.

The entire rest of the way to the hospital passed in a blur. In fact, Peter didn’t have any recollection of it at all; it was like he blinked and suddenly, May was gently urging him out of the car and into the large building.

Peter had never liked hospitals, but after gaining his powers, he really hated them. The repugnant smell of disinfectant hit him full force, as did the sounds—the beeping of machinery, the crying and moaning of patients and worried loved ones, the chatter of nurses and doctors, the televisions that were always a little static-y, despite how modern they appeared—it was always just so much all at once.

Peter shuddered as his gut clenched. He wondered if his dad hated hospitals as much as he did. His throat suddenly felt constricted, like an invisible force was choking him—

“—eter. Peter—honey? Hey, look at me.”

Peter blinked and stared at May, who had moved into his line of sight.

“Sorry,” he croaked, while trying to swallow down the tight, panicky feeling.

“Shh, don’t apologize. Look, Pepper’s back, I think the nurse is going to show us where to go.”

Peter followed the three, never straying from May’s side as they were led down the hall by the
nurse, who had already apologized for not being able to give them any information, beyond that Tony was still processed as in surgery.

The information had nearly driven Peter into another panic attack as his brain tried to fly through calculations. It’d been hours since the battle, since his dad had been presumably rushed in for care. Just how serious were his injuries?

They turned a final corner, and were shown into a small waiting room lined with stiffly-padded chairs, half of which were already occupied by the members of the Avengers. Well, half of them; Steve, Thor and Bruce were notably absent, as were Wanda, Vision and Rhodey, who hadn’t been on the mission.

Natasha was up the moment they walked in, and drew Peter into a hug, placing a soft kiss to his cheek. She whispered something even softer in his ear in Russian, before backing away and leading him to a chair.

Clint nodded and clapped him lightly on the shoulder. Sam was sitting with his arm in a sling, looking grim, but tried to shoot a smile at the three newcomers, though it didn’t look anywhere near as cheerful as Peter was used to.

“We haven’t heard anything yet,” Natasha said.

“Where’s Steve?” May asked. “I thought he’d be here.”

Clint let out an angry and derisive snort. “Being debriefed, asshole suits wouldn’t wait.”

Both Pepper’s and May’s faces took on a pinched, angry look.

“Thor?” May asked.

“Went to grab us all something to drink,” Sam said.

May nodded and settled into her seat next to Peter.

Time passed agonizingly slowly, and Peter couldn’t help but get flashes of the last time he and his aunt had sat together in a hospital waiting room, waiting desperately for news.

He nearly jolted when Thor finally returned, carrying two plastic bags full of snack foods and drinks.

“Son of Stark!” Thor gasped, seeing Peter, and let the bags fall from his hands with a smack.

Sam had, at one point, weeks ago, tried to explain that Peter wasn’t actually Tony’s son, but Thor had only looked at the man, bemused, before shaking his head and laughing in disbelief. Nothing had been able to convince the god that Peter and Tony were unrelated, and quite honestly, Peter had never tried to correct him himself. It was a small guilty pleasure, hearing someone else proclaim him as Tony’s son—something that existed outside his own head and feelings. He wondered if Tony had ever tried to set Thor straight…

Thor rushed over to Peter and knelt in front of him, breaking the boy from his thoughts.

“I wish we could meet again under happier tidings,” the man said, his face turning mournful as he continued, “I am most regretful that I was unable to help in the battle for this great city sooner.” He took one of Peter’s hands and squeezed lightly.
Peter felt a flash of anger. Why hadn’t Thor been there? Then Peter shivered and went limp, anger fading as fast as it appeared, leaving only a helpless desperation in its wake. He wasn’t angry at Thor, and he knew the Asgardian would never abandon his friends in battle. His emotions were just all over the place.

“Thank you for—” Peter’s voice broke. “—For catching him,” he finished, weakly.

Thor looked impossibly sad for a moment, then nodded and gave Peter’s hand one last squeeze, before backing off, returning to the bags he’d dropped and searching through them. He passed out the provisions he’d collected, starting with Peter, and made his way around the room, leaving the leftovers on a small wooden coffee table, half covered in untouched magazines. The team nibbled on the snacks without enthusiasm. Peter only stared at the treats in his lap, though he knew he probably should have been hungry. His lack of appetite was so strong that the mere smell of the other food made him feel slightly queasy.

“You should eat,” May said softly, but Peter merely shook his head.

His aunt sighed quietly, but she didn’t sound put-out—more resigned, and she didn’t bother to urge him.

Sometime later, Steve appeared, and he looked more haggard than Peter had ever seen him. He smiled at them, gaze lingering on Peter, tired empathy and something pained lined his eyes and face, before his attention was snapping back to his team.

“What?” he asked, voice measured.

Natasha shook her head silently, and Steve breathed out through his nose, eyes sliding closed, but only for a moment, before his face was clearing. Despite his obvious exhaustion, Steve remained standing at parade rest, from a position where he could see the room and just out of the alcove of the waiting room clearly.

Peter fell back into his own thoughts. What had happened during the battle? What was wrong with his dad? Why was the surgery taking so long? Was it normal for surgeries to take a long time? Would Peter even be welcomed in to visit, or was Tony still going to be mad at him? Peter winced. Of course he was going to be, Peter hadn’t even apologized yet—he stiffened. What if he never got to? What if his last words to his dad were shouted in anger, were stupid accusations? Peter nearly wasn’t able to choke down the sob that wanted to break him. He wasn’t going to start crying, not now, not here. He shivered. He didn’t care if Tony never wanted to speak to him again, if he took away his suit and banned him from the tower—he would take all of that if it just meant his dad would be okay.

All at once, the team was on their feet. Peter’s eyes darted up just in time to see a man in scrubs enter the waiting area. His heart leapt into his throat as his eyes scanned over the doctor, looking for any sign that would prepare him, warn him what was about to leave the man’s lips.

“My name is Doctor Michael Hammond, I’m the head surgeon here—”

“Listen, man, we just wanna know if Stark’s okay!” Clint cut in impatiently.

“Barton,” Steve said, a hint of warning in his tone.

The doctor didn’t look too offended, but Peter was having trouble reading the man at all, so—

“What? Like you—”
“Clint! Shut up,” Natasha hissed.

Clint huffed and crossed his arms.

“Doctor, please, I assume you have news,” Steve insisted.

The surgeon nodded to Steve. “Mr. Stark’s surgery was successful, and he has been moved into recovery.”

Chapter End Notes

So!

I hope you all enjoyed the update :3

Also consider following my Tumblr for fandom content, occasional updates, or just to stop by the ask box!

P.S.
I'm hitting the middle of finals in university right now so I won't be working on this fic until the chaos is all over, around 2 weeks. So I won't be updating for at least that time

P.S.S.

Thanks so much for all the support! Have a great couple weeks everyone! <3
Chapter Thirty-Three

Chapter Notes

I'm finally back!

Wow school and life kicked my ass big time and I'm sorry you all had to wait so long for an update!
But chapter 33 is here!

Chapter Warnings:

Anxiety
Depression
Talk of non/con
Angry assassins

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Peter listened to the rhythmic beep of the heart rate monitor and stared down at Tony’s slightly larger hand, resting in his own. A few days earlier, the simple gesture of holding Tony’s hand had left Peter feeling unsure; after all, it wasn’t like he’d ever held his dad’s hand before. Sure, they’d exchanged touches—a hug here, a clap on the shoulder there—but never holding hands. The first day Peter had been let in to see Tony, he’d struggled with whether or not the gesture would be welcomed. It’d been hard to resist; seeing Tony laid out pale and battered made him want to touch him in a desperate, instinctive way, to make sure he was even still alive. He was, though—the steady beeping told him as much.

Peter sat there, wrestling with himself, until Steve joined him sometime later and told him it was okay. He didn’t know how the man knew that that was what he’d been struggling with, but he was grateful nonetheless. The teen had almost burst into tears when he finally took his dad’s hand in his own and felt the slight life-affirming warmth coming off his skin. Now, days later, the gesture was all but second nature.

Peter sighed and let his chin rest against the bed as he looked up at Tony’s face. If he tried really hard, he could almost convince himself that Tony was only sleeping. The problem lay in that he had been sleeping for days. The teen was trying to remain positive, but it was hard. He’d been so damn relieved when the doctor had told them Tony’s surgery was a success that he’d blocked out the rest of the doctor’s words, asking a tad desperately if he could see him.

That had been three days ago, and Peter hadn’t left Tony’s side since, except for when the doctors came to run more tests, or the couple of times Steve carried him out of the room to shower.

Peter didn’t like the word “coma”—it was terrifying and sent his skin crawling. No, it was much better to pretend his dad was sleeping, and that any moment he would open his eyes and see Peter and smile and everything would be okay.

As the days past and grew closer to a week, Peter began to have trouble pretending. He took to
talking to Tony about everything and nothing, all of his thoughts, anything except the fears that ate away at him, bit by bit. Other times, he simply sat and wallowed in silence.

Around day five, Peter woke to the sound of another voice. It was calming and rhythmic, and he blinked awake slowly. The voice paused, as if noticing, and Peter looked over and saw Steve sitting on the opposite side of Tony’s bedside, book in hand.

“You’re awake,” he stated.

Peter couldn’t help but notice how worn-out the man looked. His eyes were tight from stress, and his usually clean-shaven face now sported the beginnings of a beard.

“Yeah, guess so.” Peter’s eyes darted to Tony. “Anything?”

Steve remained silent, before sighing.

“Not yet.”

Peter nodded, feeling disappointed but not surprised, though that was quickly replaced by guilt. He shouldn’t feel unsurprised—Tony was strong, he could beat this. He had to.

“What are you reading?” He asked instead.

“Oh, uh, *The Once and Future King*.”

“I didn’t know you liked fantasy,” Peter said.

Steve nodded. “Before the serum, I was sick a lot. Sometimes it meant I was trapped inside, and there wasn’t a lot to do, so often times I’d end up borrowing books to read. I remember reading *The Hobbit* back then—I hear it’s still popular, and that Tolkien wrote more books. I’ve been meaning to read them too, but I remember Tony mentioning enjoying the story of King Arthur, so I thought I could start there.” Steve turned his gaze from Peter to Tony, expression fond. “Do you mind if I keep reading?”

“As long as you don’t mind me listening,” Peter replied, feeling a weird mix of both happy and sad.

He didn’t know that was even possible until that moment. It was nice to see how much others obviously cared about Tony too, but it was hard, seeing his dad like this day after day.

As Steve picked back up where he left off, Peter couldn’t help but wonder if it was just as much a coping mechanism for the man as Peter’s own babbling.

---

Peter still didn’t know exactly what was wrong with Tony. He’d been tempted many times to ask, or even take a peek at Tony’s charts, but after witnessing the pale, pinched look Steve had gotten after he’d done that exact thing, Peter was dissuaded. It was hard to fight off his morbid curiosity at times though, mostly because hospitals were boring. He hated admitting that, even to himself, because the situation wasn’t boring in the least; his dad was hooked up to IV’s and tubes, completely unconscious, but there wasn’t a whole lot to do, except sit there and think.

The others seemed to want to try and bring Peter out of his self-imposed shell. Clint bought a pack of cards from the gift shop, Steve and Sam kept trying to drag him out of the hospital for food, May and Pepper succeeded in dragging him away a couple of times. Each time he left Tony’s side, Peter was filled with terrible anxiety, and no amount of comforting words could make him feel any
More than anything, Peter couldn’t shake his guilt, or his terror, that whispered like demons in his ear, blaming him for Tony being hurt. His parents, his uncle Ben—was Tony going to be added to that list, too? Was it just because the man had made the foolish decision to become involved in Peter’s life? Or was it because Peter himself had gotten attached? More and more, the invasive and heart-wrenching thoughts of him being cursed plagued Peter, and left him feeling morose and guilty and helpless. It was the helplessness of it all that left him feeling lost and sick, like he could barely breathe from the weight of it. The longer his dad remained still and lifeless, the less he was able to combat the onslaught.

Peter felt himself drowning.

---

Steve paced the hall as he clutched his phone to his ear. Occasionally, his eyes would dart to peek through the crack in the door to Tony’s room. He was growing increasingly concerned about how Peter was acting. He knew it was normal for people to react in different ways to a loved one being hurt like this, but—

“How’s Peter?” Bucky asked, interrupting Steve’s thoughts.

“He’s—” Steve paused, thinking over how to reply. “I’m concerned.”

“What’s wrong?”

“He’s withdrawn a lot. Hardly talks, barely eats—we have to all but drag him out of Tony’s room to get fresh air.” Steve rubbed at his eyes, tiredly.

“Kid’s still terrified. I don’t blame him, of course he wants to be there if anything changes.”

Steve really couldn’t argue with that, despite how much he wanted to.

“I’m sorry, Stevie.”

Steve jolted, the frown marring his face deepening. “For what?” he demanded, confused.

“I—I wish I could be there. Help somehow.”

“Buck—”

“Is the kid awake?” Bucky asked cutting off Steve’s reply.

Steve sighed, but decided to let it slide. “Yeah. Want to talk to him?”

“Sure.”

Steve poked his head into Tony’s hospital room. In the days they’d been there, the team had tried brightening it up a bit; multicolored flowers and cards were scattered over every available surface that wasn’t in the way of the doctors and machines. Rhodey had shown up the day before, and he and Sam had found an Iron Man teddy bear in the gift shop (Sam claimed it was their gift because he found it, but Rhodey argued it was his gift because he bought it).

Steve had been the one to go a bit nuts with the gifts. He couldn't really help it, though, since he thought it might make the room less clinical and sterile, less cold. But the little distractions didn't do much to ease his mind, regardless of how the room looked. Tony was still fighting for his life in
a hospital bed, and there was nothing Steve could do to fix that.

“Hey, Pete.”

The teen jumped and turned to look at him, eyes wide and tired-looking. His appearance was rumpled and ruffled and exhausted. Steve felt his heart ache in sympathy.

“Sorry. Bucky's on the phone, if you're up for talking.”

Peter hesitated for only a second before he was nodding and reaching out his hand for the phone. Steve smiled a bit in relief, and gladly passed the device over. He let his gaze travel to Tony, and felt that little bit of joy waiver. He hated feeling useless, and despite what Bucky said, he couldn't help but feel responsible. He was the Avengers leader—it was his job to make sure his teammates were safe, and he had failed at that, and now Tony was—

He left the room to give Peter some privacy.

Steve worked his jaw as Tony's medical charts flashed into his mind, the laundry list of injuries that had churned his stomach and broken his heart. The fact that Tony was able to cling to life, even now, was a miracle in of itself. Not that he was out of the woods yet—but Steve couldn't think like that, couldn't let himself even entertain the idea of Tony not waking up, of Tony losing this fight, because the thought of having to go home to Bucky and tell him Tony was gone, seeing the devastation on his friends’ and teammates’ faces, the thought of trying to care for and console Peter if Tony was gone, when just the thought of simply having to continue living without Tony there with him was almost as inconceivable as it was panic inducing—it was all too much.

Steve peeked into the room and saw a little smile play on Peter's lips as he nodded along to whatever Bucky was telling him. He was going to have to convince Peter to go shower later; the boy’s messy curls had begun to take on a particularly greasy look again. That led Steve to wondering when the last time Peter ate was, and if he should go try and find food. He couldn't do much to help Tony, and the pain of that ate him alive, but he would be damned if he let Tony's kid suffer from neglect.

He had just decided to go on a food run when he heard footsteps down the hall. Looking, he saw May walking back toward him. He raised a hand in greeting, and the woman smiled in turn. Steve couldn't help but note how tired she appeared. Hell, they all looked tired lately.

“Hey, how are they?” May asked, peeking into the room.

“Tony’s still out, Peter could use some food and a shower,” Steve said. “I was about to go get some food, would you like to come?”

May nodded her head. “I could go for something to eat.” Then hesitated. “Though, I’m not sure we should leave Peter.”

“Go, I’ll keep watch,” Natasha said, appearing seemingly out of nowhere.

Steve merely raised a questioning brow, though May jumped, startled.

“I’ll bring you back something,” Steve offered.

The redhead nodded, making herself comfortable on one of the chairs in the hall.

---
Peter wasn’t really up to talking when Steve offered him the phone, but he couldn’t help but picture how awful and empty the tower must feel with everyone in LA. So, pushing down his own downtrodden mood, he accepted the call and was immediately glad he did. He couldn't pinpoint exactly what it was about Bucky, but he struck Peter as someone he could confide in, and that had an oddly calming effect on the teen.

“So anyway, long story short, your robot pest is a liar and a cheat,” Bucky finished, causing Peter to giggle.

“I’m sure Ben didn't mean anything bad by it,” Peter replied easily.

“See, you spoiled the damn thing, so now it thinks it can do no wrong.”

“In his and my defense, I never tried to teach him how to gamble,” Peter argued.

Bucky scoffed, but Peter could tell there was no real heat to it.

“I was just teaching him Durak.”

“And he kicked your ass,” Peter said, smile growing. “I bet Natasha would love to hear—"

“Don't you dare!”

Peter laughed. The teen was slightly amazed at how good it felt to laugh again, like the suffocating weight sitting on his chest had been removed. Then he looked down at Tony, lying motionless, and the good feeling vanished, making him feel slightly ill. How could he dare let himself feel good while his dad lay injured? Immense guilt filled Peter, leaving him teary-eyed again.

“Hey. Hey, hey kid, you went real quiet real fast on me. I was just kidding around, Ben and I are good. You can tell Natalia whatever you like—"

Peter shook himself mentally, forcing his brain to re-anchor to his conversation with Bucky.

“No, I'm—it's—it's okay. I'm sorry, I'm good, I just—” Peter let himself trail off as he stared at Tony. He could feel the horrible but now awfully familiar sensation of his mind slipping, disconnecting, making him feel both absent from and trapped in reality.

“Peter. Peter, kid, hey. Listen, I want you to count backwards with me, okay? From sixty, can you do that?”

Peter nodded, though he was having trouble focusing. Then he remembered that Bucky wasn't there and couldn't see him, so he sighed shakily and replied, “Yeah—yeah, okay.”

“Okay, take a deep breath, kid. Go on.”

Peter did as he was instructed.

“Good. Okay, now: sixty—” there was a pause. “Come on, kiddo, sixty—"

‘Oh,’ Peter thought, ‘that's right, I gotta—I have to—’

“Six—sixty.”

God, his voice was embarrassingly shaky.

“Good. Fifty-nine.”
Peter breathed out and repeated the number back, and continued to follow Bucky's lead, until the man finally got to one.

“How are you feeling?” Bucky asked.

Peter nodded his head, clutching the phone to his ear like a lifeline.

“Bit better,” he answered honestly, voice a little stronger. He felt slightly more grounded than he had just a minute or so before.

“Want to do it again?” Bucky offered.

Peter felt a wave of relief. He hadn't wanted to ask—hadn't even thought to ask—but now that it was an option, he did think it would help.

“Yes please,” he all but whimpered.

“Okay, bud. From sixty, just like before, and remember to breathe.”

---

Bucky had been absently engaging Ben in a little game of tug-o’-war as he talked to the kid. He wasn't exactly sure what had done it, but one moment he had Peter laughing, and the next was eerie silence that set him on edge.

After talking the poor kid down from his panic attack, Bucky sighed in relief. He knew all too well how the kid must be feeling; more than once, he'd found himself on the verge of breaking down lately.

Next to him, Ben beeped and poked his still hand, obviously wondering why they had stopped their little game. Bucky smiled and poked the robot back, his smile widening slightly as the bot let out a higher pitched whirr and spun in an excited circle. No wonder Tony was always so damn proud of his kid. Looking at Ben, Bucky couldn’t help but feel a little pride in Peter, too.

“So Ben is doing okay?” Peter asked.

“Yeah, little guy is okay. I’m sure he misses you, though,” Bucky said.

“He’s a robot, I’m sure he’ll live,” Peter laughed, albeit a little nervously.

“Hey, say whatever you want, but this damn thing is alive,” Bucky said, only half kidding.

He didn’t know how something without eyes could give him puppy-dog eyes, but this little robot managed just fine with only his little display. Manipulative shit.

Bucky’s thoughts drifted back to the last time he’d seen Peter, when the teen had had his breakdown. Not that he blamed him. No, it was just that he couldn’t stop thinking about something the kid had said—or rather, alluded to—and it’d been driving Bucky crazy for days. He hadn’t wanted to push for details earlier, because the last thing Peter needed was more stress, but he didn’t want to let it be swept under the rug either, especially if his instincts were right in thinking something was wrong. They usually were.

“Hey kid,” Bucky started.

“Yeah?”
“Before you left, right after we found out about Tony… you mentioned something.”

There was a beat of silence.

“Okay—” Another pause. “What exactly?”

Bucky pulled at a loose thread on the hoodie he was wearing, one of Steve’s.

“You said you needed to apologize, but when you did, you said that Tony was right—what was he right about, Peter? Did… did something happen that night?”

The other end of the line was deathly silent. Bucky sighed.

“Listen, I get it if you don’t want to talk to me but, kid—”

Peter released a heavy, shaking breath.

“It’s just—I was stupid, and—I didn’t—then Da—then Tony got hurt, and I don’t know—”

“Hey, hey, hey, it’s okay. Breathe,” Bucky quickly interrupted, before Peter could throw himself into another attack.

He felt a surge of relief when he heard Peter take a deep breath and then let it out, slowly.

“Can you talk about it?” Bucky prompted after a moment.

“I—yeah,” Peter replied, voice still not as strong as Bucky would have liked. That foreboding feeling that’d been following him for the past few days grew.

“It wasn’t Harry’s fault!”

Bucky frowned. Honestly, he didn’t know what to think of this Harry kid. Peter seemed to like him, and was—obviously—ready to defend him, but he could still remember Tony’s angry comments, as well.

“Okay,” Bucky replied, a little hesitantly.

Peter huffed. “It’s just that—I know Tony doesn’t like him, and I can’t figure out why really. Other than ‘cause of his dad, but like, Harry isn’t his dad, and—!”

“Okay, so established, Harry isn’t to blame,” Bucky interrupted, sensing a rant in the making.

“Right, okay, so—” Peter groaned. “So, Harry invited me to his birthday, and the first part was, like, a really formal event Mr. Osborn put together. It was stupid and boring, and obviously just a ploy to up Oscorp’s status or something, and I mean, like, who the hell turns their kid’s birthday into—”

“Peter.”

“Right, sorry, uhm.”

“It’s okay if you don’t want to tell me personally—”

“No! I—I just—okay, so there were all these bigwig rich people there, and when Harry went up to give a speech, I was cornered by this guy, and, uhm…”
“What was his name?” Bucky asked, already feeling defensive.

“Uhm, S-Skip. Harry said his name was Skip.”

Bucky didn’t like how meek and quiet Peter’s voice got when he said that. He swallowed his anger, though. Now wasn’t the time.

“Just Skip?”


“No,” Bucky lied. “Sorry, continue.”

“So anyway, this guy just starts asking me these weird questions and, like, the whole time I’m getting this bad vibe, but I don’t wanna be rude, you know? But then Harry finished his speech, and he must have saw I wasn’t comfortable, ‘cause he, like, came over and, uh—well—told him to leave.

“That’s it?” Bucky asked, feeling relief.

“Well, I, um, thought so. Later, Harry took me to his friend’s place where there was, like, an actual fun party happening. I—everything was fine, it was fun, and yeah, I had a couple drinks, but, like, I swear it was only a couple. I didn’t even think it would affect me because of, well, the whole enhanced thing. I swear I felt—I felt fine after the drinks, and it was a little crowded, but Harry was having fun, so I thought I’d stick around for a bit.”

Bucky was tense again. He had to switch the phone to his flesh hand to avoid accidentally breaking it. He wanted to urge Peter on, but he also didn’t want anything he said to have a negative effect and have Peter clam up.

“Suddenly, I felt this tap on my shoulder and—and when I turned, Skip—Skip was there and—thinking back, maybe it was weird he was there. I-I dunno. But he said he noticed me and recognized me from the party before, and that he wanted to apologize if he made me uncomfortable then. He… he gave me a drink, said—said it was a peace offering, and—” Peter’s voice broke, and Bucky felt a swell of rage when he heard a telltale sniffle from the other end.

“I was so fucking stupid. I shouldn’t have taken it. I shouldn’t have drank it. I just—I thought, there were so many people there, and I didn’t even think—I felt a bit weird after the first drink, but I thought maybe it was the alcohol starting to affect me, you know?” Peter’s voice turned weak again. “I got real sick after the second one. My head hurt so bad and—and I was so dizzy. Skip—Skip said I should lie down and started pulling me from the room, and—I don’t know, everything was so fuzzy, and—and I must have blacked out for—for a minute, ‘cause the next thing I remember is—is having him on top of me—”

Bucky’s heart fell into his stomach as Peter broke off into a poorly-muffled sob.

“My shirt was—was gone, and—he was—I wanted to push him off—I did—I didn’t want—but it was like I couldn’t even move, couldn’t even speak…” Peter stuttered out between sniffles. “I-I was so scared.” Peter finally broke down into sobs, and Bucky felt his heart shatter.

“I-I tried to tell him to stop. It was so hard, it took all my strength just—just to speak, and he just—he just laughed at me—”

Bucky ran a hand over his face. He felt physically ill listening to Peter cry, hearing him recount—
“Peter, did he—?” Bucky began to ask, when Peter had fallen silent for a little while.

“N-no,” then teen sniffled. “He—he was going to, I-I think. He—he started trying to—trying to get my pants off, and—” Peter took a deep, shuddering breath, and when he spoke next, his voice was a little stronger. “And suddenly, he was off of me, and there was all this yelling—I guess Harry had found us, and I—I’m not too sure what happened. They fought, I think. I was really out of it for a while, I kept blanking out. But when I came to, Harry was there, and he was sort of roughed up, but he was there and he—he was trying to take care of me. I-I remember he wanted to take me to a doctor, but I was afraid. He must’ve ended up accidentally calling Tony instead…” Peter finally let himself trail off.

Bucky was silent of a long moment, processing what he’d just been told. He could feel something dark, dangerous, and old rising up in him.

“Bucky?” Peter asked quietly, nervously.

He shivered and buried the feeling down. Peter needed him.

“Thank you for telling me, Peter. I-I know that was hard.” He swallowed, thickly. “But you need to know that that wasn’t your fault, okay?”

“But—”

“No. No buts. You are not at fault here.” Bucky kept his voice firm, trying not to let his anger at the asshole that had hurt Peter slip into his tone.

He heard Peter try and muffle another cry. Shit. He was no good at this.

“Dad was so angry when he—when he showed up and—and I was still kind of woozy, but for a minute, I was so happy to see him.” Peter whimpered. “I mean, before everything fell into place and I—and I realized what him being there meant. I was so angry at myself for letting it happen, that’s why I yelled at him that night—because he was right. I was stupid and almost—I was scared and I lashed out, and I shouldn’t have, and now—”

Everything fell into place. Bucky closed his eyes, feeling the weight of it. Peter had just gone through something traumatic, and Tony, angry and worried himself, had accidentally triggered the teen, causing him to lash out.

“Peter, hey. Hey, kid, listen to me. You didn’t let it happen. You’re not at fault, I know you’re scared right now, but you have a lot of people who care about you and will help you, okay?”

“O-okay.”

“Have you told anyone else about this?”

“No, no one.”

“Okay. Thank you again for telling me, Pete.”

There was a moment’s pause, where all Bucky could hear was Peter’s disjointed sniffles. The moment was broken when the teen laughed, quiet and broken.

“So, um, maybe when—when we all come back, you can show me how to play that Durak game?”

Bucky nodded, accepting the kid’s attempt at branching away from the emotional topic.
“Yeah, it’s always better with more players. Plus, then you can see what a little cheat your robot is.”

---

Bucky was packing his best knives into his duffle when his phone rang. He growled in irritation, glaring at the device and its now-cracked screen, but stuffed down the anger. The only people with his number were the Avengers.

“What?” he barked into the phone, in lieu of a greeting.

“So. Tasha just told me an interesting story,” Clint said, voice hard.

“Oh yeah?” Bucky growled out.

“Something about someone named Westcott?”

“I’m taking care of it,” Bucky said, tone icy.

“Yeah, so are we. I have a location. We’ll pick you up. ETA 3 hours.”

Bucky gritted his teeth in an attempt to swallow down the bloodlust.

“Fly fast, Barton.”

---

Steve was balancing bags full of take-out when he noticed Clint and Natasha standing close, huddled together, faces serious and angry. He frowned as anxiety clawed at his chest. He picked up his pace, worried he had missed something.

“You have a plan?” Steve overheard Natasha ask quietly.

“I’m telling you, I know a guy. Westcott will be singing in seconds,” Clint replied.

The two spies took a step away from each other at his approach.

“Heya, Cap!” Clint greeted, smiling easily.

Steve narrowed his eyes.

“What’s going on?” he asked, voiced laced with suspicion.

Natasha sighed. “We have to head out.”

“What? When?” Steve asked, alarmed. “I didn’t get an assembly warning!”

“No, not we as in the Avengers, we as in Tasha and I, we have a mission. We’re taking the Quinjet. Shouldn’t take too long, couple days tops.” Clint shrugged.

Steve’s gaze darted between the two. He couldn’t shake the feeling that they were hiding something, but he sighed and brushed it aside. He’d worry about it later; for now, he had Peter and Tony to worry about.

“Fine,” he said, begrudgingly.

Clint nodded and clapped him on the arm on his way past, though Natasha hesitated. “You know
we wouldn’t leave right now unless it was important,” she said.

Steve nodded. He couldn’t deny that maybe a bit of the sting he felt over them leaving was over Tony, but he knew Natasha, and she was telling the truth here. They wouldn’t just abandon him or Tony right now, unless whatever had come up was of the utmost importance.

“Yes, I know."

Natasha leaned up on her tiptoes to place a kiss to his cheek, snagging one of the take-out bags.

“Hang in there, we’ll be back soon.”

Steve watched her leave, then sighed and carried the rest of the take-out over to Tony’s room.

He paused in the doorway. Peter was leaning close to the bed, one of Tony’s hands grasped in both of Peter’s own.

“—So, I-I know I haven’t been in your life for very long,” Peter said, “but you’ve been such a big part of mine.”

Steve didn’t want to interrupt the moment, and instead, studied Peter. The teen’s shoulders were sagged, like they carried the weight of the whole world upon them, and though he couldn’t see the teen’s face, he could hear that he had been crying.

“I was there that night at the 2010 Stark Expo, when all those Hammer drones went nuts. I… even back then, I looked up to you so much. You probably wouldn’t remember, but—I was wearing this Iron Man helmet Ben bought for me. We’d gotten separated in the chaos, and all of a sudden, there was this drone hovering in front of me, and I was a stupid little kid wearing this fake helmet and gauntlets, and—and I thought, ‘What would Iron Man do?’ So I raised my hand like I was gonna be able to somehow blast this thing, and then boom! I heard the actual repulsor blast, and then the drone was a smoldering ruin. And when I spun around, there was Iron Man himself. Peter broke off with a little strangled laugh. “You looked at me, and I’ll never forget it. You said—”

Steve nearly dropped the bags of food, his eyes darted to Tony’s face in an instant.

---

Peter didn’t know when he’d begun to talk to Tony. He’d spent what felt like a long time in a state of limbo after his conversation with Bucky. He kept having bursts of anxiety that made him question whether or not telling anyone had been the right thing to do. Logically, he knew it was probably better that he had, and he had felt a great sense of relief in sharing, even if it’d been terrifying. So to combat the anxiety, he began to talk. He told Tony about Ben, all the updates Bucky had given him, about how a maintenance worker had nearly had a heart attack when he stumbled across Clint in the ceiling, and eventually, he began to recount the time he was almost blown up at the Stark Expo.

He didn’t know exactly why he felt the need to recount the event, but an intense desperation had been clawing up from deep inside him. He needed Tony to know, needed him to know how much he meant to Peter, how he had been his hero since long before they officially met; that day he came home and found Tony conversing with May on their apartment sofa.

Peter laughed when he got to the part where Tony had shown up behind his childhood self. Thinking back, it was so obvious that Tony had been the one to blast the drone, but to his kid mind, his toy gauntlets had worked, and he’d blasted the drone himself, especially when Iron Man had said—
“Nice work, kid.”

Peter froze, jaw dropping as his head whipped up to look at Tony. He didn’t dare even breathe—it had been so rough and quiet, but—

The corner of his dad’s lips were turned up in a crooked smile, and Peter looked on in amazement as Tony frowned and attempted once, twice to open his eyes, finally succeeding on the third try.

Tony’s eyes were dull and dark and glassy, but they lit up when they landed on Peter, the smile on his face widening.

Peter let out a strangled-sounding sob as he jumped to his feet, restraining himself at the last second from throwing himself over him.

All the emotional turmoil of the past few days hit the teen all at once, and a mixture of all his regrets and panic filled him up until he couldn’t contain any of it.

“I’m sorry! Dad, I’m so, so sorry!” Peter sobbed, still holding Tony’s hand close.

“Hey—” Tony whispered, voice so rough from disuse. “Kiddo, shh—”

He squeezed Peter’s hand back and tried to smile. To Peter, it was the best smile he’d ever seen. His dad was alive and awake. Tony was finally back.

Chapter End Notes

Hey!
So this was a difficult chapter for me to write!
I hope all of you enjoyed the update, kudos and comments are always appreciated!
Thank you all for reading,
Consider following me on Tumblr where I post fandom content, ask box is always open!
Chapter Thirty-Four

Chapter Notes

I'm back with a new chapter!

I hope you are all ready for some wholesome family content!

Please enjoy the newest installment :D

Peter’s emotions were in shambles. Tony was awake, his dad was awake! But also with the relief came everything else—everything he’d been keeping pent up. It left Peter unsure of whether he wanted to laugh or cry, though he was pretty sure he was doing a bit of both.

Of course, despite his mix of emotions, nothing could have distracted him from the embarrassment he felt when Steve had said:

“Why don’t you go let the nurse know your dad’s awake now?”

At first, Peter had felt panic as he flushed red, then he felt a little betrayed. After all, Steve had promised before that he wouldn’t tell! But then he remembered his words only moments before, during his rushed apology; he had called Tony “Dad” right to his face.

Mortified would be a good way to sum it all up.

At least it would have been, if when he turned to look at Tony, the man hadn’t been smiling like it was Christmas morning.

It wasn’t about that. It couldn’t be. Tony wouldn’t be happy about Peter calling him that, surely.

Peter had been all too happy to dart out of the room—for all of five seconds, anyway, because he was existing in a simultaneous state of euphoria and paranoia. The pure relief and excitement of having Tony awake and responsive was now drowned out by moments of anxiety. Being away from his dad left him scared that, when he returned, Tony would be under again.

Peter all but ran to the nurses’ station.

“Excuse me,” Peter said, voice rushed in his panic.

The nurse at the station was one he recognized, and she must have recognized Peter, too, because her brows shot up in alarm, and suddenly she was standing in a hurry.

“Is everything all right?” she asked in alarm.

“Da—Ton—Mr. Stark is awake!” he stammered out, mentally cursing himself for his multiple trip-ups.

It only occurred to Peter as they were almost back at the room that he easily could’ve pressed the nurse’s call button from there.
Frowning, he quickly entered the room.

“I got the nurse—” he began, pausing when Steve jumped back from the bed where he’d been leaning over Tony.

Peter frowned at the blush that painted Steve’s face when he turned.

“Ahem, sorry, was just making sure nothing was immediately wrong.”

Tony snorted a laugh that turned into a cough, and then a groan.

“Oh, okay, no laughing at Cap,” Tony groaned, sounding a little petulant.

“Please try to remain still, Mr. Stark,” the nurse said as she stepped forward, Steve quickly getting out of her way so she could work.

Tony answered all of her questions, which Peter was sure must have been a good sign, and then went about checking the machines and his vitals, and of course, the injury site itself.

“Everything seems to be in order,” the nurse finally said. “Please wait while I go and get the doctor.”

It didn’t take long at all for Dr. Cho to enter the room. Peter was instantly relieved to see her familiar face.

“Oh, I was wondering who I’d get to annoy today,” Tony grinned.

Peter saw the woman roll her eyes but smile. “It’s good to see you finally awake.”

“Finally?” Tony questioned. “How—how long was I out?”

Dr. Cho’s face turned more serious. “Long enough to leave your team worried. How are your pain levels?”

Tony sighed/ “They’re fine. So are you going to release me, or am I going to have to sneak out the back?” he said, gesturing to the window.

Peter was a little alarmed at hearing this. “But you only just woke up,” the teen said anxiously.

His dad’s gaze flickered to him, and the man smiled softly.

“It’s okay, Pete. I’ll be okay, and I’d be much more comfortable recovering at home, come on, Helen,” he said, gaze turning back to Dr. Cho. “You know I have everything I need to recover at the tower. You’ve literally worked in my medical facilities.”

Dr. Cho sighed, sending Tony an irritated look that truly didn’t have much heat to it. “We’re keeping you for observation for now,” she replied, matter-of-factly.

“But—”

“No, no buts. Your injuries were and still are extensive. And to top that, your week long nap—no one’s going to be crazy enough to let you out yet. No matter how much you try to bribe them.”

Tony was frowning, but he was also looking more and more tired and unfocused. Dr. Cho must have noticed as well, because the severe expression on her face softened considerably.
“Rest, Tony. I know you don’t quite get the definition of that word, but try, for your friends and family at least,” she said. “I’ll be back to check on you in a little while. Rest.”

With that, the woman left, though not before giving Peter a soft smile.

Tony really must have been exhausted, because not minutes later, the man was snoring softly without as much as another word.

“You.”

Peter’s head darted around to look at Tony, who was waving him over.

“Yeah?” Peter asked as he took his usual chair next to Tony’s bedside.

“So, did you bring your web-shooters?”

“My web-shooters—?”

“Despite what Dr. Killjoy thinks, I’ll be fine, so with the tactile strength of your webs—”

“Tony,” Steve said from where he was standing in a disapproving tone. “Absolutely not.”

Peter watched his dad grin. “Pete, we gotta be careful, Cap here is obviously Team Killjoy.”

Steve rolled his eyes, then froze.

“Oh shi—” Steve’s eyes darted to Peter then back, “—shoot, I gotta call Buck!” he exclaimed, before darting out of the room.

Silence fell over the room after Steve’s departure, and Peter was hit by a sudden swell of nervousness and self-doubt. Sure, his da—Tony seemed happy to see him when he woke up, but could he really trust that? He was drugged, maybe his judgement was impaired. What if he didn’t even remember their fight? Oh God, what if he had to tell him and remind him, and then watch that angry disappointment return in the man’s eyes? Peter didn’t think he could handle that. He needed to talk to Tony, but—what if Tony was just waiting for a private moment to let him down easy? To tell him to pack his stuff and go? What if—

“Hey, kiddo—”

Peter spun around. He knew he probably looked a little ridiculous—he felt wide-eyed and startled. He tried to school his features, better late than never and all that…

Tony waved him over, then pointed to a water bottle that had a straw poking out.

“Wanna pass that over here?”

Peter jumped into action, nearly fumbling the bottle, before steadying himself and bringing the straw up to Tony’s lips.

The man rolled his eyes and muttered something about not being completely invalid, however, much to Peter’s relief, he didn’t put up a fight and accepted the gesture.

He looked tired, and Peter felt concern grow in him. Sure, he wanted to know exactly where they stood, but he also wanted to make sure Tony got proper rest. He had a lot of healing to do.

“Maybe you should get some sleep,” Peter found himself saying aloud.
Tony only smiled ruefully. “Kid, according to you lot, I’ve been sleeping for a literal week. I don’t need to pass out quite yet.”

Peter fidgeted and nodded, resisting the temptation to correct Tony and tell him it had actually been nine days now.

“All right, what’s on your mind? I could practically hear you thinking just now.”

“it’s just…” Peter took a deep breath. “I know I already said it, but… I’m sorry. I’m sorry for lying, and—and I’m so, so sorry for saying those awful things after.” Peter heard his voice break, and he had to snuffle back tears. “I was scared and I was angry, and I did something awful, and—and I understand if you—if you don’t want me around any—anymore—”

Peter wiped at his eyes, blinking back more tears defiantly.

“Hey, whoa, whoa, whoa—kid, now who said anything about not wanting you?” Tony interrupted, frowning.

“Pete,” Tony sighed. “Listen, I’m not going to send you away or stop your training or anything else you’re worried about. I’m not saying what you did was okay, because it wasn’t. And yes, I would be lying if I said—if I said that your words didn't sting a bit that night—”

Peter winced, and looked back up at Tony, imploringly, “I'm so sorry—”

Tony shook his head. “Thank you. I appreciate that, but you said some things I needed to hear. I realize now that I had lost sight of just how bad my drinking had gotten, or how it was affecting those around me. So, I'm sorry too, kid, and I promise I’m going to do better—"

Peter gaped. “No, no, please, Mr. Stark, you don't need to apologize!”

“Mr. Stark?” Tony huffed, incredulously. “Jeez, Pete, one apology and I’m demoted from ‘Dad’ to ‘Mr. Stark’? Ouch.”

Peter paled and then flushed in quick succession. Of course Tony had heard him.

“Hey, Peter, it's okay, don't panic. It's fine, it's all fine. Listen, I’m not upset—look at me, there you are, okay—I'm not upset, you can call me whatever you feel comfortable with, all right?”

“You’re… you’re not mad? That I—that I called you that, I mean…” Peter asked quietly, something huge warring in his chest. He couldn't decide if it was hope or terror.

“Mad? No, of course not. Peter, I would only feel so honored that you would even consider—” Tony stopped, seeming to try and gather his thoughts. “I want you to feel like you can be honest with me, Pete. If that’s how you feel about me—” Tony’s voice took an almost disbelieving tone, before he swallowed the emotion and continued, “—then I want you to know that that’s okay, all right, kiddo?”

Peter nodded slowly, hardly daring to believe what he was hearing. Was Tony actually giving him permission… to call him Dad?

“But I don’t want you to force anything, and if you’re not totally comfortable with it now, then that’s also fine, and that also doesn’t mean you can’t decide you are comfortable later on or—oh, I’m rambling.”
Peter smiled and let out a shy laugh. “Wow, good to hear word-vomit coming from someone who isn’t me for once,” he joked.

Tony huffed a laugh, and reached over to ruffle Peter’s curls, a familiar gesture—or it would’ve been. Tony’s hand only reached partway before his entire form froze and shuddered. Peter’s eyes darted to his dad’s face in alarm, and he nearly whimpered at seeing his face twisted in a look of pain—the hand fell. Peter caught it and held his dad’s hand as he glued himself as close to the bedside as he could.

“Should—should I call the nurse? Steve? What can I do?” Peter said, feeling panicked again.

Tony took a few deep breaths, as if steadying himself, and reopened his eyes which had clenched shut. They looked more unfocused and hazy than before.

“No, no, I’m fine,” he replied, sounding winded.

Peter shot him a disbelieving look.

Tony caught it and smiled, though it didn’t look convincing at all.

“Think I just need to—need to nap for a minute. Rest my eyes. I’m all right, kiddo. I’m…” Tony’s eyes were drooping even as he said his reassurances, voice growing quieter and quieter until all that was left was the sound of his soft, even breaths.

Peter shuddered and laid his head down on the mattress, next to Tony’s—his dad’s hand, and worked to shove down his anxiety. His dad would be okay. He just needed rest. Peter yawned hugely, the exhaustion of the last week and a bit catching up to him all at once. Soon his eyes, too, were drooping and then closing as sleep finally took him.

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Steve paced the hall as his first three calls rang all the way to the voicemail greeting of, ‘Just leave your damn message.’

“Buck, it’s me, again. Just call me back when you—no, to hell with it, I’m gonna call until you pick up. God, you better not be doing anything stu—” Steve was cut off by the end beep.

He huffed and hit the red End Call symbol, waited for the screen to return to Bucky’s contact profile, then hit the call button again. It’d been a couple of hours since Tony had woken up, and he had promised to call right away.

Shit, he also needed to contact the others. They’d be mad enough that he hadn’t called the moment Tony woke up.

He’d just been swept up in the moment, so relieved and giddy at seeing Tony open his eyes, and then so nervous when he’d gone back under during his nap. Steve hadn’t wanted to take his eyes off him, and stood vigilant over Tony’s bedside until he’d awakened some hours later.

“What?” snapped an absolutely furious-sounding voice.

Steve jolted from his musings.

“Buck, thank God—what’s that sound?” He frowned. There was static on the line, and what sounded like an engine of some kind?
“Oh fuck—hey, Stevie!”

Steve’s eyes narrowed. There was something else, something he couldn’t quite make out over the engine.

“Bucky, what’s going on?” Steve asked warily.

“Nothing, nothing, just watching the TV. Tony’s got amazing speakers—real loud, gimme a sec—” There was rustling, then everything became slightly muted, like Bucky was covering the mic.

“Just—shouldn’t have—waited—brought him here—”

Steve pressed the phone as close to his ear as he could, trying to make out what was being said. His heart hammered. Was someone else there with Bucky? Didn’t he know how dangerous that was? What the hell was—

A muffled shout—

“Shut him—fuck—”

The noise died down.

“Hey, Steve, sorry, couldn’t—uh—find the remote.”

Silence hung heavy between them.

Steve took a calming breath.

“TV, huh?”

“Yeeep.”

“You sure there isn’t something you want to tell me.”

Steve didn’t phrase it as a question.

“No, though I’m guessing there’s something on your mind. What’s up?”

Like a shock, Steve remembered his whole reason for calling.

“Christ!” he said. “Buck—Tony’s awake!”

Steve heard a sharp intake across the line.

“Is he—?”

“He’s hurt pretty bad. I’m going to go talk to Helen and see what her timeline is as far as recovery goes, but—he woke up.”

Bucky released a shaky, wet-sounding laugh. “Is he—is he awake now? Do you think—could I talk to him?”

“Here, let me check. I left the room while I was trying to call you.”

Steve walked down the hall as fast as he could without running, then he opened the door to Tony’s room quietly and peeked in.
There he saw not just Tony asleep, but Peter as well, head pillowed next to Tony’s hand.

Steve let out a breath.

“Damn, he’s asleep again, isn’t he?”

“Yeah,” Steve said in a hushed tone, as he quietly moved back into the hall and closed the door.

Bucky sighed a bit in disappointment, though there was still relief to it.

“Okay, just… let me know when he’s awake again. Oh—I have to go—I’ll try and call you later.”

“Hey, wait a minute, don’t think I don’t—“

“Love you, bye Stevie,” Bucky said in a rush before hanging up.

Steve took the phone away from his ear and glared at it. Great. Something else to worry about.

He sighed. Maybe he should take a plane back. He cast Tony’s room a glance. Tony may have been awake, but Steve didn’t feel comfortable just leaving him. Hell, it was time to call the others anyway; maybe he could talk Sam into a favor.

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Pepper had cried when she rushed back to the hospital and saw him awake and chatting softly with Peter. May had been close to following her; hell, Rhodey, too, had looked a little misty-eyed.

"Don’t do that shit again,” Rhodey said as he patted Tony's leg, the closest bit he could reach with Peter and Pepper taking guard on either side.

Sam came sauntering in not long later, his usual smirk in place. “So, when are we busting your ass outta here, man?”

Tony grinned while Steve huffed in annoyance.

“Hey, he’s bad enough on his own, don’t you be going and giving him any more ideas, Sammy,” Rhodey mock-glared.

Sam only barked a laugh and draped himself on one of the chairs against the far wall.

“Seriously, you all need to stage an intervention and get me the hell outta here,” Tony said.

“Tones, you need to heal,” Rhodey said more seriously. “This isn't an injury you can just shrug off, not this time.”

“And I can knit myself back together at home. In my own bed and medical labs.”

Rhodey gave Tony an unimpressed look. “Can you at least try and keep your cool for just a few days while the doctors make sure you’re not gonna hemorrhage or some shit?”

Tony’s answer was to roll his eyes.

“I’m sure they’ll let us move you as soon as it’s safe, you’re an awful patient,” Pepper said with a teasing smile.

Tony most definitely didn’t pout. And even if he had, it couldn’t have lasted long, because he
caught sight of Peter’s smile and then he, too, was grinning. Something tugged at his chest, warm and fluttering. Peter just seemed to have that effect on him.

The ease didn’t last long. Tony hated feeling trapped, and that’s just how he felt lying in the damn hospital. He shifted and huffed.

“Man, stay still, you’re gonna tear something,” Rhodey griped.

Tony glared, unimpressed.

“Don’t give me that look.”

Tony continued to wiggle, trying to get comfy. “It’s not my fault this bed is made of straw and rocks. Seriously, this is awful, who do I need to yell at—” he cut himself off with a loud hiss as he did indeed pull on something, his body alighting in a flash of agony.

Tony took a shuddering breath and reopened his eyes. He must have closed them when the pain hit. His field of vision swam slightly with concerned faces.

“I’m fine,” he grumbled.

“Yeah, totally fine,” Bruce muttered from where he’d been silently observing.

Tony shot him a betrayed look.

“Just take it easy,” Steve started.

Tony was growing frustrated. He hated this. Stupid fucking robots. He couldn’t believe he let something so damn stupid best him. Now he was trapped in this sickening place, and everyone was hovering, and—Tony clenched his jaw, trying to push away the dark feelings that were growing.

Someone took his hand. Tony almost snapped at them, until he looked over and saw Peter, and all the fight left him at once. He tried to smile comfortingly at his kid’s concerned gaze. He hated that Peter looked so worried; he never wanted to be the one responsible for that expression marring his face.

Anxiety grew in his chest at the thought. Could he really be sure that he wouldn’t ever put that look back on Peter’s face? He was an Avenger. Threat of bodily harm was sort of part of the job description. He tried to beat away those feelings, too. It was easier said than done. He wrapped them up and stuffed them down, letting none show on his face; Peter could be almost unnervingly perceptive when it came to others’ emotions.

Maybe he could suck it up, for Peter’s sake. For a couple of days, anyway.

---

Steve smiled as he watched how Tony seemed to ground himself with Peter’s presence at his side. Still, he worried. It was obvious Tony was in more pain than he was letting on. He wanted to huff in irritation that the man was still fighting to get out of the hospital despite this, but then again, he supposed that was rather hypocritical of him. He avoided the hospital as much as he could—he absolutely hated them. In truth, spending as much time here as he had with Tony injured had left him feeling more strained than he could really express. He couldn’t let that come across, though. He wouldn’t be selfish like that. It didn’t matter that the sounds and sights of all the machines made his chest constrict.
Steve took a breath and caught Tony’s eye, and held up his phone as he gestured toward the hall. At Tony’s returning nod, Steve excused himself quietly, bringing up Bucky’s number. Despite the slight aggravation of his wounds, Tony seemed awake enough that maybe he would be up to a chat with Bucky.

That, and Steve could really do with hearing the other’s voice. He sent off a silent prayer that their call yesterday was a one-off, odd fluke.

He brought the phone to his ear and listened to it ring, and ring, and ring, until the voicemail picked up. Steve’s lips thinned as he hung up and redialed.

“Yeah?” Bucky picked up on the fourth ring.

“Hey Buck.”

“Stevie, hey!”

“How are—

A blood curdling scream in the background cut Steve off, and his heart stuttered. “What in the hell was that?” he demanded.

“Uhh—”

Hurried footsteps, then the sound of a door opening and slamming closed—

“The TV. Got some horror movie marathon on, sorry ‘bout that,” Bucky said, smoothly.

Steve’s gaze narrowed.

“The TV,” he said.

“Yeeep,” Bucky replied.

Steve was hit by an overwhelming sense of Deja Vu.

“Buck, if something’s going on, I want to know.”

“Steve, just—don’t worry, everything’s fine.”

“You promise?”

“Yeah, I promise,” Bucky said with barely a hint of hesitation. “Now, how’s our best fella?”

Steve sighed, his chest still tight. “He’s awake, thought you might—”

“Yes!”

Steve smiled. “Yeah, okay, one sec.”

Steve made his way back into Tony’s room and got the man’s attention. “Bucky,” he mouthed silently, and pointed to the phone still pressed against his ear. He delighted in the way Tony lit up and immediately reached out, making grabby hands.

Rhodey shot Steve a knowing look and stood up.

“All right gang, let’s give the man some space,” Rhodey said, giving Pepper a pointed look.
“May, Peter, why don’t we go get something to eat?” Pepper suggested.

Peter looked ready to argue, until May cut in an affirmative, and gestured for her nephew to follow. Which he did, only after telling Tony he’d be back soon. It was pretty cute, actually. By Tony’s smile, he thought so, as well.

Steve passed over the phone into Tony’s eager hands, watching the others file out of the room. He caught Sam’s arm as he followed, and gestured for him to follow him into the hall, rather than continue on with the group.

“What’s up, man?” Sam asked when Steve made sure Tony’s room was closed off.

Steve sighed. “I know this past almost-two-weeks has been tiring, but, I need a favor.”

Sam frowned, his posture tensing and face serious as he immediately got onboard.

“What do you need? And will it involve getting shot at? Hey, look at the track record, it’s a fair question!”

Steve sighed, but grinned, crookedly. “No, you shouldn’t get shot at… I don’t think.”

“Then what?” Sam asked.

“I was hoping you’d be willing to head back to New York ahead of us and check in on Bucky.”

Sam looked thoroughly unimpressed.

“Listen, man, you’re one of my best friends, but why the hell do you need me to play babysitter? Mecha Jesus can handle himself.”

“I just—maybe I’m just paranoid, but—I’m afraid Bucky’s gone and done something stupid,” Steve pressed, ignoring the name.

“Isn’t he always doing something stupid?” Sam mumbled quietly, but Steve still heard the, “Okay, fine, let me get my gear together. How stupid we talking? Like, am I on the next flight outta here, or can we wait until I’ve had my power nap?”

“Sleep on the plane?” Steve tried.

“Mhmm,” Sam said. Steve was impressed a single noise could sound so dry.

“Please?” he asked, giving Sam his most earnest smile.

“Ugh, stop it. Of course I’m going,” Sam said.

Steve beamed at him, some of the anxiety in his chest easing. “Thank you.”

“Yeah, I got you, man. I’ll let you know when I get there.”

---

Tony felt his heart leap as he snatched the phone from Steve’s hand.

“Hey!” he said, only slightly mentally berating himself for the eagerness in his voice.

He sent Rhodey a grateful smile as he and Pepper herded the group from his room, though not
before he gave Peter’s hand a parting squeeze and promised he’d be okay.

“Hey doll,” Tony heard Bucky reply, and he felt a flutter at the obvious smile in the man's voice.

“How are you holding up there?” Tony asked. He’d been worried at the thought of Bucky all alone.

His answer was a small laugh. “I’m pretty sure that’s what I’m supposed to ask,” Bucky said.

“Well, I’m going stir crazy,” Tony admitted, though he also took note of how Bucky avoided the question.

“Of course you are. So when are you planning your jailbreak for?”

Tony grinned. “Hopefully sooner rather than later. Unfortunately, I’m rather outnumbered at the moment.”

“Aw, do I need to come rescue you?”

“Please do, and bring cheeseburgers. Seriously, Helen has me on these horrible meal replacement shakes that taste like chalk and sadness,” Tony said, jokingly.

There was a moment’s pause, and Tony was wondering if he had said something wrong, then:

“Stevie… he didn’t give me too many details, just said it was bad—”

“I’m okay—hey, seriously, I’m okay,” Tony insisted.

Bucky sighed heavily over the line.

“I wanted to be there. I… I was gonna—but Stevie said it was a bad idea. Too many suits.”

Tony nodded in agreement, even as his heart clenched. “Yeah, it wouldn’t have been safe for you here, but don’t worry, I’ll be back soon and you can fuss over me to your heart's content.”

“Fuckin’ deal,” Bucky replied. “Just—just take care, all right? Let yourself heal.”

“Now whose side are you on?” Tony said, keeping his voice light, hoping to lighten the heavy tone the conversation had taken.

“Yours,” Bucky replied, without hesitation. “Always.”

Tony had to swallow back his sudden emotion, feeling taken aback by the conviction in Bucky’s tone.

“Same to you,” he finally replied. “It won’t be like this forever, I—I’ll make sure of it. You won’t have to hide away.”

He closed his eyes, hating that Bucky had to continue to suffer likes this.

“And, babe, when I sort all this out,” he let out a whistle, “You, me, and Steve are going on one hell of a vacation. I’m thinking somewhere tropical, white sandy beaches, warm waters, the whole shebang.”

“You don’t need to do that. I’d be happy just—just being able to go to dinner or catch a flick with you n’ Stevie.”
Tony mentally solidified his plans. He was totally going to take his boys out on so many dates once it was safe. Well, legal, at least.

“And you’ll get them, as many as we want.” Tony looked up as Steve entered the room. “Oh, Captain-Anti-Escape-Plan is back, better shush up.”

Steve sent him a long-suffering look, which didn’t carry any true weight with the way his eyes sparkled in good humor.

Suddenly Tony couldn't hold back the huge yawn that shook him. Socializing was hard. Why was socializing so hard now?

“Oh, I think it's naptime,” Bucky said in amusement.

Tony scoffed. “I don’t need a—” he yawned again.

“Go get some rest. Get better so I can see you soon,” Bucky said.

“Deal,” Tony replied.

He regretted having to pass the phone back to Steve. Speaking to Bucky solidified how much he missed him.

“How are you feeling?” Steve asked, running a hand through his hair.

Tony couldn't help but let his eyes flutter close at the touch.

“Tired,” he replied honestly.

“Any pain?”

“A bit, but only if I move around a lot.”

Steve nodded. “Do you need anything before you rest? Water?”

Tony shook his head. “No, thank you.”

“All right,” Steve said, leaning down to place a kiss to his forehead. “Get some sleep.”

Tony couldn't keep the smile from his face as he let himself drift off, acutely and warmly aware of the spot Steve had kissed, as well as the gentle motions of a hand stroking through his hair.

---

Sam was still fairly exhausted by the time he stumbled into Stark Tower. The trip hadn't been very long, but he had found it hard to rest over the last couple of weeks. He’d been trying to fight off a feeling of guilt that maybe Tony's injury was partially his fault—he’d been working air support, too—but everything had happened so quickly. One moment, he was assisting Cap, and the next, Iron Man was disappearing into the smoke with a yell.

Logically, he knew blaming himself was completely pointless. It wasn't his fault—there’d been a lot of variables, too many. It didn't help as much as he’d like. He could only swear to try and do better next time.

“Welcome back, Falcon,” the AI greeted as he entered the elevator.
“Hey, Friday. Barnes around?”

“He is on the communal floor,” she replied, and set the elevator in motion.

It seemed Steve's worrying was for nothing, after all. Oh well, maybe he could finally get that nap; the tower had those fancy rich people mattresses that did wonders on his back.

The elevator opened, and Sam strolled into the main living room, poised for a greeting, when he froze.

Bucky was indeed on the floor, on the recliner, in fact. The coffee table was pulled up close, and on it, an assortment of knives and guns that were in the process of being cleaned. Barnes himself looked fresh off a mission; he was in full, dirtied tactical gear, complete with the dark paint around his eyes. His hair was a bit grimy, and his hands had smears of blood and dirt on them.

Sam couldn't help but flash back to his meeting of the Winter Soldier.

It seemed like he’d taken Barnes by surprise as well though, since the man had frozen in his weapon cleaning to stare back at him.

The reality came crashing back in an instant, and Sam shook his head, grin sliding on to his face as he pulled out his phone.

“Ohhh, Steve's gonna kill you.”

Sam was stopped from using the phone when it was rather suddenly no longer in his grasp. Natasha strolled around him, twirling it in her own hands.

“Natasha?” he asked, somewhat surprised. He heard her and Hawkeye were on a mission.

“Barton and I needed an assist. James was the closest one who could help,” she said, smoothly.

Sam's eyes narrowed, not really believing the story, but smart enough not to question it.

“We would appreciate discretion,” she continued, pointedly placing his phone down on the coffee table.

Sam huffed a sigh, knowing he was outnumbered, hating how smug Barnes looked—and, okay, so his face didn't change, but it was all in the eyes!

“Fine, but Steve is still expecting a check-in.”

Natasha tossed his phone back.

“Can't believe this,” he muttered as he began texting Steve. “Lying to Captain freaking America.”

“I swear to God, if I find another ant in my goddamn quiver—oh, hey Sam!” Clint said as he strolled in. He did that thing where he glanced at Natasha and somehow had an entire conversation, completely mute. “Just you?”

“Just me. Steve sent me to check in on his trash panda boyfriend.”

Clint snorted.

Barnes rolled his eyes, then frowned and flicked an—ant?—off the coffee table.
“See? I knew some of them hitched a ride!” Clint exclaimed.

“It was your idea to involve that friend of yours,” Natasha said, cryptically.

“Hey, it worked, didn't it?” Clint shivered.

“Know what?” Sam said, interrupting. “No. I don't want to know whatever screwed up shit you three were messing with. I want plausible deniability.”

Barnes smirked and Natasha shrugged, while Clint paused, considering, before he nodded.

“Yeah, that's fair,” the archer said.

“All right, I told Cap Barnes is here and shit’s normal, so get all this shit cleaned up before he decides to get smart and asks Tony to look into Friday's cams. Also, dude, you're a fucking assassin, learn to lie better so I don’t gotta play babysitter.”

“Oh go have your nap, Wilson,” Barnes scoffed.

Sam sent him a look, but decided to make his retreat. “Whatever, man. Enjoy your murder tea party.”

He heard the conversation pick back up as he left.

“Honestly, as long as we didn't bring back any of those big bullet ants, I don't care,” Barnes muttered.

Sam shook his head. He did not want to know.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you all enjoyed this chapter! Thank you so much for reading, please comment your thoughts or drop a kudos!

(Chapter 35 is already well underway!)

<3 <3

Enjoy the rest of your weekend!
Home-coming came faster than Tony was legitimately expecting. For all his complaining, he hadn’t actually expected Helen to give in and let him go home—especially after he got a sneak peek at his charts. Of course, he’d known it was bad—he could feel that much, thank you—but making assumptions and then reading the facts on paper was a bit mind-altering. Still, it wasn’t as if this was the first time he’d been uncomfortably close to death, and with his line of work, it was highly unlikely it would be the last. But that was no matter. The point was, Tony was home. Back in New York, only an elevator ride away from being able to see Bucky again.

He had tried to fight off Steve in the garage, giving the man a disparaging look when he pulled out a wheelchair, but the Captain was unaffected, merely raising his brows at Tony while he unfolded the chair pointedly. Tony had sent out a silent thank-you that Happy had had the automatic foresight to park in the underground instead of dropping them off in front of the building; he could imagine the vulture press if they’d gotten pictures of him being pushed into the tower. Especially since no one had released a statement about his current state of health. Apparently, the media platforms were at war on whether or not he was dead—again.

He grimaced at the thought.

Steve must have seen his look and misinterpreted it, because the blond sighed and locked the wheels before moving to lift Tony into it.

Tony, in turn, squawked indignantly as he was (gently) manhandled.

“Don’t squirm, you’re going to hurt yourself,” Steve said, frowning.

“I’m fine!” Tony hissed. “You didn’t have to—”

“I don’t want you straining yourself yet. Plus, you heard the doctors, Tony. You’re on strict bed-rest, no walking unless absolutely necessary.”
“Standing in the elevator—”

“Would put unnecessary strain on your wounds and use energy you could put toward healing,” Steve said, as he unlocked the wheels on the chair and started them toward the elevator.

Tony couldn’t help rolling his eyes, trying to fight off the irritation—and the little voice in his head that wanted to agree with anything Steve said—and the other, pettier voice that wanted to disagree just because. He never really grew out of that.

“Besides, do you really want to be bone-tired when Peter gets here?” Steve bribed in the most casual tone he could muster.

Tony pouted. Low blow.

Though, to be honest, Tony was loving and dreading the thought of Peter coming to stay more long-term. The last couple of days in hospital had nearly driven him insane with how overprotective and fussy his kid had gotten over him. He was touched, but it got old pretty quick; he wasn’t actively dying… anymore. He was fine. Really, a few more naps and he’d be good as new.

“Really, he’s such a worrier. How is a kid that tiny already such a mother hen?”

Tony heard Steve laugh quietly behind him as they entered the elevator. Tony smiled as Friday welcomed him back.

“You think he’s bad? Just you wait,” Steve said in a tone that made Tony instantly nervous.

“Um, what?” he asked, trying to turn to look up at Steve instinctually, but a sharp jolt of pain forced him to stop.

Stupid human body.

“Careful,” Steve murmured, placing a steadying hand on his shoulder.

The warm touch was instantly comforting. Tony hated how it made him want to instantly settle, do anything this man asked of him. His cheeks flushed.

“Almost there.”

“He know we’re on our way?” Tony asked, not having to clarify who “he” was.

“Of course. Buck’s probably pacing a hole into your expensive flooring right now.”

Tony hummed, but his chance to reply was stolen as the elevator opened onto his penthouse. Sure enough, the first thing Tony spotted was Bucky spinning around to face the elevator from where he had indeed been pacing a mere few feet away.

“Tony!” His name escaped past Bucky’s lips in a rushed sigh of breath, and the man hastened toward them. Bucky immediately leaned down and, cupping Tony’s face, brought their lips together in a searing kiss.

“Don’t you ever do that again, you hear me?” Bucky gasped out once he pulled away.

Tony nodded dazedly, but again, he wasn’t given the chance to answer before Bucky was straightening up and turning on Steve.
“And you! What are you thinking, letting him out like this? Without even a blanket? He’s injured! What if he catches a cold? He needs his immune system to be in peak condition, you punk!” Bucky snapped. “Give him here!”

Bucky pushed his way into the elevator and took control of Tony’s chair, pushing him into the penthouse while Steve stepped to the side, hands raised in a surrendering motion. Suddenly, Steve’s earlier remarks were making sense.

“All right, let’s get you to bed, doll,” Bucky said to him, in a much-less-tempered manner.

Tony was a little taken aback by Bucky’s fussing. Surely this wasn’t the same man who had been offering to break him out of the hospital over the phone mere days ago? Tony said as much.

Bucky only rolled his eyes—well, Tony was about ninety percent sure that’s what he was doing in the silence before his reply.

“Of course I offered. Don’t need that stupid hospital. There’s plenty of good doctors in New York, and I’m going to take better care of you than anyone else, anyway,” Bucky muttered.

Tony didn’t know whether to be touched or… concerned. He tried to shoot Steve a questioning glance, but the other man was—poorly—trying to hide just how amusing he found the situation.

Tony sighed, knowing he wasn’t going to get any help there.

In moments, they were entering the familiar space of Tony’s bedroom. The huge, plush emperor-sized mattress looked very inviting compared to the stiff hospital bed he’d been in. It was a little pathetic; he’d done little-to-no actual moving the entire trip home, and yet he could feel exhaustion creeping up on him with alarming speed, now that he was in an environment that radiated vibes of comfort, familiarity, and safety. He tried and failed to suppress a yawn.

Bucky was immediately running a gentle hand through his hair, placing a quick kiss to his temple, and Steve was already moving to turn down the comforter and sheets.

With very little effort, both men had Tony in bed, and Bucky went about tucking him in like he was a child. He tried to look unimpressed, but honestly, he was tired and couldn’t fight off the perpetual good feeling that’d settled over him upon seeing Bucky again.

“Get some rest, Tony,” Steve said.

“We’ll be right here when you wake up,” Bucky added.

It was to the soft reassurances of his lovers’ voices that he finally drifted off to sleep.

---

Steve studied the rooms in the penthouse and communal floors, looking for any hint of something out of place. He raised his brows in surprise… and also suspicion, when he came across both Clint and Natasha watching TV.

“I thought you were on a mission,” he said.

“Hey, welcome home, nice to see you too,” Clint replied.

Natasha sent her companion a look, before replying herself, “It was easy to wrap up.”

“Hmm,” Steve said, not really believing her, but having no evidence to the contrary, he wasn’t
about to start pointing fingers.

“How’s Tony?” Natasha asked.

Steve let her change the subject. “Settling in. Napping. The trip took a lot out of him.”

“We’ll stop by later,” she said.

Steve nodded and continued on. He was positive something had happened while he was distracted in LA, and he had a hunch that it involved not just Bucky, but Natasha and Clint, too.

Steve huffed in annoyance. He hated being kept out of the loop, but for now, he didn’t have much choice except to let it go.

One thing was certain, though—if Bucky had put himself into needless danger, Steve was going to tan his damn hide for it.

---

Peter let out a long breath once he and May made it back to their apartment in Queens. He had hated separating from his dad at the airport, but May had been insistent that Peter spend at least one night at home to rest before heading over to the tower to act like a second shadow. Peter took a little offense to that—it’s not like he was planning on just gluing himself to Tony’s side uselessly, he’d be there to help!

“Why don’t you go shower while I see if there’s anything still good in the fridge?” May suggested, gently tugging on one of his curls.

Peter nodded. He knew he hadn’t been taking the best care of himself while in LA, and he hated worrying his aunt, but he just hadn’t had the energy. He’d been too worried over whether or not Tony would wake up to bother with his own wellbeing.

He lingered a little longer in the shower than he normally would have, the past two weeks’ exhaustion finally catching up to him as the hot water beat against his aching muscles. He decided it was time to leave after he caught himself drifting off for the second time.

Coming down the short hall, Peter heard his aunt chatting to someone and frowned. Who would be by already?

“Oh, Peter, there you are, look who’s here!” May said in a friendly manner, right before Peter was nearly tackled to the ground by another body.

Peter yelped and flailed out, grabbing hold of the person who was… hugging him?

“Peter!”

Peter blinked owlishly as the other boy finally released him.

“Harry?” he asked, taken aback.

Harry straightened up and tried to look nonchalant, as if he hadn’t just tried to crush the life out of Peter.

“I’ve been trying to get a hold of you forever,” he said, shrugging.

Peter winced. “Oh shit. Harry, I’m sorry, I was in such a rush—we were out of state and I totally
forgot my phone charger—"

“Sorry to interrupt, but I’m going to order some pizza. Is there anything you’d like, Harry?” May interrupted with a friendly smile.

“Oh, it’s fine, Mrs. Parker, you don’t need to—”

“You’re right, it is fine. Now what would you boys like to eat?” she insisted.

Harry must have been smart enough to know a losing battle when he saw one, because he caught Peter’s eyes quickly and then shrugged, listing off something simple.

May nodded and made the call, before pulling a couple of bills from her wallet.

“Okay Peter, I’m going out to pick a few things up at the shop, most of the stuff in the fridge has gone off. I’ll leave the money for the pizza on the table.”

“Oh, thanks May!” Peter said.

Harry waited until May was gone before rounding on Peter.

“Really forgot your phone charger?” Harry asked.

“I was in a hurry,” Peter said, glancing at his feet.

Harry sighed, though it sounded like it was in relief. Peter hoped it was in relief.

“Well, don’t mind the gazillion notifications when you plug your phone in, then,” Harry said, and Peter could’ve sworn the other boy’s cheeks tinted a bit at the grumpy sounding admission.

“I’m sorry I worried you—”

“I just—I thought something might’ve happened, you know, after—” Harry cut himself off after a flash of anger passed over his face, before it morphed into concern, “but then I saw the news and—shit, Pete, is—is Stark okay?”

Peter swallowed thickly, feeling guilty over worrying his friend, which led him to think about Ned and MJ—oh god, they were going to kill him—well, MJ for sure.

“Yeah, it—it was bad, but, he’s going to be okay now. Well, at least, that’s what the doctors say. As long as he listens and follows the recovery plan, and…” Peter stopped. “Sorry, I’m rambling,” he admitted, cheeks flushing.

“No, don’t apologize, Pete. I’m glad to hear he’s going to be okay,” Harry said, then paused and continued, “And you—you’re okay?”

Peter nodded. “Yeah, well,” he didn’t want to lie, and Harry had already proven himself to be trustworthy… “I wasn’t, for a while, but, I think I’ll be okay now.”

Harry nodded, frowning seriously.

“If you ever need anything, just let me know, okay?”

“All right. Thanks, Harry.” Peter said, not really knowing why his stomach was fluttering.

Harry nodded, then coughed, as if that could dispel the heavy atmosphere.
“So, how about we find some bad sci-fi to pick apart on TV?”

Peter grinned. “Hell yeah!”

---

After having poor luck finding anything on TV, Peter pulled out a stack of DVDs from where May kept them under the TV. They had bickered between *Troll 2* and *Alien 3*—both being absolutely terrible in the best ways—but eventually settled in to watch *Alien* when Peter gave up with a sigh.

Halfway through a film so bad it was removed from canon, Harry and Peter had already depleted their bowls of chips and popcorn. Harry got up and collected the empty bowls. “I'll go get us more,” he said.

Peter immediately started to protest—after all, Harry was his guest, it should have been Peter making sure the snacks were full and ready—but Harry waved off his protests.

“Pete, it’s fine, I’m sure I can navigate the kitchen. Just relax.”

Peter huffed, but nodded and sank back into the old sofa. A couple of minutes later, Harry was back, and Peter watched as he sat the now-filled bowls on the coffee table and settled in on the sofa.

He was only too aware of the heat from Harry's leg as it pressed against his own as the other boy situated himself back onto the sofa.

He was a bit surprised at Harry's choice of seating arrangements, since the other boy had resolutely kept to “his side” of the sofa during the movie. Still, Peter wasn’t completely shocked, since Harry seemed to be a very touch-oriented person. When they spoke, Harry would often brush their arms together, or gently touch his arm or shoulder; when he’d pass something to Peter, he would often let his fingers linger against Peter's own, or even when they went to the fair, Harry had held his hand for a bit.

Hell, as children, Harry had always been very gestural when he spoke about a topic that held his interest. That habit seemed to have been lost, or perhaps trained out of him over time, which Peter found a bit disheartening. He had always liked the way Harry had been so open and passionate. Not all of that was lost, thankfully; though some of his gesticulating may have ceased, Harry still got that excited and lively spark in his eyes when talking about things he was particularly fond of. Usually subjects about science, different projects he was working on, personal theories, hypotheses…

Not for the first time, Peter wished that his dad could get over his strange and completely unfounded hatred for Harry. Then again, even if he could, Harry didn't seem that fond of Tony either—not that Peter could blame him. Tony had been standoffish at best and threateningly aggressive at worst.

Peter shivered at the thought of the party, at the pure, enraged fury that had shone in his dad’s eyes upon seeing Harry there.

“Cold?”

Peter was broken out of his musings by Harry's voice. It took a moment to understand the question—oh, Harry must have misinterpreted his shiver—great, and now he’d been silent too long, and shit, it was going to get awkward, and—
Harry seemed completely undeterred by Peter’s lack of response. Rather, the older teen turned and pulled the blanket from the back of the sofa to spread over their laps.

“There,” Harry said, once he was done fiddling with the blanket. “Better?”

Peter flushed and nodded, thankful that the lights were out in the living room so that Harry couldn't see his blush. “Thanks,” he replied, silently congratulating himself on sounding much more relaxed than he felt.

Peter saw Harry smile, bright and happy, before turning back to the TV to continue watching the movie. He felt an odd flutter in his stomach at the sight of the smile, and immediately did his best to stomp the feeling out (rather unsuccessfully).

He frowned. He didn't understand where his sudden flare of nervousness had come from. There wasn't anything out of the ordinary or out of place. He and Harry were simply hanging out, watching movies. It was something he would do with any of his friends, it shouldn't have felt different—and yet, it did. It wouldn't have been so bad if he could just place why.

Throughout the rest of the movie, Peter caught Harry glancing at him here or there, as if Peter himself was more interesting than anything happening on the screen. He’d be lying if he said he didn't like the attention, and yet he couldn't seem to get rid of that fluttering nervousness that’d made a home in his belly.

Why was he feeling so… weird?

“Want to watch another?”

Peter blinked. When had the movie ended?

“Uhm, sure!” He smiled at Harry.

Harry grinned and got up off the couch, kneeling in front of the TV stand where the DVD player and a pile of movies sat.

“So what do you think, should we try to sit through Resurrection?” Harry held up the case for Alien 4. “God, why do you even own this?”

“It was part of the box set!” Peter argued.

“Uh huh, you also own Troll 2, sooo…” Harry teased.

Peter rolled his eyes, but couldn't fully keep the grin off his face.

“I think you like bad movies!”

“I like good bad movies!” Peter tried to defend.

Harry laughed. Peter felt something in him constrict at the sound, then warm and settle into accomplishment.

“You realize that makes no sense, right?”

“It totally does and you know it!” Peter said.

“All right, Pete, sure,” Harry said, still grinning.
“Oh just hurry up and pick something.”

“Fine, fine!” Harry dug through the movie cases.

Peter watched as Harry sorted through the disks until he made a sound of interest and popped the DVD into the player.

Harry reclaimed his spot next to him, stretched out, and let his arm fall to rest along the back of the sofa. Harry wasn't touching him, apart from their legs brushing together, but he was still very acutely aware of how close they were; Harry could so easily wrap his arm around Peter's shoulder, and it would be so easy for Peter to let himself relax against Harry's side—he felt hot and maybe even a little sick with nausea suddenly as the fluttery feeling came back full force—maybe he was sick, and that's why he was feeling so weird?

The music on the screen picked up and Peter tensed as he was brought out of his thoughts. It occurred to him, then, at the rising sound of shrill violin, that he had no idea what Harry had decided to play. He did, however, have a sinking feeling that it was something horror related—Peter’d been sure all the movies he grabbed from the cabinet were sci-fi related, but—he must have made a mistake.

Peter's eyes fixated on the screen, waiting for the scares that would undoubtedly leave him shaking. He didn't even register it at first, he was so intent and tense, but soon the fingers lightly brushing through his curls became hard to ignore. Peter found himself distracted.

He could feel Harry gently pulling and stroking the few stray curls around the back of his head that always refused to sit straight.

Peter found himself a sort of living paradox then; he loved it when his hair was stroked or head massaged, but also, he was still feeling flushed, and if anything, the butterflies in his stomach only grew more restless. He didn't want Harry to stop, but he was also thinking maybe he should go lay down.

He felt himself instinctively leaning into the touch, anyway.

Harry's fingers mussed his curls, brushing lightly against his neck. Peter gulped as his heartbeat sputtered and his flesh prickled somewhat pleasantly, though he couldn't shake the nervous, sick feeling.

Peter was just thinking that maybe he should really call it a night when the music on screen came to a shrill high, then there was some seriously creepy ghost kids and blood and Peter was jumping with the characters’ screams.

When Peter's heart slowed to a reasonable rate, he became aware of two things: one, in his panic, he had latched onto the closest thing and his face was now smushed against Harry's chest, and two, Harry's hand was stroking his back, soothingly.

“Damn, Pete, if I knew you were this bad with horror I wouldn't have put it on.”

Peter groaned in embarrassment. Great. Now he looked like an idiot.

He supposed it could have been worse; the last time Clint had snuck up on him, Peter had wound up stuck to the ceiling. He tried to envision explaining that off the Harry. 'I ate so much candy that my fingers got sticky and I guess it was enough to—'

No.
Harry was way too smart for that. Peter sighed, and as he did, he got a whiff of Harry's cologne and realized he hadn't tried to extract himself from Harry's lap yet. Wonderful. Peter flushed darkly, even more embarrassed.

“Hey, I put it on pause. Why don't we put something else on?”

Peter pulled away, Harry's arms falling away, if but a bit reluctantly.

He really was in a mood, wasn't he?

“Resurrection it is,” Harry said, getting up and swapping disks.

---

Two movies later they finally called it a night. After Harry said his goodnights, he paused, frowning to himself for a moment before he pulled Peter into a tight hug.

“If you need anything, just let me know, okay? I’m only a phone call away,” Harry said.

Peter nodded as he returned the gesture, but as Harry was pulling away, he stopped and leaned in again. Peter was just thinking about what a double hug could possibly mean when he felt Harry's lips meet his cheek.

“Night, Peter,” Harry said softly as he pulled away.

Peter didn't have a chance to respond before Harry was out his door. He blinked, convinced he looked stupid, standing in the hall staring at the closed door, but really—his hand came up to his cheek, and he felt it warm with his blush. He swore he could still feel the tingle where Harry's lips had been, and...

Did that… mean something?

Peter's heart fluttered. Could Harry… like him?

He shook his head.

Harry was just worried about him. He was being a little clingier tonight because Peter had all but vanished for two weeks, that was all. Really, it was sweet that Harry was so concerned about him.

He shoved down the wiggling disappointment that sparked in his gut. Peter frowned. That was just ridiculous, he had no business dwelling on something like that anyway, he had other things to worry about—like his dad, and what he was going to tell Ned and MJ. Plus, he wasn't even gay, so...

Peter groaned and decided to get ready for bed. He wanted to be up early tomorrow to get to the tower.

---

Tony sighed as he frowned at Steve.

“Italy,” he stated. “We can go to Florence, soak up the sun, look at the art or whatever, you’ll love it.”

“Tony, really, it’s fine. You’re not taking me to Italy,” Steve denied firmly.
Tony’s brow furrowed deeper and he huffed. “You’re right, gotta wait until we can bring Bucky. Wouldn’t be able to enjoy it without him. Something closer, then. Oh, how about—”

“Oh, how about—”

“Tony.” Steve finally set aside his sketchpad.

“Steve.” Tony nodded.

Steve sighed. “What is this about?”

Tony glanced down to where the comforter was pulled over his lap, and tugged at a loose string, a little nervously. Something akin to guilt and disappointment churned in his chest. He resisted the urge to rub at his scar.

“Well, we never got to celebrate your birthday, and—”

“That’s what’s got you all worked up?” Steve asked, sounding a little amused. “My birthday?”

Tony shot him a sour look.

“Look, it’s not a big deal—”

Tony scoffed. “You’re right, so I figure, if we start planning now, we can have one hell of a party before the month is up—”

“Tony, really, I don’t need—”

“Listen, you all threw me a—well, an awesome party, now it’s your turn—dammit, I had plans! That didn’t involve sleeping through your birthday—actually, there wasn’t going to be a lot of sleep planned at all, if you catch my drift,” Tony said in frustration.

He’d been planning a party for Steve for a while; nothing huge, he knew Steve didn’t like large crowds, just amongst the team. Then he went and got fucking skewered like a grade-A idiot and slept—

“Tony, you didn’t sleep through my birthday, you were in a coma,” Steve stressed. “And even then, you don’t owe me anything.”

“But—” Tony tried to argue, but Steve shook his head.

“Don’t worry about it, just concentrate on getting better, okay? You waking up was honestly the best gift you could have gotten me, anyway.”

Tony pulled a disgusted look, even as his chest warmed happily. Steve only grinned, knowingly.

“Here,” Steve said, as he handed Tony his pills and a water bottle.

Tony sighed, but swallowed them down dutifully.
“Happy?” He grinned.

Steve nodded and picked his sketchbook back up, a small, content grin on his face.

Tony relaxed for all of five seconds before the door to his bedroom was thrown open.

“Hi!” Peter cheered as he maneuvered himself and a large tray into the room.

“Please, come in, make yourself at home,” Tony deadpanned.

“Has he taken his pills yet?” Peter asked, completely ignoring Tony’s muttering.

“Just did,” Steve said, fighting off a grin at the affronted look on Tony’s face.

“*He* is right here,” Tony groused.

“Okay, ‘cause Bucky said that Dr. Cho said that it’s better if he has something in his stomach, so we made soup! Well, it’s more like a low-sodium broth.” Peter hesitated for only a second, before he was grinning again. “But soup!”

Tony was very impressed that he was able to withhold from rolling his eyes.

“Has he had his meds?” Bucky asked as he strolled in.

Never mind.

“Don’t roll your eyes at me, doll, just making sure you’re following the doctor’s orders.”

“I’m *fine,*” Tony insisted, for what felt like the millionth time.

Bucky fixed him with a dry look. “Oh, sure, perfectly fine,” he said, sarcastically.

Peter set the tray down over Tony’s lap and gestured to the meal. Tony used the term meal *very* loosely.

“No bread or crackers?” he asked, already knowing the answer.

“No, no solid foods for at least another three days. Then we’ll try smoothies,” said Bucky as he placed a linen napkin next to the bowl of broth.

Tony quickly picked up his spoon, glaring pointedly at Bucky when he caught the man gazing at it a little too intently. They were *not* having a repeat performance of the last time Bucky had tried to feed him.

After eating his rather pathetic lunch, Tony felt himself grow embarrassingly tired, until he finally drifted off for yet another nap.

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When Tony awoke, he was alone. Steve’s sketchbook sat on the bed a few feet away, and when Tony paused to listen, he could hear the faint sounds of the shower running in the attached bathroom.

In his own defense, he tried to convince himself not to, that it was a breach of privacy and just plain rude, but, well, Tony’d always been intensely curious. He lasted all of a minute before he cracked and reached over to grab the sketchpad.
The first picture Tony recognized instantly as his workshop, smooth lines perfectly illustrating the organized chaos and machinery. Next was a drawing of the Avengers Tower, and then another of the compound, a neighborhood Tony didn’t recognize, and yet so much detail had been poured into it he knew it meant something to Steve. Tony was genuinely impressed by Steve’s obvious talent. He knew Steve was into art, but as far as he could tell, if this was what his lover was like when his skills were, as he had stated, “rusty,” then Christ, he really needed to invest.

There weren’t just landscapes in the book, either. Portraits were also sprinkled through, Natasha sparring, Thor and Clint laughing together over some unseen thing, Sam smiling, Bucky pulling his hair back, Peter petting a large dog, Tony asleep at his desk, Wanda reading, Tony and Bucky curled up on the sofa—an entire page of Bucky—oh, look, followed by an entire page of him, too. Tony felt his cheeks flush slightly. His fingers traced over the drawings lightly, careful not to smudge the pencil. It was fascinating to see, not just himself, but the Avengers scattered throughout Steve’s artwork.

Tony turned the page and paused over the next piece, the soft smile that had made its way onto his face dropping. The next drawing was different from the rest, apart from being done with what Tony would guess was a ballpoint pen, the lines were less precise, harsh and messy, the ink being reworked in some spots so often that it bled together to form dark bold lines, and even places where it looked as if the pen was almost pushed straight through the paper. The paper itself was warped at its edges as if it’d been clutched much too tightly while being worked upon. The whole piece felt raw and angry, and maybe even desperate. Something in Tony’s heart clenched the more he studied it.

“I was so afraid.”

Tony’s head darted to look at Steve, who was standing just outside the bathroom door, staring at the sketchbook open on his lap.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have—” Tony began, feeling chastised that he was caught.

“It’s okay,” Steve said as he sat himself down on the bed next to Tony. He took the book back from him and stared at the drawing of Tony lying in the hospital bed.

“When Thor caught you and brought you down and—god, I thought it was too late,” Steve swallowed thickly as his throat seemed to tighten, then he took a deep breath and shook his head. “And then the doctors told me they were putting you into a coma to help you heal, but then—”

“But then I didn’t wake up. Not when I was supposed to, at least,” Tony finished, feeling a stab of guilt. “I’m so sorry, Steve, I should have been more careful, I—I don’t know, it just happened so fast and—”

“No, Tony, it wasn’t your fault—god, no!” Steve said, fast and firm. “I’m team leader, if anything—”

“Steve, there’s no way you’re blaming yourself for this!” Tony argued, gesturing to himself.

“How could I not when—”

“Especially since I—”

They began at the same time, and were both cut off by an annoyed-sounding sigh.

Tony and Steve both turned to see Bucky hovering by the door.
“Are you both seriously having an argument over who’s most guilty over Tones’ injuries?”

“Technically more like who’s more responsible,” Tony muttered.

Bucky rolled his eyes as he walked over to the closet to grab his towel.

“Then blame the asshole robots that stabbed you and whoever built them,” Bucky said matter-of-factly, before disappearing into the bathroom.

Steve and Tony stared at the closed door, then to each other, then burst into giggles.

Tony finally stopped laughing when his stitches complained a little too painfully.

“Oh, ow, okay. Maybe that was a little…”

“A little stupid,” Steve finished, grinning brightly.

Steve closed the sketchbook and set it aside, then leaned down and kissed Tony, once, twice, three quick pecks to his lips. Tony let go of his worry, if just for a little bit, and allowed himself to feel happy.

---

Three days later, Tony was finally on his feet. Sort of. Almost.

“No,” Tony said as he glared at the cane Peter was brandishing.

It was an ugly thing, silver metal with four feet on the end, much like the kind the elderly used, only missing the tennis ball feet.

“Absolutely not,” he said, crossing his arms.

Steve sent him an unimpressed look. “Tony, if you want out of bed and out of the chair, then you need to use this. It’s not like you’re leaving the tower with it, it’s just us here.”

Tony glared. “That thing is hideous.”

Steve looked to the ceiling, like he was sending a silent prayer, then sighed and looked back at Tony. “You need to start exercising again, in small doses, but you can’t walk without support.”

“Come on, doll, just use it and we’ll buy you a pretty one later,” Bucky said, grinning.

It was obvious that Bucky was finding the whole thing much too amusing. Tony sent him a look that told him he thought as much. Bucky’s grin widened.

Assholes.

After a few days, Tony was certain of two things: he hated the cane. He really hated the cane. What he was starting to hate even more, though, was Peter’s hovering every time he used the cane.

“Are you sure you’re feeling okay?”

“Do you need to rest? Maybe you should rest!”

“I’ll carry that!”

“I’m sure I could just carry you!”
Tony loved him, he loved him with all his heart, but he was about six seconds away from murdering him.

It wouldn’t have been so bad if it was just Peter, but Bucky was there, too. Anytime he left his bed, Bucky would materialize from nothing like a goddamn vampire. He was less vocal than Peter was in his worry, but Tony could still feel his gaze following him.

Maybe it was the meds making him tired, or the pain, or the frustration of everything suddenly being a challenge, but Tony found his tolerance levels to be exceptionally low.

“You know if you—” Peter started.

Steve must have seen something in his face, a warning tick or something, because a moment later, the man was leading Peter away from him.

“Pete, here’s twenty bucks, why don’t you go out for the afternoon and have some fun with your friends?”

Tony could’ve kissed Steve.

Peter frowned, looking unconvinced.

“I don’t know, what if something happens when I’m gone and D—and Tony needs me?” he asked.

“Don’t worry about that, kid, Stevie and I are here, we’ll take care of Tony,” Bucky added.

“Go on, Pete,” Tony insisted, while trying not to sound too excited by the prospect. “I’m not going to keel over. Go call your friends.”

Peter hesitated a moment longer, chewing at his lip nervously before he nodded.

“Okay, but if anything happens, call me!”

“We will, promise,” Bucky said. “Now, shoo!”

Tony watched Peter run back to his room to grab his wallet and shoes and sighed in relief, though the tension didn’t fully leave until five minutes later, when his kid was finally in the elevator, heading out.

“Steve,” Tony said and waved him over.

Tony was going to make good on his silent promise and kiss him silly.

---

Peter felt a restless tug that wanted him to turn around and head back up the elevator. He knew that, whatever should happen, Steve and Bucky could handle it. He knew that, but still, a piece of him felt wrong for leaving his dad while he could hardly move.

On top of that, this would be the first time he saw Harry since their movie night. They had spoken on the phone and texted often since then, but never had Harry mentioned or even seemed to allude to his behavior that night. Peter had decided to just let it go and not overthink it unless Harry said something. Still, an excited yet nervous jitter lit up his body as he made his way out of the tower.

He let out a sigh and checked his phone. No new messages since Harry’s last text telling him he was on his way to pick him up.
He headed over to the same cafe Harry had picked him up at previously, ordered a coffee and waited. He felt a little guilty for meeting Harry, but really, May was obviously okay with him being around, so why wouldn’t his dad be fine with it too? Peter scuffed his shoe against the pavement a bit in frustration. He just wished his dad would get over whatever hang up he had, he hated feeling like he was sneaking around just to meet his friend.

Peter was half done his coffee by the time Harry pulled up and honked to get his attention. He felt an excited flutter in his chest and stomach at the sight of the familiar car and waved as he hurried over.

“Hey!” he greeted Harry with a huge grin.

“Hey, Pete. How’s it going?”

Peter nodded. “All right, I guess.”

God, Harry always looked so well put-together and cool—he made it all look so easy. Peter was suddenly starting to second guess his choice of attire.

“That doesn’t sound too confident,” Harry paused, “Stark still doing okay?”

Peter blinked out of his thoughts, then nodded once he registered what Harry had said.

“Yeah, he’s getting better slowly. I still worry, though.”

“That’s understandable. Well, let’s try and get your mind off of it, huh? It’s summer! You need to relax a bit. So, what do you wanna do?”

Peter thought about it for a bit as Harry drove. “Any good arcades nearby? I’ve got a twenty.”

Harry nodded. “Yeah, we could go to the one in the mall and then maybe catch a movie?”

Peter grinned. “Let’s do it!”

“You better be ready, Parker, I’m going to kick your ass at Street Fighter,” Harry challenged.

“You can try!”

They drove for a little bit in companionable silence before Harry flicked on the radio. Harry groaned at the song that started playing, even as Peter started tapping his hands to the beat.

“Of course you’d like this,” Harry accused, though there was a smile in his voice.

Peter scoffed in mock offense. “The top twenties are on the top for a reason!”

Harry sighed but didn’t move to change the station, and Peter caught a small smile at the corner of his lips, so he doubted Harry hated the song as much as his griping would suggest.

A few more songs played in the same manner before the station switched gears to its newscast segment. It started with the weather, current temperatures, and led into traffic patterns. Peter started to tune it out, until the other newscaster came on.

“And in the news tonight, police are investigating the death of forty-seven year old James McLaughlin. James was last seen leaving for work early Friday morning. Though police have yet to confirm, sources say that it’s suspected that this might be another strike from the Tri-City Ripper. Police are issuing a plea to the public for any information in regards to the case.”
Peter felt a cold weight of dread fall heavy in his gut, which quickly morphed into guilt. He’d been so absorbed in his dad’s fight and subsequent injury that he’d totally pushed aside his duty as Spider-Man. Jason's face flashed in his mind, leaving him feeling slightly ill.

Next to him, Harry tsk’d, and when Peter turned to look, he saw the other boy’s upper lip curled in distaste.

“My dad’s obsessed with that guy, like Beautiful Mind level obsessed. He has one of those, like, clue boards and everything. It's weird, but, whatever.” He paused and shook his head. “I can't believe they haven't caught this guy yet,” Harry finished.

Peter nodded, swallowing around his lingering nausea.

“Yeah, he—he killed a—killed a student who went to my school,” Peter whispered, his guilt over Jason churning in his stomach.

Harry's knuckles turned white against the steering wheel, his nostrils flaring and his eyes darting to Peter.

“Fuck!” Harry hissed. “Are you—is it safe? Shit, Pete—"

“No, it’s—Jason wasn't taken from school. May really freaked out, though—Mr. Stark too, actually. Neither of them let me transit through the area alone anymore. May started picking me up from school.”

“What about when she works?”

“Then Mr. Stark sends his driver to get me.”

Harry nodded, seeming to relax subtly.

“If, for whatever reason, that falls through, just—just call me, okay? I'll come get you,” Harry said decisively.

Peter nodded as he felt his chest warm a bit, even if he wasn’t worried about his own wellbeing.

“Thanks,” he said.

Peter turned to gaze out the window and tried not to let his mood be too affected by the news. After all, he was here to have fun with Harry, not mope. Though, he did make a silent promise to go out for a patrol soon.

They had just turned the corner when Peter perked up, eyes zeroing in on a familiar figure.

“Wait! Stop!”

Harry swore and hit the brakes, his right hand flying from the steering wheel to Peter’s chest instinctively as they jolted with the force of the stop.

“Jesus! Peter! What?” Harry exclaimed as horns blared behind them.

Peter flushed, embarrassed. “Sorry!”

Harry sighed, but pulled over to the side a bit to give traffic a chance to pass. The car behind them sped past, the driver flipping them off angrily.
Harry sent Peter a *look*. Peter shrugged and blushed, smiling nervously.

“You're lucky you're cute, Parker,” Harry muttered.

“What?” Peter asked, feeling—a flutter?—in his stomach at the comment.

“So what's up, why'd we stop?” Harry said.

Peter jolted as the whole reason came back to him. “Oh, right! One sec!” Peter said as he unbuckled and darted out of the car, ignoring Harry calling after him.

Peter smiled and waved as MJ looked at him a little incredulously.

“Christ, Parker, way to make a scene,” she said, smiling crookedly.

“MJ! Hi!” Peter said excitedly.

It hit him now just how long it’d been since he had seen his friend. He stopped, taking in her appearance. She was carrying a backpack and gym bag with her, and when Peter stopped to get a good look, he realized just how tired she appeared.

MJ wasn’t the most open person Peter knew; in fact, despite attending the same school for a couple of years and considering her a friend, he knew surprisingly little about her. Still, he felt a pang of concern at how ruffled and exhausted she looked.

“Hey, are you okay?” Peter asked, his voice soft.

MJ seemed to freeze, a little wide-eyed, almost startled, before she shuddered and to Peter’s absolute panic, began blinking back tears.

“I—I’m okay. It’s fine,” she managed with a very unconvincing, shaking smile. MJ was about nine levels of absolute snark; the image before Peter didn’t align with the mental picture he had of her at all.

“Okay, so, for argument’s sake, let’s say I believed exactly none of that and asked again. Would you tell me what’s going on?” Peter said.

MJ was quiet for long enough that Peter began to believe she was going to remain that way, before she let out a heavy breath. A new, derisive and slightly bitter smile appeared on her face.

“I… I came out to my parents today.”

“What? Really?”

“I honestly thought—I mean, they never really said anything against—” she paused, her eyes glazing over for a moment, before she seemed to blink back. “They barely gave me enough time to throw together a couple of bags before they threw me out.”

Peter’s heart ached in sympathy.

“Oh, you don’t really seem like a touchy-feely kind of person, but I really wanna give you a hug,” Peter said.

MJ swallowed thickly, but nodded, and Peter immediately wrapped her up in a hug.

“I know it probably sounds kind of pathetic, but I’m really sorry that happened,” he said.
He felt MJ move her head against his shoulder in a nod.

“Hey.”

Peter and MJ stepped apart, and Peter saw Harry walking up to them.

“Found a place to park. Is everything okay?” His eyes darted between them.

“Yes,” said MJ.

“No,” said Peter.

They looked to each other and broke into laughter.

“Uhh, okay?” Harry said, obviously lost.

“Sorry!” Peter said, then. “MJ, this is Harry, he’s—he’s a really good friend. Harry, this is MJ.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” Harry said, extending his hand for her to shake.

MJ took his hand and looked him up and down. “Hmm, I don’t know, you seem too cool to be friends with this nerd.” She grinned, gesturing to Peter.

“Hey!” Peter squawked. “No lies, he’s tricking you with his fancy clothes, he’s super dorky!”

Harry laughed. “Nope, too late, Pete, it’s been confirmed, I’m the superior friend!” He followed the statement with a bright smile and a playful wink that did not have Peter blushing.

Peter huffed. “Now you’ve done it,” he said to MJ. “As if his head wasn’t big enough. He’s not going to be able to fit his ego in the car now.”

Peter felt the light atmosphere slowly dim again, and before he knew it, he was lost in what MJ had told him. “So, uhm, have you—do you, like, have anywhere to stay?” he asked, quietly.

MJ stiffened a bit, and Peter felt bad, but he also wasn’t about to let MJ walk off if she didn’t have anywhere safe to sleep.

“Well, I mean, I have a little bit saved from my part-time job. I was going to get a cheap room somewhere and try and regroup but—but I don’t know.” She frowned, then continued, more softly, “I really wasn’t expecting this.”

Harry had seemed to sense the change in mood as well, and though he hadn’t been present for the whole story, he seemed to play catch-up just fine.

“If you need somewhere to stay, there’s plenty of space at my place. I know you don’t really know me or anything, but I wouldn’t feel comfortable leaving one of Pete’s friends out here.”

Peter felt a shock go through him at Harry’s offer, as well as something dark and—and he didn’t know what, but he suddenly had an urge to stomp his foot and shout, ‘No!’ He swallowed it down, feeling ashamed of himself. Harry was being nice, offering to help someone he didn’t even know, just because Peter introduced them.

“We have guest rooms, so you wouldn’t have to worry about sharing a space,” Harry continued.

The words did little to soothe the sore spot in Peter’s chest. He frowned. He was being ridiculous, what did he have to be so upset over? After all, MJ had literally just said she came out to her
parents—well, that was also presumptuous, he supposed, she hadn’t told him how she identified
—why did it matter? Peter silently cursed himself out.

Would he have cared if it’d been Ned who had offered? No. Then why?

Peter quickly composed his features when MJ glanced at him, and then forced himself to smile
encouragingly.

“You can always leave if you don’t like it,” Harry continued, “but I thought I’d offer. It’s not
exactly safe out there, especially right now. You can settle in and work on getting back on your
feet.”

MJ looked between Peter and Harry and back again, before she nodded.

“Okay, I-I would really appreciate that,” she said.

Harry beamed. “Awesome! Pete and I were just heading to the arcade, why don’t we throw your
stuff in the car and you can join us. It sounds like you could use some down time, too.”

Peter felt a little of that bad feeling leave at MJ’s answering smile. He didn’t know what the hell
that little stint had been about, but he refused to feel bad that his friend was getting help.

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Tony sighed as he let himself sink further into the plush sofa. Steve looked over to him with a grin
as he continued to rub Tony’s feet. Bucky hurried in, carrying a plate of fruit and cheeses, and set it
next to Tony before squishing himself close, and hey, maybe this whole pampering thing had its
perks. Tony let himself soak up Bucky’s cuddles, basking in the affectionate little kisses peppered
against his head and cheeks.

“Boss, Peter has just been dropped off,” Friday alerted them.

Tony sighed, but smiled. “Thanks, Fri.”

He was happy that Peter finally went out and enjoyed himself a bit. The kid had been turning into a
recluse—wait. Tony frowned. He didn’t think any of Peter’s friends drove yet.

“Friday, do we have an ID on who Pete was with?” Tony asked.

Steve and Bucky both paused and caught each other’s gaze with a subtle grimace. Even Friday
seemed to hesitate.

“The vehicle and plates are the same as before,” she finally admitted.

Tony felt a wave of disbelief wash over him, quickly followed by rage.

“God dammit, Peter!” he shouted.

He pushed himself up from his reclining position and grappled for the stupid cane.

“Doll, take it easy now—”

“Don’t tell me to take it easy!” Tony snapped at Bucky. “I expressly forbade Peter from seeing that
kid!”

“Tony,” Steve began, but Tony shook his head as he struggled to stand.
“No! Don’t you start! I—dammit,” he swore as he twisted the wrong way, causing a spark of pain to shoot through his tender abdomen.

“Are you okay?” Peter was immediately rushing over from the elevator, arriving just in time to see Tony flinch and swear.

“Fine. I’m fine!” he said, unable to keep the anger from his voice. He couldn’t help it, though. What was he going to have to do to get his damn kid to listen?

Peter hesitated, obviously reading the tone in his voice. “O-Okay?”

“Enjoy yourself?”

“Um, kind of, yeah—we ran into MJ though, and—”

“Oh yeah? And who’s ‘we,’ Peter?” Tony demanded, not letting the teen finish.

He watched as Peter froze, his eyes a little wide, stance tense.

Tony caught Steve’s gaze and sighed, trying to get control of his anger and slight panic. Their last fight over this hadn’t exactly gone well.

“Peter.” Tony leaned heavily on his cane. “I thought I made myself very clear that you were not to go near Osborn?”

His eyes narrowed as he watched Peter straighten his body, getting that stubborn tick in his jaw when he was getting ready to fight.

“Harry is a good friend, and I’m not going to just abandon that!” Peter argued.

“He’s not safe.”

“You’re wrong.”

“Excuse me?” Tony took a step forward.

“You’re wrong. I trust Harry—” Peter said, though he took a distinctive step backward.

“No. This ends now, Peter!” Tony snapped. He gritted his teeth and tried to tell himself to remain cool, but it was so hard, why did Peter have to fight him on this?

“You can’t tell me who I can be friends with!” Peter snapped.

“The hell I can’t!” Tony said back, voice raising an octave.

“It’s not your place or responsibility to decide what I can or can’t do!” Peter argued.

“We both know that’s not true,” Tony scoffed.

“Harry is a good person! You can’t keep—you can’t keep villainizing him!”

“I won’t have my kid running around with that delinquent!”

“You’re not listening!” Peter almost yelled.

“No, you’re not listening. You are the child, I am the adult, and I am tired of you constantly undermining my authority on this! It stops now!” Tony’s voice rose louder.
Peter was being obstinate and stubborn and infuriating. His side ached as he continued to stand, but he forced himself to stand tall. He needed to appear strong, in charge.

He ignored the worried looks Bucky and Steve were sending them.

“You don’t have the authority to tell me who I can hang out with!”

“I swear to god, I will ground you for the rest of the damn summer!”

“You can’t do that either!” Peter argued.

Ridiculously argued, since Tony had already extended his power in that regard in the past. He knew they both knew it. Peter was just being difficult for the sake of being difficult, and that was making Tony even more frustrated.

“I can and I will. I won’t have my kid be put in danger because of Osborn!”

“I’m not in any danger when I’m with Harry! I’m not going to stop hanging out with him, go ahead try and stop me! You can’t!” Peter shouted, then more quietly, “I’m not your kid. You can’t force me to do anything.”

Tony felt a stab of pain hit his chest that had nothing to do with his injury, but he pushed it down. Peter couldn’t even meet his eyes as he said that last bit, he’d gone from staring him down to pouting at his sneakers. Tony felt affronted and slightly insulted that Peter would even imply that they weren’t family at this point, especially after what they had spoken briefly about in the hospital. This stubborn, infuriating little—

“May—Aunt May is my—my guardian, and she—and she—”

Tony’s eyes narrowed at how strong Peter’s stammering was getting. The teen’s cheeks flushed, he looked rather miserable.

“Fine,” Tony growled and marched from the room, leaving Peter to snap his head back up and watch with a panicked expression.

Tony was on a mission. Peter thought he could mouth off and ignore his rules, then he had another thing coming.

“Tony, Tony, slow down, you’re going to hurt yourself!” Steve was hot on his heels. “Tony, what are you doing?”

Tony ignored him and pushed on. His body ached and burned, but it was nothing in comparison to the anger he was feeling. That little Osborn shit thought he could pop into Peter’s life and Tony wouldn’t be ready? Fuck him. Tony was not going to let his kid get hurt—if Norman Osborn ever found out about Peter—about who and what he was? Tony felt sick dread pool in his gut. The terror of the thought was strong enough to leave him shuddering.

He couldn’t let that happen.

Peter wanted to argue that Tony didn’t have the authority to parent him? Fine. They both knew that that was a garbage argument. His kid would’ve been able to look at him properly as he said it if it wasn’t, but regardless, Tony was going to make damn sure to eradicate it.

He let his office door slam as he pushed it open.
“Tony—” Steve tried.

“In a minute,” he said to Steve, then muttered angrily to himself, “Pete wants to act like a damn brat? Fine. Let’s throw a wrench in his already-flawed logic.”

“Tony, Peter didn’t mean that, not really. Surely you know that,” Steve began, misunderstanding.

“Oh I know. And I’m about to make damn sure he knows that I know.”

Tony’s brow was awash in a light sheen of sweat, and he could feel the exhaustion creeping up on him. He mentally cursed himself and his broken body. He moved around his desk and had Friday unlock the top drawer, then reached inside and pulled out a large envelope, brandishing it with an “Ah-ha!”

“What’s—?” Steve didn’t get to finish before Tony was on his way out of the office.

Back in the main area, Tony saw Peter and Bucky huddled close together, Bucky had a hand wrapped around Peter’s shoulders as they spoke quietly, Peter looking particularly distressed.

“Pete—”

Tony was cut off when by Peter’s surprised gasp.

“I-I thought you left—I thought—I’m sorry, I didn’t mean—well, I meant everything about Harry, but the other thing—”

“Do you know what this is, Peter?” Tony said, holding up the envelope, feeling another shot of glee at his kid’s confused frown.

He made a show of opening the envelope and reaching inside.

“You want to try and argue that my authority isn’t valid? Well, guess again, kiddo. I have every right to make sure you are kept safe, regardless of this—” He pulled out the papers. “But since, apparently, you need something a little more tangible than my word, then let’s try this on for size.”

Steve, Bucky, and Peter all looked equal parts confused. It would have been intensely funny if Tony wasn’t so worked up.

“This,” Tony continued, “is a legal document granting me joint-guardianship over one Peter Benjamin Parker, signed by one May Reilly Parker. The only thing missing is my signature.”

Tony reached into his pocket and pulled out a pen, then, ignoring the stunned onlookers with a swift and practiced hand, filled in the remaining blank spaces with his signature.

Tony stepped back, admiring the still-wet ink settling into the page. He felt something settle in him, an anxiety he hadn't even realized was there. He turned and showed off the now-signed papers, stopping at the shocked expressions on the others’ faces. Suddenly, a new anxiety was rearing up inside of him. Maybe this was the sort of thing you spoke to your partners about before doing. In fact, yeah, kind of sort of adopting a kid definitely fell into that department. Oops. And Peter—Tony was having trouble reading all the emotions that were flashing through the teen’s eyes, and he gaped.

Peter finally broke the tension by stepping forward and reaching out for the papers. Tony handed them over silently, trying to hide his nervousness.
He watched Peter closely as he took the papers, eyes darting over the legal jargon, and then lightly tracing his fingers over the signatures at the bottom. Peter's eyes darted back up to meet his, still in disbelief.

Tony cleared his throat. “So,” he said, working to break the vibe of the room. “I think I have the total authority to tell you to go to your room.”

Peter blinked, as if remembering that, hey, yeah, they had been arguing, and then just nodded. He carefully passed the papers back to Tony, lingering on them, as if he thought they would disappear should he look away, then looked again to Tony, who could see the careful hope shining out of Peter's eyes now. Then, he turned and left the room, to do exactly as Tony had said.

Tony's gaze followed Peter until he heard the telltale click of his bedroom door closing. The man let out a sigh and let himself slump, leaning heavily on his cane.

Bucky let out a low whistle.

“Congratulations?” Steve said, sounding unsure.

Tony looked at them both, and couldn't stop himself from laughing. He was going to have to sit down and talk with Peter later, actually try and get the teen’s take on all of this. But for now, he needed to take a couple of painkillers and get to bed.

Steve attentively approached and offered to help him to his room. He didn't have to energy to be grumpy about it, and merely nodded.

“Well, that's one way to win an argument, I guess,” Bucky said, following after them.

Chapter End Notes

IT'S HAPPENING!

Peter: You can't tell me what to do!
Tony: Wanna bet?

Thank you all so much for reading!

Consider following me on Tumblr where I post fandom content, ask box is always open!
Chapter Thirty-Six

Chapter Notes

Another chapter update!

Thank you all so much for the awesome comments last chapter! I love reading every single one!
And a special big thanks to my beta reader!

I'm happy I was able to get this out since I'm starting back at school tomorrow!

Any way I hope you can enjoy this next installment!

TW: Anxiety and talk of rape/non-con.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

If a computer blue-screening could be transmuted into an emotion, Peter was sure that’s what he’d be experiencing. He’d been sitting on his bed, staring ahead in space for an undetermined amount of time in a state of disbelief. His mind couldn’t seem to wrap around what had just transpired only—Peter glanced at the clock—an hour earlier.

Oh man, had he really been sitting there for an hour?

The teen forced himself to move, wincing as his limbs momentarily ached after the prolonged stillness. The movement in his body seemed to knock something in place in his brain, too, because the next moment, his heart was pounding as his thoughts raced.

Had that actually happened? Had he just been adopted? By Tony Stark? Sort of? One moment, he and his dad were fighting, and the next, the man was shoving signed, legal papers in his face.

Peter felt like he was about to explode. He pulled out his phone and dialed.

“Hey Peter, what’s up? Are you doing okay?”

“NED!” Peter shouted.

“Whoa! Jeez, dude, what’s happening?” Ned yelped, then gasped. “Is this a Spider-situation?” he asked in more of an excited hush.

“No, not really—I was just adopted!”

Silence.


“Err,” Peter paused. Could he be adopted twice?

It hit the teen, then, that he wasn’t exactly clear on the difference between an adoption versus a guardianship.
“Oh god, did something happen to May? Peter—!”

“No! No, my aunt’s fine—well, okay, maybe I wasn’t adopted—I’m still a little fuzzy on the details, this literally just happened—”

“What just happened?” Ned prodded.

Peter took a deep breath and proceeded to tell Ned all about what’d happened between him and his dad, their little spat, and how it had ended with the papers.

Ned was silent for just long enough for Peter to become concerned, when his friend’s shriek suddenly pierced through the line.

“DUDE, YOU WERE ADOPTED BY IRON MAN?”

“Sort of? Like I said, the papers said guardianship and like you said, I’m already adopted. May has full custody and I don’t really know what the difference is?”

Ned hummed. “Here, let me look it up.”

Peter waited as Ned worked the magic of Google.

“Well?” Peter pushed after a few moments, tempted to hop over to his computer and check for himself.

“Okay well, it sounds like someone who shares parental duties over a dependent? Like, May has full custody since she adopted you, right? So, like, in the eyes of the law, you are her kid; a guardian is kind of like a secondary parental figure, or an acting parent. Like, they have a right to see you or take care of you and make sure your needs are met while your parent isn’t around. Or like, if something were to happen to May, you wouldn’t get thrown into the system, I guess. Most of the info just says stuff like you’re not eligible for that fat Stark fortune,” Ned laughed. “No giant inheritance or anything.”

“I don’t care about his money,” Peter snorted.

“I know, just saying, man.”

Peter thought over what Ned had told him. He’d have to look into it more later.

“Still, that’s so cool. You pretty much just had Iron Man tell you he wants to be your dad or something! What the heck!”

Peter flushed, unable to keep the smile from his face.

“So you are, like, grounded again, or can we finally get that movie night in? ‘Cause I just got a Star Destroyer Lego set that we have to build together!”

“I—I actually have no idea. I’ll have to ask Tony later.”

He sort of assumed he was going to be grounded again, but he didn’t want to disappoint Ned. Peter frowned. He hadn’t seen Ned for a while now, and so far, a lot of their plans had fallen through—mostly because of him. He couldn’t help but wince, feeling like he was a bad friend.

“Okay, well let me know how things go!”

“I will. I promise I’ll do what I can to figure something out,” Peter said, meaning it.
Peter was still feeling jittery after he hung up the phone. He was tempted to suit up and swing through the city but wasn’t too sure if he’d be allowed, and the last thing he wanted was to anger his dad even more. Peter paused. *Dad...* it somehow felt more tangible now.

Moments later, Peter was panicking.

---

Tony was down in his workshop, doing his very best to *not* be pathetic as he worked on a gauntlet. His entire upper body ached something awful; he was probably due for another dose of medication soon. He hadn’t been in bed for more than an hour before his thoughts had driven him down here.

Tony sighed. What had he been thinking?

“You know Stevie’s gonna kill you if he finds out you came down here, right?”

Tony jolted, before breathing out the tension and mentally trying to get his heart beating properly. He cursed how silently Bucky moved.

“Kill me if he finds me down here, huh?” Tony said, a little flippantly.

The thought irritated him more than it maybe should have. It was probably the pain, or the increasing hunger. Yeah, he got hangry, sue him.

“Yep, and we both know how *that* usually ends,” Bucky responded, making his way deeper into the workshop.

“Bucky-bear, don't tease!” Tony said in a fake whine.

Bucky smiled crookedly, and Tony gazed up as his lover stopped next to him, examining his work.

“Kiss,” Tony demanded, drawing attention back to himself.

Bucky smiled. “Oh, sorry, doll. How rude of me, not greeting you properly.”

“Terribly rude,” Tony agreed with fake solemnity. He sighed happily when Bucky finally kissed him, soft and lingering in a way that had Tony craving more. He whined when Bucky finally pulled away.

Bucky took Tony's soldering iron and turned it off before placing it back on the desk. “So, congratulations. Are we going to be throwing a baby shower? I'm sure Steve can paint the banner, ‘It’s a boy!’ or maybe, ‘Welcome to the Family!’”

Tony groaned and rubbed his eyes. “Nice try, but Rhodey already made that joke.”

Bucky’s smile didn’t falter. “Damn.”

“I didn't exactly handle things the greatest back there,” Tony admitted with a grimace.

Bucky raised a brow with a shrug. “Well, it's not like Peter wasn't your kid before.”

“What?”

Bucky rolled his eyes. “What? You gonna try ‘n convince me that you didn't emotionally adopt the kid eons ago?”
“That's not the issue,” Tony said, a little uncomfortably.

“That's not the issue,” Tony said, a little uncomfortably.

“Then what is? It's not like Stevie and I were unaware of what Peter is to you.”

“It’s still something I probably should have taken the time to… I don't know, discuss?” Tony waved his hands in exasperation.

“Now when has Tony Stark ever asked for permission?” Bucky huffed with a laugh.

Tony sighed. What was he so anxious about?

“Who cares about some fucking papers? Peter was just as much your kid before you signed as he is now. So quit moping down here and go talk to your kid, and try not to turn it into a fight. He—” Bucky paused, frowning. “I know for a fact there's some shit he probably wants to talk about with you, too.”

Tony studied Bucky's expression, feeling a tad suspicious that the man knew something he didn't.

“Fine, okay,” he said as he pushed his chair away from his desk. He tried not to show how much pain he was in as he reached for his cane, but he knew he couldn't have done an outstanding job when Bucky's hand laid over his arm.

“Did you take the pills Steve laid out earlier?”

Tony sighed again. He could feel the sick feeling churning in his stomach from the increasing discomfort of missing his medication. “I may have forgotten—"

He yelped as the next moment he was being held securely in Bucky's arms.

“No wonder you look so pale. For crying out loud, those pills are important.”

“Put me down!”

“You look ready to keel over and quite frankly, I'm not willing to risk you tearing something open if you do. I'm going to take you to bed, get those pills—which you will take—and then you're going to nap. After that, you can sit down with Peter and talk things out,” Bucky said, matter-of-factly.

Tony huffed and muttered something about mutiny in his own home, but did nothing to really struggle against Bucky’s hold.

---

Peter twirled his phone in his hands in a bid to dispel the nervous energy that’d built up over the last hour or so. Since talking with Ned earlier Peter had done a bit of research of his own, but all it had done was make him question Tony’s decision even more. Legally, guardianship seemed to be impermanent; once Peter turned eighteen the guardianship would dissolve. It was... temporary. Peter sighed and squirmed.

His phone jumped to life in his hands with a catchy but obnoxious beat. Peter fumbled with it as the pop song continued to blare—he'd downloaded the chorus to the song Harry had complained about earlier that day and immediately set it as his ringtone.

“Harry, hey!” Peter answered.

“Hey Pete. Listen, you forgot your coat in my car earlier. I can drive back and drop it off for you?
You’re still at Stark’s, right?”

Peter mentally slapped himself. He had totally forgotten!

“That would be great but, uh, that might not be the best idea…”

Harry was silent for a moment.

“So on a scale from one to ten, how much does Stark hate me?” he said, tone joking.

“Uhh, well, he sort of—well, he kind of adopted me just so he could forbid me from seeing you, I think. So… wherever that falls.”

Silence.

Peter grimaced. Maybe this would be the line, and Harry wouldn’t want to—

He jolted as raucous laughter filtered through the line.

“You’re kidding me—there—there’s no way!” Harry crowed between laughs.

Peter groaned, but couldn’t fight the little smile tugging at his lips. “It’s not funny!” he insisted, letting himself slump over onto his bed.

“No, sorry, you’re right,” Harry conceded. “It’s fucking hilarious.”

Peter sighed.

“Seriously, I-I don’t know whether to be insulted or flattered! Either way, you’re welcome, I guess.”

“Wow. Thanks,” Peter deadpanned, though that seemed to only throw Harry back into laughter.

“Do you think he’ll throw me out if I show up with your coat?” Harry bust out with more laughter.

“Oh god Harry, do not test that!” Peter begged.

“Okay, okay—I won’t, I’m done,” Harry finally said, stifling his giggles.

“Good,” Peter groused without any actual negativity. He could practically hear Harry’s smile—it made something in him flutter.

“So I guess we’re laying low for a while.”

“Yeah, I guess. I’m—I’m going to try and talk to him again tonight.”

“Okay, let me know how that goes.”

“I will. So uh—” Peter hesitated, biting at his lower lip. “How’s MJ?”

“She was okay last I saw her, she’s settling into one of the guest rooms now,” Harry said.

“That’s good,” Peter said with a sigh of relief.

He’d been worried since being dropped back off. He couldn’t imagine being disowned like that. His heart ached in sympathy for his friend.
“Yeah, she’s a spitfire. It’ll be rough, no doubt about that, but she’ll be okay.”

Peter nodded, trying to take confidence in Harry’s words, when a knock at his door disrupted his thoughts.

“Oh shit, I gotta go,” Peter said, worried Tony would catch him.

“Okay, text me later!”

“Okay, bye!”

Peter hung up just as his door opened up a smidgeon. Steve popped his head in, brows raised in a knowing expression. “Not interrupting, am I?” he asked.

Peter tried—and failed—not to look like a deer caught in the headlights.

“Nope!” he chirped, scrambling to sit up and look as natural as possible.

Steve quirked a brow, but came into the room regardless and, after gesturing to the chair in question and getting Peter’s nod of approval, swiveled the desk chair to face the bed where Peter was still perched, and sat down.

“So,” Steve began after a moment’s hesitation, “that happened.”

Peter was silent for a moment before the incredulousness of the scene really hit him, and the next moment, he was devolving into giggles. Steve rubbed at his face, but his shoulders shook with the same laughter.

Finally, he sobered up enough to nod in agreement. “Yeah,” he said. “It definitely did.”

But as the giddiness faded, Peter was left again feeling uncertain. He looked away from Steve, back down to his phone, which he began turning in his hands in a somewhat nervous gesture. He tried to keep his restlessness from showing, but it was hard not to start fidgeting, feeling like this.

“You okay?”

Peter looked back up to Steve and nodded out of instinct, before pausing and considering the question more seriously.

“I don’t know,” he decided on, finally. “I mean…” he sighed. “It just happened so fast, and—and I wanted to know more, so I looked it up, and now I’m even more confused,” he admitted.

“Peter,” Steve began. “You know Tony cares about you very much, right? You’ve said yourself that you see him as a father-figure in your life; well, the reverse is true, too. Tony sees you as a son, and I think he has for a long while now. That doesn’t mean any of the things you’re feeling aren’t valid—in fact, I think you should sit down with Tony and actually have a talk with him. The both of you have a lot you need to hash out before you can move forward.”

Peter listened, holding on to everything Steve was saying.

“I—what if he won’t listen?” he asked quietly, worry churning his stomach. He hated the sudden sensation of being smaller than he was, yet at the same time, he wanted to curl in on himself even more. “I just… I don’t want to make him mad,” he continued.

Steve frowned slightly, before his expression shifted to something Peter couldn’t quite read, but seemed a little sad.
“Listen, Peter, I know things have been rather strained lately with everything that’s happened, but you shouldn’t disregard how a situation—or especially a person—makes you feel. I know I can’t fully speak for Tony, but I know that he would hate it if you felt like you couldn’t talk to him. I really think you both need to sit down and discuss everything at length.”

Peter nodded. He honestly wanted to, but— “But what if it turns into another fight? I really—I really don’t want to fight anymore,” he said a little meekly.

“Then tell him that too, before anything else, even,” Steve insisted. “And if you’d like, then either myself or Bucky—or even both of us—would be more than willing to sit down with you both, act as middlemen, and step in if things start devolving towards a fight again.”

“You’d do that?”

“Of course Pete.”

Peter nodded, oddly touched at the sentiment. “I think I’d like that,” he said.

Both of them looked down as Steve’s phone buzzed. Peter watched as the man quickly glanced over whatever message he’d gotten.

“Well, looks like your dad’s down for the count for a bit. Maybe take some time to think over everything you want to hash out or get off your chest,” Steve suggested.

Peter nodded, trying to look a bit more confident than he felt. Despite his lingering uncertainty and apprehension, he was filled with a new sense of determination.

“Okay. And, um, thanks,” Peter said as Steve stood up.

The man smiled and nodded, before opening his arms up in a silent question. Peter stood and accepted the hug, letting himself soak up the bit of comfort. And really, Captain America gave great hugs.

“You’ll be okay, kid,” Steve said when Peter pulled away.

Peter nodded.

“Your family cares about you, okay? So just take a deep breath and try to relax,” Steve said with another smile before he left, not noticing how Peter’s breath had hitched.

Family. Peter had family.

---

Steve carefully closed Peter’s bedroom door and immediately saw Bucky waiting for him. He smiled a little tiredly, nodding to the living room. “Recap?”

Bucky nodded and followed him to the next room, collapsing next to him on the sofa.

“Tony finally asleep?”

Bucky nodded. “Damn straight. Didn’t even have to threaten to tie him down.”

“Shocking,” Steve said, genuinely a bit impressed. “What about everything else? He still being stubborn, or…?”
“He wants to talk it out. Of course he does. He loves that kid, and hates how they’ve been fighting. How was Peter?”

Steve shrugged. “He seemed anxious. I think he’s probably overthinking his way into a panic attack.”

“Well, did you calm him down?” Bucky demanded. “Don’t tell me you just left him all—”

“I tried!” Steve defended. “Jesus, I think I ended up sounding like my therapist.”

Bucky was quiet a moment before shrugging. “Honestly, that can’t be too bad of a thing. Anna is the most sensible person we know and I haven’t even met her. I mean, she’s able to cut through your bullshit.”

Steve tried to shoot Bucky an annoyed look, but the effectiveness was mostly compromised by the grin trying to twitch its way onto his lips.

“Peter’s afraid of starting another fight I think,” Steve finally said.

Bucky nodded. “That’s understandable. Not like it’s exactly been relaxing ‘round here lately.”

Steve sighed, nodding as well.

“Speaking of therapists though—have you made an appointment?” Bucky broached in a casual tone that was offset by the tightness in his shoulders.

Steve felt a pang of guilt seeing it. “I’ll give her a call. Missed a few sessions already from LA,” he promised, watching as Bucky relaxed slightly.

“Okay, sounds good.”

“Oh, also, I sort of promised Pete that we’d be there during their talk. To try and, uh, diffuse any potential arguments.”

Bucky eyed him skeptically. “When in the ever-loving-fuck have you ever diffused a situation? Stevie, I love you, but if people are standing there with gasoline, you’re the kid with the matches.”

“Oh please. I’m not that bad.”

“Save it for someone who didn’t spend literal years pulling your ass outta alley fights.”

Steve couldn’t help it; he laughed at Bucky’s disgruntled look.

---

Tony came back to consciousness slowly. His brain felt groggy, like every thought had to plow through sludge to form. He really did hate his damn pills. He felt over his tender stitches and rubbed them gently, not quite scratching, but with just enough pressure that it offered a hint of relief against the slight itch of healing skin. He stopped when the incision panged in irritation and sighed.

“Good Evening, boss. It is currently eight-thirty-four P.M.,” Friday greeted.

Tony blinked his eyes open and stretched, hissing and aborting the motion when it pulled at his abdomen too painfully. “Thanks, Fri,” he mumbled, still tired.
He counted in his head until the twinges of pain stopped before trying to sit himself upright. Tony grit his teeth as new pain erupted throughout his body, leaving him trembling and panting harsh breaths through his nose. Silently, he cursed how much effort everything was now. The physical discomfort gave him flashes of being trapped in Afghanistan, a car battery hooked into his chest. Tony grabbed the glass of water from his bedside to wet his parched throat and wished it contained something stronger than water.

He reminded himself to steady his breathing. The last thing he needed was for his panic attacks to resurface, or worse, to relapse. He was suddenly glad he had spent that night, weeks ago now, emptying the tower of alcohol.

He wondered just how many emails had piled up in his inbox, how many projects awaited his attention.

Tony rubbed his eyes and looked about for his cane. He was supposed to be barred from his workshop until he was a bit better, but he was growing ever more restless as the days passed.

Maybe he’d try and get Peter down there with him, it’d been awhile since their last nerd-night. 

Peter.

Tony remembered then, their argument, the papers, and his talk with Bucky. Shit.

He needed to talk to Peter. The sooner the better.

Tony grabbed the dumb cane and used it to help himself stand up from the bed. “Friday, where’s Peter?”

“Peter is currently in his room,” the AI replied smoothly.

“Steve and Bucky?”

“In the living room, boss.”

“All right, here goes nothing.”

---

Okay, so, *maybe* standing outside Peter’s door until his hands were clammy and knees ached from standing (*lord, he hated how quickly he tired these days*) wasn’t the most courageous thing he’d ever done. But in his defense… okay, so he didn’t have much of a defense either, but really, how could he not be worried? What if Peter didn’t want him as a parent? Sure, the kid had all but told him he saw Tony as a father-figure, but… did he really *mean* it? And even if he did, had Tony scared him off with the guardianship? Or—

The door opened.

There was half a second where Peter and Tony simply stared at each other, before Peter yelped and jumped back. Tony’s first instinct was to reach out to the teen, but Peter recovered just as quickly.

“Shit, oh my God, I did not expect you to be there!” Peter breathed out, clutching his chest.

Tony let out a little laugh. “So much for those spidey-senses, huh kiddo?”

Peter huffed and said, “My spider-sense alerts me to *danger*. Obviously this didn’t count.”
Something about that touched him deeply. Did Peter trust him enough that Tony didn't register on his spidey-sense at all?

“Well, counting or not counting, I'm sorry for spooking you. Wasn't intentional.”

Peter nodded. “Yeah.”

There was a beat of silence that stretched just long enough to feel awkward.

Tony cleared his throat to dispel the silence and gestured down the hall. “If you have a moment, I was thinking that maybe we should talk.”

Peter blinked owlishly, and any other time Tony might've found the wide-eyed gaze humorous, but he felt just as anxious as Peter looked.

“Oh, uh—yeah, I, uh, I wanted to talk to you, too—oh man, I'm making you stand here when you should be sitting down, I'm sorry!” Peter rambled.

“Hey, it's okay, kid. I'm not gonna keel over that easy,” Tony said.

Though, as he made his way down the hall, his body flared up in pain that he had to work hard to hide, and he couldn't mask the relieved sigh once he sat down, Steve and Bucky sliding closer together to give him more room on the long sofa.

He cursed when the room’s occupants sent him concerned glances, waving them off. He didn't want any more babying.

The next few seconds were filled with silence as they all looked between each other, seemingly at a loss for how to begin.

Suddenly, Bucky slapped his thighs and made to stand. “Well, good talk everybody. I’d like to thank you for coming out—”

Steve sighed and yanked Bucky back down onto the sofa.

Tony couldn't help but roll his eyes, though he heard giggling from the armchair where Peter sat. He felt his heart warm at the sound, and watched as Peter tried and failed to cover up the laughter. He was surprised at the depth and intensity of affection that bubbled up in him, then. It was a little intimidating, realizing, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that Tony would give and do anything for this kid in front of him.

He could admit, at least to himself, that he probably hadn’t handled the whole adoption-slash-guardianship scenario the best way he could have. Something churned in his gut at even the silent admission; he didn’t like admitting when he was wrong, and he hated apologizing—but at least he could admit to it. When he needed to.

Tony looked at Peter and felt another twist to his heart. He needed to be better than he was, if not for himself, than for Peter. His own father had never apologized to him for shit—the thought of Howard ever stooping to such a thing was laughable—but Tony he wanted to be better than that. He wanted to do better.

“Peter,” he began, getting the teen’s attention.

He watched as Peter got his giggles under control and turned to him, a slight nervousness returning to the boy’s posture, his fingers tapping fast against the arm of the chair he was curled on.
“First of all, I—I want to apologize.”

There. A little blunt, but to the point.

“What?” Peter said, sounding _surprised_.

Tony's lips thinned a bit as he berated himself. Was he really doing that piss-poor of a job, that Peter would be _that_ taken aback by an apology?

“Earlier today—I shouldn't have done that,” Tony said.

“Oh,” said Peter, looking increasingly concerned. “Did…” he stopped looking away.

“No, it’s okay, Pete. What is it?” Tony tried.

That's what this was for—talking. He needed Peter to know he could talk to him.

Peter hesitated a moment more, before he was looking at Tony with a new sort of determination.

“Did you sign those papers just to win the argument?”

“What?” Tony thought, a jolt shooting through his body. “What?” he echoed aloud, just as incredulously.

“Be—because I—” Peter began to stutter.

‘_No. Oh no, he’s stammering, he’s upset—_’

Tony felt a rush of panic. He needed to fix this, he needed—he tried to stand, but a sharp pain brought him short, as well as Steve's hand coming down gently on his shoulder.

“If… if that's all that was…” Peter continued, looking more and more distraught.

“No!”

Peter started at the sudden exclamation.

Tony took a steadying breath. “Oh kid, _no._” He rubbed his eyes, suddenly feeling tired, even though he'd only just woken up. “Peter, that’s not—”

But really, could he blame Peter for coming to that conclusion? In retrospect, his actions were even worse than he’d thought. Because in retrospect, he kind of _had_ done just that. However, he hadn’t meant for his actions to somehow lessen what signing those papers signified.

“That’s why I wanted to say I’m sorry. I—I acted rashly, I didn’t—”

Tony cut himself off when he heard a sniffle, his gaze shooting to Peter. He didn’t see any tears, but his kid was looking… well, _destroyed_.

“It’s okay,” Peter said quietly. “I get it. I know—I know that you have to get the papers—the papers approved before they’re valid, s-so—”

Tony’s heart sank. Peter thought he wanted to back out?

“Pete, hey—hey, look at me. Listen, I’m not backing out. God no, I’m not apologizing for signing the papers, I’m apologizing for _how_ I went about signing them.”
Peter looked up sharply, eyes suddenly so hopeful.

“Peter, I’ve—I’ve wanted to sign that damn document for a while now, and honestly, I don’t know why it took me so damn long in the first place, but I never should have done it in a context of an argument, nor without your express permission.”

“You—you wanted to sign?” Peter asked in disbelief. “You wanted—but—but that means—that would make—” He saw Peter’s gaze dart to Steve next to him, saw him nod to the teen in an encouraging manner. “That would make you like—like my dad—”

“Kid, I’ve been ‘like your dad’ for months now.” Tony gestured to Steve, who pulled out the papers. “And I’m offering to take the ‘like’ out of that sentence. If… if that’s something that you want.”

He held up the papers and flipped to another page before setting them on the coffee table. Peter leaned forward, saw the blank line.

“May and I have both signed, but you’re right, the papers do need approval, your approval. Now, just because we’ve both signed doesn’t mean you have to. I don’t want you to feel pressured.”

The last thing he wanted was for Peter to feel like this was something that had to happen.

“Do—do you have a pen?” Peter asked.

Tony felt the anxious tension that’d been building in him subside and be overcome with a burst of excitement.

“Here,” Bucky said, handing over one of the pens he kept on him.

“Thanks,” Peter replied, taking it and the papers from the coffee table. He seemed to look over the documents more seriously than he had earlier. Less in shock, Tony figured.

Finally, Peter let out a deep breath. “So, you—you want to do this? Like for real?” he asked. “Not—not just because you don’t like my friends or whatever?”

Tony felt a little jolt. Honestly, he hadn’t even thought about God-damn-Harry-fucking-Osborn since waking up. That little fucking sh—

He realized his face had pulled into a pretty impressive scowl when Steve’s hand rested again on his shoulder. “Tony…” he said quietly but reproachfully.

Tony closed his eyes and tried to erase his scowl with a deep sigh. When he opened his eyes, Peter was watching him closely, but the pen and paper had been set on the teen’s lap.

“I—I don’t want to fight anymore, I hate—I hate it when you’re mad or disappointed in me, but—I know you don’t like Harry, I just don’t get why.”

“Peter, I don’t want to fight with you either, but if you—” Tony was starting to feel tired again. “The Osborns are not good people.”

He heard Peter take a deep breath and glance quickly to Bucky, who made a ‘go on’ gesture with a subtle wave of his hand. Tony narrowed his eyes in suspicion.

“I—I won’t speak for Mr. Osborn, I can admit I don’t really know him and—and honestly, the few times I’ve met him, I haven’t liked him very much, but—”
Tony’s head snapped back to Peter as his heart clenched awfully.

“I’m sorry, the few times you’ve what now?” he asked. There was no way his kid was anywhere near that psychotic—

“Uhh, well, I mean—”

“Peter, I’m being beyond serious when I say I will not allow you anywhere near that man. Okay? You’re not to go within a thousand damn feet of him.”

“Okay, fine, I’ll do my best to stay as far away from Mr. Osborn as I can get!” Peter replied.

“And I don’t want you around his damn kid—”

“No!” Peter stopped. “I’m sorry. I just—Harry is a good person! I feel like you’re not even giving him a chance.”

“And I think you’re putting way too much faith in this kid!” Tony shot back. “The fact remains that he’s dangerous, Peter, and I’m not going to let you—”

“He’s not dangerous!” Peter exclaimed. “I know for a fact that Harry is a good guy!”

Tony rolled his eyes, feeling irritation swell in him. “Oh, you know that for a fact, huh?”

“Yes, I do!” Peter insisted.

The teen was no longer curled up in the recliner, his feet were planted firmly on the ground, and he was leaning forward towards Tony, his gaze intent.

“Peter, I get it, you think this boy’s your friend. I know, I’ve been there too, but—”

“No, you think you get it, but you don’t! Harry wouldn’t let anyone hurt me!” Peter interrupted, voice growing more distressed.

“How can you possibly know that!” Tony finally snapped.

“Because if he was the bad person you say he is, he wouldn’t have stayed with me that night, he wouldn’t have protected me and made sure I was all right, he—he wouldn’t have stopped—he wouldn’t have stopped that guy from raping me!” Peter’s voice broke off.

The teen was standing now, panting, trembling. His skin was pale and lord, he looked like he was going to throw up and—and all Tony could hear was ringing in his ears.

“What?” he asked, feeling breathless, lost.

Peter sniffled and wrapped his arms around himself. Tony reached for his cane, he needed to get to him, but then Bucky was up and across the room, laying a gentle hand on Peter’s shoulder.

“Hey, hey, it’s okay,” Bucky whispered, and helped Peter back into the chair, rubbing his back when he leaned forward, obviously trying to get his breathing under control and away from panic-attack territory.

Tony wasn’t doing much better. Peter’s words were spinning in his head over and over and over, the ringing in his ears growing louder and louder—his vision was obstructed when suddenly Steve was in front of him, hands on his shoulders. Steadying him.
“Tony, Tony, hey, come on, snap out of it. Come on, Peter needs you right now,” he whispered quietly.

Oh god, Peter—Tony’s eye’s tried to look past Steve, he needed to see Peter, needed to see if he was okay.

Peter was sitting up again, but his eyes were closed. Bucky was perched at his left, on the arm of the chair, saying something too quiet for Tony to catch, but Peter nodded, took a deep breath and let it out, then opened his eyes. Tony’s gaze immediately met Peter’s. Something silent but important passed between them.

Steve was next to him again, and Tony was so, so tempted to seek out his hand with his own. He resisted; he was pathetic enough with his injuries. He needed to be strong now, as strong as he could be, for Peter.

“Can—can you tell me?” he asked, throat tight to the point of being painful, his voice coming out raspy.

Peter nodded, took another deep breath, and began to talk.

It was possibly one of the hardest things Tony had ever had to do, listen and watch as his kid told him everything, barely keeping it together as he did. Tony wanted to gather Peter in his arms, hide him away, make all the hurt, all the pain go away. But he knew he couldn’t. He couldn’t wave a magic wand and erase all the damage that had been any more than he could go back and stop that son of a bitch from hurting his son.

He felt ill. His stomach churned with guilt as he thought back to that night in particular. God, Peter—his kid had just been fucking assaulted, and he—he had yelled at him, pushed him. He had been so wrapped up in the fact that Peter had lied and snuck out that he completely overlooked every goddamned warning sign that something had gone terribly wrong.

“And—and, uh, I guess you—you know the rest,” Peter trailed off, after he got to the point in the story where Harry had apparently told some friend of his to call for help.

Tony took a deep breath. Some of the shock had started to wear off, and in its place was a searing rage. It took every bit of his self-control to keep his breathing calm and even. The last thing he needed was Peter misinterpreting his anger.

“Thank you, Pete, for telling me. I—I am so sorry you went through that, but you know that none of what happened was your fault, right?” Tony asked.

Peter needed reassurance, and quite frankly, Tony felt out of his depth, but he needed to try. He needed Peter to be able to trust him to have his back—the fact that it had taken this long to come to light was unacceptable.

Peter nodded, and Tony didn’t miss the way he leaned against Bucky a little.

“Have you… have you told other people?”

Peter hesitated and glanced up at Bucky. “I told Bucky, but, uhm, not that long ago—it was when you were still in the hospital and—and I—”

“Hey, hey, it’s okay, I’m glad you weren’t keeping it to yourself,” Tony said.

He quickly caught Bucky’s eyes and sent him a grateful look, though he couldn’t help but notice
how tense the other was.

“Anyone else?”

Peter shook his head. “Just you three, and, uh, Harry knows, obviously…”

Tony nodded. He thought back to that night, remembering the older teen’s bruised face. Peter said he had fought the asshole who he’d found trying to molest him. Tony grabbed his cane and stood. Peter hopped to his feet, and Tony had to work hard to not roll his eyes at his concern. He made his way over to Peter and grabbed him by the shoulder, tugging him into a hug. He heard Peter’s surprised gasp, but less than a moment later, the teen’s arms were clinging to him tightly.

Tony didn’t say anything that could possibly break the moment, wishing that he was able to use both hands to hug his kid back instead of just the one. Still, he waited, refusing to be the first one to pull away, letting Peter take the comfort that he needed. And if he was being honest, it was something he needed then, too.

Eventually Peter did pull away, sniffling, his eyes a little red. Tony felt the conflict of emotions rise in him like a storm.

“Do you need to go lie down? Maybe have an early night?” Tony offered.

Peter shook his head. “I-I’m okay.”

“All right,” Tony said softly. “Here, let’s sit down, though.” Standing wasn't doing him any favors.

Peter startled. “Oh my God, I'm sorry! Here, uh-uhm—!”

“Kid. It’s okay. Just help me to the couch,” Tony said. He didn't need the help, but he knew it would make Peter feel better.

He sat with Peter curling up next to him, not noticing that Steve and Bucky had made themselves scarce until that moment, but hey, he wasn't going to complain.

“Pete,” he sighed.

He still didn't trust Harry, but...

“Dad—"

Something in him fluttered in excitement—and maybe a bit of terror—at the title.

“I know you don't trust Harry, and I get that something happened between you and his dad or something, but, Harry is important to me. Can you maybe just—just give him a chance?”

Peter sounded so tired and withdrawn. It made Tony's heart ache. He wrapped his arm around Peter's shoulders and sighed.

“Why don't—”

God, he was going to regret this.

“Why don't you invite your friend for dinner or something.”

“What? Really?” Peter sat up, turning to face him.
“Listen, I still don't necessarily trust this kid, but quite frankly, if you're going to insist on hanging out with Osborn, I'd rather it be here where I can keep an eye on things,” he broached.

“Thank you!” Peter wrapped him in a hug, nearly pressing the air from his lungs.

“Wow, what'd we miss?” Bucky asked as he and Steve returned to the living room, carrying mugs of hot chocolate.

“Dad's going to give Harry a chance!” Peter cheered.

Steve raised his brows and sent Tony a surprised look.

Tony shrugged and looked away with a slight huff. “I reserve the right to toss him off the balcony,” he grumbled.

“Here, drink your hot cocoa and stop pouting,” Bucky said, passing him a cup.

“So that's where you two went.”

“Stevie thought cocoa would be nice. I decided to help out,” Bucky said.

“Oh yes, ‘help.’” Steve rolled his eyes. “If by help you mean, ‘stand there and watch while shoving your face with marshmallows’ then yes, you were super helpful.”

“Hey! I also added marshmallows to the cups!” Bucky turned to Peter and passed him the cup that was practically overflowing with a small heap of mini marshmallows. “This one's yours, kiddo.”

Tony was a little wary of just how much sugar must've been in that cup, but figured Peter deserved a treat after the rough night. “Hey!” he exclaimed a little indignantly while glancing into his own cup. “How come I didn't get any marshmallows!”

“Cause you can’t have any excess sugar,” Steve said patiently.

“Don't worry, I gave your marshmallows to Peter,” Bucky said, smiling crookedly at Peter, who seemed thrilled at the treat.

Sometime later, after the hot cocoa had been demolished and Peter was yawning hugely, Tony tried herding the teen off to bed.

“Go on and get some sleep, Pete.”

Peter nodded sleepily without protesting, but stopped and gasped before he made it out of the living room. Spinning around, the teen ran over to the guardianship papers and picked up Bucky's pen, quickly signing his name.

“There. Okay, now we're good,” Peter said, before heading back toward the hall that would take him to his bedroom. “Night, guys.” He paused, cheeks flushing slightly. “Night, Dad.”

Tony felt that same overwhelming affection bloom in his chest. “Night, kiddo,” he said, unable to keep the grin off his face.

Steve and Bucky copied their good nights as Peter left to turn in for the night. But once the teen had gone, Tony felt some of that good feeling dissipate. Instead, he was thrown back into the reality of what Peter had confessed happened, and all the anger he’d been sitting on began to bubble up.
Next to him, Steve rubbed his hands over his face as if trying to wipe away the stress, but Tony could see the way his jaw muscles twitched in anger.

“Friday, prep my suit,” Tony snarled.

“Friday, disregard that,” Steve sighed.

“Disregard? Excuse me, who the hell—”

“You're in no shape to be traipsing around,” Steve snapped, then sighed, obviously trying to pull himself together, as well.

“Listen, that son of a bitch hurt my son, if you think for one goddamn minute that I’m going to just sit around and—”

“And we have his name. We can get him, Tony, I swear, just—just not right this second.”

Tony’s eyes narrowed as his ire grew. “That piece of shit has been off scot-free for too damn long already.”

That’s when Tony noticed Steve stiffen and turn suddenly to where Bucky was resting in the armchair. “You’ve been rather quiet,” he stated.

Bucky tensed.

Steve’s eyes narrowed, and Tony watched the two stare off. Finally, Steve pulled a face that, quite frankly, Tony had believed was reserved only for his bullshit.

“Dammit, Buck! I knew it, I knew you were up to something!” Steve exclaimed.

“What?” Tony snapped.

“Well, what'd you expect, Stevie?” Bucky snapped back. “The kid fucking broke down over the phone and told me some asshole tried raping him, and you expect me not to do something about it?”

“What if you'd been caught? Jesus Christ! Why couldn't you have waited for back-up to—” Steve stopped abruptly, eyes narrowing again as he studied Bucky's face. “Oh my God,” he whispered, glancing up as if in a prayer for help. “It was Clint and Natasha, wasn't it? That's why they took off so sudden.”

“No comment,” Bucky muttered angrily.

“Is he dead?” Tony asked, cutting off whatever Steve was about to say in reply. Bucky's gaze cut to him quickly, lingering for a moment before he shrugged.

“Probably. I wanted to finish him off, but—well, we agreed it'd be better if he… felt it. Barton said he knew a guy who’d be interested in helping rid the world of one more fucking pedophile. So we took a road trip. Couldn't stay long, though. Knew Stevie was gonna be back soon. So yeah. Got a bit of anger out, listened to him squeal, then we left him.”


“I dunno, everyone's got a fucking gimmick nowadays. This dude liked ants. Could do this weird thing where they listened to him or something,” Bucky continued a little vaguely, and then much less vaguely. “When we left though, he no longer had a dick, and was buried up to his neck with a
bunch of bullet ants.”

Steve swore under his breath.

Tony had mixed feelings. On one hand, good. On the other hand, he wanted a chance to rip into the sick fuck who’d done this.

He sighed. “Sure you can’t give me a name? I’m not trying to get anyone in trouble. Figured I could get this guy a fruit basket. Everyone likes fruit baskets, right?”

Bucky hesitated, obviously uncomfortable giving out any more information.

“Lang. Scott Lang. Like Bucky said, he likes ants,” Clint interrupted, leaning against the wall next to the elevator.

“Jesus!” Tony swore at the sudden appearance.

“You sure this guy’s okay?” Steve asked, seemingly unfazed.

Clint nodded. “Yeah, he’s a good guy. Little twitchy sometimes.” The archer shrugged.

“Forward me his info,” Tony said.

Clint studied him a moment, then nodded in agreement. “Sure thing. So, how’s your little arachno-kid doing?”

“He’s shaken up,” Tony answered.

Clint sighed, but nodded grimly.

“What’re you doing here, anyway?” Bucky asked.

“Robbing ya,” Clint answered, heading into the kitchen.

“We have communal and private floors for a reason!” Tony called after him.

He got no response.

“I expect a detailed—unofficial—report on my desk by the weekend!” Steve demanded.

That received a pained groan.

---

Peter flopped down on his bed in a bit of a state. He was emotionally exhausted after going over the events of the party again, and yet at the same time, he felt a hit more relieved now that his dad knew—holy hell, his dad!

Giddy excitement fluttered in his stomach, and he immediately grabbed the stuffed dog Harry had won for him, hugging it tight.

Tony wanted the guardianship, had actually told him that he wanted to be his dad, that Peter was like his kid, and—and he was even willing to give Harry a shot!

Oh man, Peter didn't know how to process it.

But he figured he knew where he could start.
He pulled out his phone.

**Peter**: Hey!

**Peter**: I know it's getting late, sorry!

**Harry**: Hey, it's okay. How's it going?

**Peter**: Good!

**Peter**: Great!

**Harry**: Oh? What's up?

**Peter**: How would you like to come over for dinner?

**Harry**: HA! Told you May liked me!

Peter grinned.

**Peter**: Uhhh.

**Peter**: It won't be at May's...

Chapter End Notes

It finally happened! Tony and Peter actually talked!
Dad! Tony is official!

Thanks so much for reading!

Feel free to drop by my Tumblr for fandom content, updates, or just to say hi! My ask box is always open!
Chapter Thirty-Seven

Chapter Notes

Hi all!

Guess who's back FINALLY with a new chapter!
I'm sorry for the long wait between updates but I've had a lot going on recently that's made it hard to keep up!
However this update is fairly lengthy so hopefully that makes up for the delay!

A big shout out to my beta/editor that helped me get this thing together!

Also, I'm sure many of you, like myself, were greatly saddened by today's news so I don't feel like I can post today without saying:
RIP Stan Lee, you will be remembered and missed by many.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony paused as the music in his workshop dimmed.

“Sir, you have a call from Mrs. Parker.”

“Thanks Fri, put her through,” Tony said. “Hey May, how’s everything?”

“Tony, hi, everything’s all right here. How are you, how are things?”

“Good, I’m hiding at the moment. You know, if Peter wasn’t so keen on tech, I’d be convinced he was planning on pursuing nursing with the way he’s been going lately. Seriously, between him Steve and Bucky, I don’t stand a chance,” Tony grouched.

May’s laughter trickled through the line.

“You should be taking care of yourself, though. That wasn’t a minor accident you had.”

Tony sighed. “Yeah, my healing organs and I are aware. But there’s only so long I can sit in bed, or sit on the couch, or—it’s just very boring.”

“Well, just make sure to take care of yourself. You had us all very worried. Peter was devastated,” May said, a little quietly.

Tony felt his stomach churn. “Yeah, I—Peter and I had a fight right before I was deployed.”

“Steve said as much,” May admitted.

“We’ve… talked things out. Which I admit is a relief.”

“You know… after Ben and I got custody of Peter, he was so young and lost. He’d just had his entire world turned on its head and we were all so scared. Peter grieved, he had nightmares, and there was more than one night where we had to sit up with him and comfort him. Eventually though, he began to adjust, and when he did, I remember being so confused because, well, Peter
was perfect. He never complained, he followed Ben around like a little duckling, never threw fits or got into any sort of trouble.”

Tony felt a mix of avid curiosity and sympathy as May spoke. He didn’t even bother trying to suppress his own internal ache that he hadn’t been around to see little baby Peter. Though, he probably wouldn’t have been a very good influence for such a small child—he brushed away the thought and concentrated back on what May was saying.

“I remember it so clearly—” May giggled. “I had just told Ben to go help Peter get ready for school, and not a minute later, I heard this almighty scream. I dropped everything and ran to Peter's room, and honestly, the look on Ben's face probably would’ve been funny if I wasn't so shell-shocked myself. But there, still sitting in bed, was Peter with the most unholy scowl on his pudgy little face! I had never seen anything look so angry in my life. And in the next second, he just starts wailing. Ben and I just looked to each other at such a loss. It was like a switch was flipped that morning, and we couldn't go more than a day without a full-blown meltdown. I swear, it was like he was looking for things to be mad about. Finally we reached the end of our rope, we were so upset we spent the money to see a child psychologist, and you know what he told us?”

Tony smiled. “What's that?”

“He told us Peter was driving us crazy because he loved us. He loved us, and he was terrified he was going to lose us, too. Apparently it’s a common issue with kids in new homes. Peter had just lost his parents months earlier, and he was so worried we wouldn't stay with him, either. And even if it was subconscious, he was testing us. Pushing boundaries, to see where our limits were, and… and if he could drive us off. Or if we were safe.”

Tony tried picturing Peter as a sad, scared little boy, and it made something in him ache.

“I can't imagine how hard that must have been.”

“It was. And you know, I'm proud of Peter. He's gone through a lot, and he's never let it turn him into someone bitter, or—he's just such a sweet kid, but he's a teen, and he's trying to figure out where he fits and develop who he is, and that can be scary. And now he has someone else to look up to, and I know he's scared of losing you, too.”

Tony swallowed thickly, blinking back the traitorous moisture stinging his eyes.

“Well, he's not getting rid of me that easily.”

May let out a small laugh that sounded a bit too watery. Damn human emotions. A moment or two of comfortable silence passed, before May sniffled and said, “He’s always looked up to you, you know? Even back then.”

Tony felt a little smile make its way onto his face, even as his chest ached again at the thought of missing Peter growing up. He knew it was ridiculous; Peter wasn’t his by blood, but he was still his son now, and it made Tony wish he could have been there through more of his life.

“Well, Iron Man’s pretty popular with the kids,” Tony replied instead, trying to sound nonchalant.

“Not Iron Man.” May sounded amused. “He loved you.”

“…What?”

“When Peter really started coming out of his shell and exploring his interests with us, Ben and I were thrilled. Ben especially, when Peter took such a liking to the sciences. They would always go
and perform their little tests and experiments. Right from the get-go, though, Peter was fascinated by robots. He wanted to know all he could, so Ben spent some time going over information with him as best he could. Of course, your name came up.”

Tony didn’t know what to say, he was completely lost for words.

“That Halloween, he said he wanted to dress up as his hero, so we went out to go get a costume, but when I pulled the Iron Man one off the shelf, Peter just shook his head. “No, Aunt May! Not Iron Man, Tony Stark!” So it’s, like, two days before Halloween, and Ben and I were looking at each other like, oh god, what now? I don’t even know how we did it, but—” May broke off into giggles, “we somehow found this little suit, still slightly too big, but it fit good enough for Peter, and—and Ben painted on this little goatee and, oh god, Peter made him redo it three or four times until it was perfect! Oh my lord, it was the sweetest thing! He looked so darn cute!”

Tony became all too aware of the lump in his throat that he couldn’t quite swallow down. He wiped at his suspiciously damp eyes and sniffled none too subtly.

“Are you all right?” May asked, sounding a little startled.

“Fine! I just—forgot my last dose of pain meds!”

“Oh huh.” She didn’t sound convinced.

“Dear lord though, woman, you let a little kid idolize me?” Tony deflected. “I was even more of a disaster then than I am now!”

“Tony, you have no idea how defensive he was about you. Once he got it into his mind you were his biggest hero, there was no changing it. I remember I once gently implied that maybe you weren’t exactly what he thought you were, and he got so, so angry, he wouldn’t speak to me for an entire week.”

Tony barked a sharp laugh in disbelief.

“All I said was, “Hey, take those articles with a grain of salt, sweetie, sometimes celebrities aren’t all we imagine them to be,” and that was it. He did not breathe a word to me for seven days. Just this cold, angry glare. I had to bribe him to talk to me again.”

“With what?”

May sighed. “A trip to the Stark Expo.”

Tony froze. Oh god.

“Oh god. That was when—” Tony cut himself off, his stomach knotting in anxiety.

May let out a slightly dry laugh. “Yeah, it didn’t exactly go as planned. Peter sure walked out of there starry-eyed, nonetheless.”

Tony breathed out heavily.

“You know, I think—I think I still have pictures from that Halloween!” May suddenly said. “I should dig them out for you!”

Tony’s mood shifted a full ninety degrees, and he grinned hugely. “Please!”

Of course it was then that the workshop door slid open. Tony turned to see Peter himself poking
“Speak of the little devil,” Tony said.

“Oh, is Pete there? Here, I'll let you go.”

“Hey Pete, its May, say hi.”

“Oh, hi May!” Peter said cheerily.

“Hi Peter, listen, I'll call you later.”

“Okay,” Peter said.

Tony said his goodbyes, waiting a moment to make sure the call was done before fixing his attention to Peter. He quirked a brow, taking in the teen’s nervous posture. He also noticed how Peter's gaze flickered to his current project, his expression dubious.

“So what's up, kiddo?” Tony cut in, before he had to deal with hearing another reprimand.

“Oh um, well,” Peter cut off with a groan. “It's sort of complicated.”

Tony's mind went into overdrive, every worst case scenario crashing over him like a train wreck. He breathed in and kept his composure, somehow.

“So okay, well, take your time.”

Peter grabbed onto one of the free chairs and rolled it over to where Tony sat, collapsing into it dramatically. Tony would have found it funny if he wasn't so worried.

“So I have this friend, MJ. I've told you about her, right?” Peter began.

Tony nodded. There weren't many people Peter talked about, and even less he described as friends.

“Well, earlier this week,” Peter looked a bit uncomfortable, “when I went out with Harry…”

Tony sighed, but nodded. There wasn't any point digging into that. They had already said their pieces.

Peter seemed to relax minutely when Tony didn't start in on it, either.

“So, while we were out, I noticed MJ on the street, and she was carrying a couple bags, so I got Harry to stop, and—and I went up to her, and I could tell right away that she was upset, you know? Like, something was wrong—”

Tony straightened up, attentively.

“So I asked her, and—Dad, her parents kicked her out.”

Tony frowned. “What?” he asked, feeling incredulous.

What kind of people would—?

“Apparently she… she said she came out to them, you know? And they just—they just told her to get out.”

Tony felt a burning rage settle in his gut. “Jesus Christ,” he swore, quiet but fierce. “Wait, where is
she now? Did she have somewhere to go? Peter, why didn't you bring her here?”

“She's staying with Harry right now. He offered, and she says it's going fine, but just—”

“You let her stay with Osborn?” Tony snapped.

“Dad!” Peter groaned. “Harry is a good guy!”

“That is up for debate,” Tony found himself growling. “What isn't up for debate is his father. Peter, I know you don't fully understand this, but Norman Osborn is a very, very dangerous man.”

Peter met his gaze, then glanced to the floor, worrying his lip. “I—she says it's okay there. Harry's given her her own room, and the place is big. I don’t think she’s even met Mr. Osborn.”

“Small miracles,” Tony muttered. “Regardless, that place isn't safe, and even if it was, she probably wouldn't want to overstay her welcome.”

Peter nodded. “MJ says she has a part-time job, and she's trying to find a cheap apartment, but, well, rent isn't really cheap here, and—and it just sucks. I don't know how this could happen—well, I do, but—it's stupid!”

“Tell you what. Why don't you invite your friend to stay while I set something up for her? If you find out where she works, I can narrow apartment searches to that area, or around the school maybe. I’ll snatch one up, and then she won't have to worry about rent and can concentrate on school.”

Peter looked at him wide-eyed. Finally, the teen nodded. “That'd be amazing, but I don't know if she’d ever accept something like that. MJ is sort of… err… proud? Or I think she might see it as bad, somehow?”

Tony stopped to consider it. Maybe…

“Hmm, well, if she’s that stubborn, maybe I can buy out an apartment and, I don't know, she can pay a small fee? And I'll just put it in a separate account for later. Like a college fund for when she decides to move on? It's not like I need the money.” He was really just thinking out loud at this point.

“I’ll run it by her,” Peter said, a smile finally touching his expression.

Tony felt a pleased warmth at the sight.

“Invite her over soon, nonetheless. It would be nice to have her input.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

Tony smiled, feeling another curl of warmth.

“But you should probably still go back upstairs before Bucky or Steve find you working down here. I mean, have you even taken your—”

“Yes, Peter. I’m fine.”

“Still—”
“Okay, okay. Friday, wrap up and save this to my personal server.”

“Yes, Boss.”

“Now, let’s go get some lunch.”

---

“Dishes go in the dishwasher, *not* on the counter!” Tony said pointedly, not looking up from his own bowl.

His lips quirked up into a smile as he heard Peter sigh, followed by the telltale sound of the dishwasher being opened and filled. Tony figured he’d better follow suit and made to stand, with the help of the cane, but Peter was next to him in a flash, gathering up his dishes and toting them over to the kitchen himself. Tony rolled his eyes and let himself continue to rest on the chair. “I’m not an invalid,” he said once the teen reappeared.

“Shh, I’m being nice,” Peter answered.

“Uh huh. Sure.”

“Sorry for the interruption, Boss, but you have a visitor,” Friday chimed in.

Tony perked up. “Is my Rhodey back from the war?” He sighed happily and eyed the elevator; very few people had access to the personal quarters of the tower. Peter rolled his eyes.

Friday was silent for a moment. “Identification unknown—”

Tony froze. “What?”

“Sorry, Boss—I think—there may be an error in my—” Friday’s usual lilt was rushed in alarm, before suddenly cutting out.

Tony was all too aware of the sound of the elevator. He stood on instinct, gritting his teeth through the pain, throwing his arm out in front of Peter, trying to put himself between his kid and any possible danger, his eyes wide. An icy flash of adrenaline spiked through him at the thought of what could—Tony’s heart seized. He couldn’t let anything happen to Peter, he couldn’t allow anything to happen to his son.

“Dad—!” Peter tried to push himself in front of him.

“Peter, stop, get behind me!”

The elevator chimed.

They both froze, and his grip on Peter’s arm tightened in warning. Steve was out, and Bucky was floors below them, in the gym, and as much as he fought against it, the fact was he was in no condition to fight.

The doors opened.

A single man in a black suit exited the elevator and looked around the room.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Stark. I see you’ve changed some things around. The renovations look rather nice.”
Tony looked on in disbelief. He was vaguely aware that he was gaping, but it didn’t seem important at the moment, all things considered. He was at a loss, thrown for a loop, mentally stalled. He said the first thing that finally filtered back into his brain.

“You son of a bitch.”

Coulson smiled.

---

Of all the bullshit things Tony foresaw happening that day, a long-thought-dead Shield agent (mentor? Ally? Guard? Glorified nanny? …Friend?) appearing in his home with little (read: no) warning was the last thing he would have guessed. Tony breathed through the shock and leaned heavily on the cane.

“Peter. Go to your room,” he directed.

The teen was startled out of the defensive glare he was shooting at the man before them. “What?”

“Go on.”

“But—I’m not just leaving you here!” Peter hissed, glaring suspiciously at the stranger.

Tony sighed. “Peter,” he pitched his voice low, meeting his eyes. “Go on. It’s fine.”

Peter picked up the change of tone easily and stiffened. Tony was honestly impressed when the teen met his gaze defiantly… for all of three seconds.

“Fine. But I want it on record that it wasn’t my idea.” Peter sent another suspicious look Coulson’s way.

“Noted. I’ll make sure to file it with our complaints department,” Tony responded, a little dryly.

The look Peter sent him matched the tone of his comment. Though, by some miracle, Peter decided to listen. He backed himself toward the hall where his bedroom was, his eyes distrustfully trained on Coulson. “I’ll just be in the other room,” he said.

Tony sighed again. “That’s the idea,” he stressed.

Peter huffed and finally, finally left.

Tony waited a few seconds after he heard the sound of Peter’s bedroom door closing before he fixed his gaze back to Coulson with a critical eye.

The man was waiting with the same polite calmness that he had always carried, his smile controlled, but not cold. He almost appeared unassuming. Though, Tony figured, his ability to seem as unassuming as he did was probably a practiced trait, the same way Clint’s idiocy was only about fifty, maybe sixty percent legitimate. Or the way Natasha could break a man’s neck with her thighs and leave the room looking completely innocent.

“You’re looking pretty spry for a corpse,” he sniped. He gripped the handle of his cane with one hand, and shoved the other into the pocket of his slacks to hide the tremble. God, he wished he could have a drink. Just a small taste would be so—

“Hmm, the rumors of my death—”
“Might have been a tad exaggerated?” Tony pressed.

Coulson paused, as if thinking it over. “Perhaps.”

Tony tried not to roll his eyes, he really did. He wasn’t very successful. Coulson looked toward the hall Peter had disappeared down. “Fatherhood suits you, Stark.”

He didn’t know what it exactly was, but something cracked in his chest. Anger simmered and bubbled as betrayal, clear and sharp, ached between his ribs.

“Everyone thought you died. The whole team. Thor said he saw you get, what, stabbed? Impaled? Straight through the chest.” Tony brought his own hand up to tap at his own chest in emphasis. “I was at your funeral.”

Coulson lowered his head, lips thinned. He almost appeared regretful.

“There was a matter of secrecy around my… return.”

“No kidding,” Tony grumbled, fixing the man with an unimpressed look.

He grit his teeth as his knees began to shake, ever so slightly, the ache burning in his abdomen. The shot of adrenaline was working its way out of him, and leaving behind the uncomfortable aftereffects the high tension had on his recovering… well, everything.

Tony leaned just a little more on the cane, then sighed and gestured to the sitting area, doing his best not to limp as he walked over.

Coulson sat himself in the armchair, angled slightly across from where Tony now sat.

“So what brings you out of your retirement, you know, from life?” Tony asked, stamping down his warring feelings of both betrayal and relief.

“Many things, most of which are classified,” Coulson replied. “However, most relevantly, the Accords.”

Tony’s brow arched. “Really?” he said, feeling a little skeptical.

“Indeed.” Coulson pulled a file from his coat and lean forward to set it on the coffee table between them. Tony tried not to feel a glimmer of thankfulness that the man remembered his aversion to being handed things. “What’s this?” he asked, picking it up.

“The details around the new direction for the Avengers Initiative,” Coulson said. “I’ve been offered a place as director.”

Tony paused, looking up from the papers he was already leafing through.

“I think the UN believes a familiar face will help smooth the remaining ruffled feathers. Even if you have all signed, it wasn’t a secret that there was some lingering apprehension amongst the team,” he explained.

“Speaking of the team. Does anyone else know?” Tony asked.

“Not as of yet,” Coulson admitted. “I’ll be making a trip to the compound after this.”

“The spy kids are there today,” Tony said. “Cap too.”
“I’m aware,” Coulson nodded.

“Of course you are.” Tony sighed. “Well, good luck with that.”

He tried not to snort at the mental image of Clint and Natasha throwing Coulson out on his ass.

“Thank you. Well, everything you need to know should be there.” Coulson stood. “If you’ll excuse me, I have a lot of work to get done.”

Tony hesitated as Coulson made his way back toward the elevator.

“It’s good to have you back,” he finally said.

Coulson paused, then smiled again, more genuinely than before.

“I look forward to working with you all again.”

Tony smiled crookedly. “Oh, I’m sure.”

Coulson sighed and sent him a long-suffering look. “Take care of yourself,” he said.

“You too,” Tony said, and then, “and apologize to my AI for that stunt you pulled with the elevators the next time you’re around. Friday hates it when she’s disconnected.”

“Very well. And I assume it may be too much to ask that you stay out of trouble?”

Tony shrugged. “We’ll see how bored I get.”

Coulson sighed. Tony turned to smile, cheekily, as the elevator doors closed.

He collapsed back against the sofa and stared up at his ceiling. He supposed weirder things had happened, his thoughts drifting to one Nick Fury. Shield seemed particularly fond of faking deaths.

---

That night, Wanda and Vision, complete with his new human camouflage (because apparently that was a thing now) showed up with the rest of the team. There was an air of tension that Tony immediately picked up on as he looked over the bunch. He decided he might just take a look at the footage of Coulson showing up at the compound after all.

Peter jumped up and ran over to Wanda and Vision, absolutely beaming. “Hey!” he said, excitedly.

“Peter!” Wanda wrapped him in a hug as Vision smiled in return. “Oh, we missed you.”

“Same! Sorry I haven't gone to the compound in a while.”

“It’s okay, things have been crazy. We understand.”

“We thought perhaps you might like to join us for dinner,” Vision said.

Peter looked up at him and hesitated. “Um, sure!”

Tony watched as his kid sent Wanda a confused look and then it hit him—and oh, it took every bit of self-restraint not to start laughing—Peter had no idea who Vision was. The teen didn't recognize him in his new human appearance, and was too awkward to mention anything out loud.

It was cute when Peter turned and shot him a questioning look, while also trying to subtly gesture
to Vision in question. Tony simply nodded in allowance but gave no other hints. It’d hit Peter eventually.

Wanda smiled and told Peter to grab his coat.

“Text us when you no longer need him distracted,” Vision said once Peter was out of the room. Clint scoffed, Natasha sighed, and Tony raised his brows at the bluntness, but no one commented.

“Have fun, kiddo,” Tony said when Peter dashed back into the room. “Here, take a few bucks in case you guys decide to do something else as well.”

“You really don’t have to—” Peter tried to say as Tony pulled out his wallet, but he shook his head and waved off his kid’s concern.

“It’s fine, here.” He grabbed a few bills and passed them over without really caring to look what it was. “Stay out of trouble.”

“We won’t let anything happen to him,” Wanda promised.

Tony nodded, but felt more reassured when Vision copied the sentiment.

The heaviness of the atmosphere in the room became almost suffocating the moment the elevator doors closed.

Tony’s gaze immediately darted to Clint, who’d been looking like he was going through a count sequence to a nuclear blowout in his head the whole time they’d been waiting for Vision and Wanda to whisk Peter away.

Sure enough, Clint was the first to break, scoffing and storming over to the loveseat and throwing himself down on it. “That absolute fucking asshole!” he hissed.

Natasha didn’t say anything, but her eyes were hard when she sat herself next to her friend.

“We had an… unexpected visitor at the compound today,” Steve told him.

Tony noted how tense Steve was, and carefully scooted over so the man could sit next to him on the sofa, nodding. “Yeah, I know.”

Clint’s head snapped to him, gaze hot. “You knew?” he accused, angrily.

Tony frowned. “Calm down, Katniss, I only found out today too,” he replied, then muttered, “Strolled in here like he owned the damn place.”

Steve placed a hand on Tony’s shoulder and squeezed lightly in reassurance. “Now’s not the time to be turning on each other.”

Clint sighed, deflating slightly, but still looked just about ready to run someone through with an arrow.

“I had triple checked everything after—after the invasion,” Natasha finally spoke. “Though, I suppose it’s not the first time Shield’s faked deaths.” Her lips thinned, a crack in her mask.

“Fuck, I need a goddamn drink,” Clint growled.

Natasha produced a small flash from her boot and handed it over wordlessly.
Steve cleared his throat, and Tony rolled his eyes at the lack of subtly. Especially when the two spies side-eyed him.

“Jesus, it’s fine,” he said. He didn’t need them walking on eggshells around him.

Even if his nose could pick up the faint scent of vodka.

Clint handed the flask back to Natasha after only a single swig, and it disappeared back into her boot.

Tony ignored how he felt both relieved and sad to see it go. His right hand trembled and tingled as the need to grip a cool glass washed over him. He clenched his hand and rubbed at his palm, as if he could wipe away the ingrained habit.

“Where’s Bruce?” he asked, trying to dispel the new tension. There was enough of it in the room already without adding layers.

“Down on his personal floor,” Natasha said. “He said he wanted some space.”

“He came back with you, though?”

Natasha nodded.

“Friday, order some pizzas,” Tony instructed. Nothing better to help emotional angst than greasy food—

“Tony, you know you can’t eat that.” Steve sounded regretful saying it.

“I’m emotionally compromised, Steve. Look, look how compromised I am. I need comfort food,” Tony replied.

Steve sighed. “You’re still healing. We’ve barely been able to get you onto more hearty soups, and —”

“Psshh, soup, pizza, my body won’t know the difference.”

Steve let out a long-suffering sigh. “I can pretty much guarantee it will.”

Tony felt a shimmer of irritation. He wanted to keep arguing petulantly, but when he turned slightly to send Steve a glare, he noticed that the other looked tired. Exhausted, even.

“Friday, place the pizza order.”

Steve sighed.

Tony pressed on, “But, also find something that fits my new misery diet.”

“Very good, Boss.”

Steve relaxed slightly and placed an apologetic kiss to his temple. Tony leaned against him a bit more, silently letting him know it was okay.

Not long after the food appeared, so did Bucky, who, though somewhat lost on why everyone seemed so downtrodden, still stuck around and wedged himself next to Steve on the sofa.

And a little while after that, Bruce finally made his way up, waving tiredly at the group before
loading up a plate with what was left from the pizza boxes and joining their little gathering.

The atmosphere, though still a little morose, had lightened considerably. And Tony could appreciate being amongst his team.

The tension finally dispersed when Clint, who’d been sulking quietly, huffed and said, “That asshole owes me so many birthday presents.”

---

Peter bounced nervously as he watched his dad squint suspiciously at the stove, more specifically, into the pot of boiling potatoes. With something that Peter could only describe as trepidation, Tony lifted the lid and jolted back from the billows of steam that erupted, hissing in pain as he did so and nearly cracking the glass lid against the counter as he dropped it. Peter waved away the steam and peered curiously into the pot, wrinkling his nose.

“So why are we cooking, exactly?” he asked as he tried to see if anything in the pot was salvageable.

“We can’t order out for every meal,” Tony replied, staring dubiously at the stove.

Peter opened the drawer next to him and pulled out a fork. Eying the pot, he poked it inside to clear away the starchy foam, and grinned when he saw some potato. But it faded when the bit of food dissolved immediately upon contact with his fork.

“Yeah, but, Bucky can cook, Steve can cook, so—”

“I can cook, too!” Tony said, a little defensively, leaning heavily against the counter.

Peter couldn’t hide his doubt. He stared at his dad, then looked at their pot of starchy water.

Tony huffed in response and looked pointedly away, as if not looking at their failure would somehow make it disappear.

“Plus, they’re busy,” Tony finally admitted, begrudgingly.

Peter bit down a laugh, but couldn’t hide his amused smile.

“Jesus, what died in here!” Clint exclaimed as he walked into the room.

“Nothing! Everything’s fine!” Tony insisted.

“Yeah? Then what the hell’s burning?”

Peter’s gaze quickly darted to his dad, Tony mirroring the movement. He was suddenly all too aware of the slightly charred scent coming from the oven.

“Shit!” Tony yelped, reaching for the oven door.

Peter was quicker, though, and threw the oven open. Immediately, black plumes of smoke lofted into the air, the room’s smoke detector blaring angrily as everyone began to cough. Peter quickly helped his dad from the room, despite the man’s protests, and rushed back to help Clint air out the smoke.

In his absence, Clint had removed the charred, smouldering roast from the oven and threw the entire thing, pan and all, into the sink, the water on full blast.
“Friday’s beginning to vent the floor,” Clint wheezed, pointing to the vents in the ceiling.

Peter rushed to grab a tea-towel and began waving it around, trying to blow the smoke toward the vents.

“Peter, get out of there before you get sick!” he heard Tony call from the other room.

“Come on kid,” Clint said as he finally turned off the tap. “Let’s get outta here and let the robot clear out the rest.”

“AI,” Peter corrected distractedly, while making sure the stove and oven were both off.

“What the hell were you two trying to accomplish, anyway?” Clint asked as he flipped on the TV.

“I have a friend coming over for dinner tonight,” Peter explained.

Clint raised a brow, then glanced pointedly at the kitchen.

“Well, good fucking luck with that,” the archer snorted in amusement.

“Hey, watch it around the kid,” Tony said without much feeling.

Clint sniggered. “Oh my god, you’re spending so much time with Cap, you’re morphing into him.”

Tony didn’t deign that with a response.

Peter felt concern grow when he glanced over at his dad and noticed the man’s eyes were closed, the lines on his face showing clear exhaustion. It was obvious that his dad was slowly healing, with real emphasis on the slowly. And as the days went by, Peter could sense Tony’s frustration more and more. He knew it was unusual for his dad to remain idle for long, which was probably why he spent so much time trying to sneak back into his workshop, despite not yet being cleared by medical. Peter knew that the simple fact that Tony survived his injuries was a testament to his strength, and yet, it was still unbelievably unnerving to see Tony in such a weakened state, reality clashing with the image he had of his father in his mind.

“Uhm, do you want me to get your pills?” the teen asked quietly, hoping not to irritate him.

His worry was unwarranted, though, as his dad only raised his hand from off of Peter's shoulder and ruffled his hair. Peter's face scrunched up and he tried to dodge out of reach, ignoring the mix of embarrassment and happy acceptance that fluttered in his chest. Tony's eyes were open, and the exhaustion had given way to a certain fondness, his lips quirked up in a crooked grin.

“I’ll be good for a little bit yet,” he replied with a sigh, when Peter settled back down next to him.

“So, why are you destroying my perfect communal kitchen instead of your own penthouse on high?”
“Dad said Steve and Bucky needed privacy to talk something out,” Peter replied with a shrug.

Clint turned sharply to Tony, staring long and hard at him. Tony leaned back and smirked. Clint’s face twisted into a look of disgust, before turning his whole body toward the TV.

“Never mind.”

Peter didn’t pay too much mind to the two men, suddenly too absorbed by what was on the TV.

“…It’s been just over two weeks since the last victim of the Tri-City Ripper was found and identified. This lull in brutality has left the citizens of the New York boroughs shaken and on edge. With no new leads from police, and no witnesses stepping forward, our once proud city waits with bated breath as we ask ourselves, who will be next?”

Peter felt a heavy stone of dread settle deep in his guts. This had been going on for far too long.

“Jesus, someone really needs to look into this,” Clint growled. “We should be looking into this. Obviously the police are bloody useless.”

“I have been,” Tony spoke up.

Peter turned slightly to get a better look at his dad, feeling rather startled.

“After that young boy from Peter’s school was… found, I tasked Friday to go over the city’s cameras and look through police reports, but—” Tony sighed heavily, “the… person… doing this is—careful.” Tony glanced over to Peter and squeezed his shoulder in reassurance.

“Everyone makes mistakes,” Clint insisted grimly, eyes narrowed at the TV, lip curling in disgust.

Tony nodded. “And when he does, I’ll be there.”

Peter hadn’t thought his dad was even looking into the case, besides making sure Peter himself was as safe as possible, but the knowledge provided little relief in the wake of just how many lives had already been lost. He looked down at his hands and wondered how many more innocent people would have to suffer before someone was able to put a stop to the chaos.

“Jesus, what happened down here?”

Peter turned to see Bucky walking off the elevator, his face scrunched, most likely due to the charred smell permeating the air. Steve followed, not far behind, looking around in concern.

“Was there a fire?” Steve asked, voice deeply concerned.

“We’re going to have to order out tonight,” Tony grumbled in response.

Peter glanced sheepishly at the other two, expecting to have to explain further. Instead, he saw Steve and Bucky look at each other and have some kind of non-verbal conversation, before they looked back at Tony, nervously.

“Uh, actually…” Bucky began, trailing off.

Steve squared his shoulders and put on his brave Captain Face.

“Bucky and I started dinner upstairs.”

Peter’s gaze immediately darted to his dad, who he could see had stiffened. In his peripheral vision,
he noticed Clint slowly, carefully lifting his phone from his pocket, the archer’s face resembling a kid at Christmas.

And sure enough.

“I’m sorry. What?” Tony asked, sitting up, eyes narrowing dangerously.

Peter found himself scooting a little further down the sofa, away from his dad, eyes wide. He recognized that look, only, in his experience, it was usually directed at him, right before shit hit the fan. Seeing it thrown toward Steve and Bucky was… surreal. In a way. Also, strangely exciting.


“You see, that’s what I thought he said. Except, I have a very definitive memory of telling both of you that I’d be cooking tonight.”

“Oh, well, the thing is—” Steve began, some of the false facade slipping off his face.

“What Stevie means to say is…” Bucky glanced at Tony, then to Steve, looking like a man about to be led to the gallows. “We know sometimes you need, uh, an extra hand in the kitchen, so we, well, we—”

“Went ahead and made tonight’s dinner completely behind my back. You *planned* on me failing! I can’t believe either of you!”

“Tony—” Steve began.

“Listen—” Bucky started.

“No! This is completely unbelievable! This disrespect—in my own house!”

Peter flailed as Tony shakily stood and passed his dad his cane. Tony took it angrily. “I should beat you both with this damn thing!”

Peter didn’t know what to do. He wasn’t even fully convinced this was actually happening and not just some sort of weird fever dream. Sure, his dad had been frustrated and stressed lately, but he hadn’t imagined it would manifest like this.

“I can cook, dammit! I—I made both of you that really nice Italian meal—ha!”

“That was your mother’s recipe, wasn’t it?” Steve latched on to the topic, trying to steer them out of the fire.

Tony nodded with a huff.

“Then why didn’t you make *that*, the one thing we know you can cook!” Bucky exclaimed.

Tony looked enraged. Steve looked horrified.

“**Bucky—**” Steve hissed.

“I didn’t make that tonight because that is *special*, and—!”

“Okay—we know, Tony,” Steve placated, while shooting daggers at Bucky with his eyes. “Why don’t we just—”
Tony snarled and threw up the hand that wasn’t leaning heavily on his cane before storming out. Well, as well as he could, in his current state. Peter winced.

There was a long silence afterward.

“Really, Buck? Were you trying to antagonize him?” Steve finally gritted out.

“I couldn’t help it! He’s so damn stubborn!”

Steve sighed. “It’s more than the dinner.”

“I know.”

Peter noticed Clint slip away from the room. He, too, suddenly felt out of place. He sighed and cleared his throat.

“Do you, um, need any help finishing dinner?”

Steve smiled. “Sure, that’d be swell, kiddo.”

Bucky wrapped an arm around his shoulders and muttered a quiet apology to him as they entered the elevator.

---

Tony reappeared somewhere during the final touches on the meal. He looked at the rather delicious looking spread and sighed.

“Yeah, okay,” he said in defeat.

“We weren’t trying to insult you,” Steve said earnestly.

Peter looked between them, deciding maybe it was best if he gave them a minute, and left. His phone chimed a minute later, Harry letting him know he was finally here.

“Hey, Dad! Harry’s here, I’m going down to show him up, okay?”

The soft murmur of voices ceased.

“Okay, we’ll get everything set out here!” Tony called, sounding a little strained.

Peter sighed and tried to calm his suddenly upset nerves.

---

Tony studied the table for any imperfections. He moved a glass to make sure it was in line with the rest of the place settings, then sighed, torn between wanting to ensure he provided a good view of his home and his competence as Peter’s father, and desperately wanting to not give a shit because this was Osborn’s spawn he was… allowing into his home.

“Here, do you have the pot coasters down?” Steve asked, carrying in the still-warm casserole dish.

“Yeah, set it here,” Tony pointed. “Then we can put the salad here, and the roasted veggies here, and then the bread there.”

“Perfect,” Steve smiled and began to follow Tony’s direction, pausing to place a quick kiss to his
“I wish Buck could be here,” Tony muttered.

“Someday soon. We’ll sort it all out, Coulson mentioned it. It sounded like he wanted to help.”

Tony very markedly didn’t roll his eyes. “Trying to suck up.”

Steve sent him a look. “I’m sure that’s not true. I—I didn’t know him very long, but, well, he seemed like a very stand-up sort of guy before.”

Tony deflated a little. “He was.”

“Why don’t you sit down for a bit?”

“I’ll be sitting all evening,” Tony groused, and yet, he could feel the tiredness creeping up on him. He fought down the shot of frustration that burned within him. His meltdown earlier had been bad enough.

He pulled out the chair at the end of the table and sat as Steve came back into the room carrying the roasted vegetables.

“Thank you.”

Steve paused after placing the dish down and smiled at him. “No need to thank me.”

“No, I do,” Tony admitted. “I was... out of turn, earlier, and again, I’m sorry.”

“Thank you,” Steve said, then smiled again. “And you’re welcome.”

Tony relaxed when Steve kissed him again. Steve placed the final dish on the table, and then the elevator chimed.

“About time,” Tony grumbled. “I was about to send a bloody search party.”

Steve nudged him lightly. “Try to be nice.”

Tony didn’t dignify that with a response. He bolstered himself, preparing for the night ahead.

“Hey, we’re here!”

Tony watched as Peter bounded out of the elevator, full of excitement. And behind him, being tugged along, was Harry Osborn.

He narrowed his eyes as he studied the boy. He was dressed, regretfully, quite nicely, in a blue suit with a light grey vest which probably cost close to Tony’s own. He was also carrying a rather nice-looking paper bag, though Tony couldn’t see where it was from.

“Welcome,” Steve greeted as he walked over.

Tony turned his gaze to Steve and sighed quietly, but also took personal joy in the boy’s somewhat startled look. He was good at quickly schooling his expression.

“Thank you. Harry Osborn,” he introduced, offering Steve his hand, which the blond accepted easily. “Peter mentioned you might be joining us, though I wasn’t sure. Oh, here,” he said, passing the bag to Steve. “I brought some dessert. Sorry if you already had something planned, I didn’t
want to come empty-handed.”

“Well, thank you, that was very thoughtful.”

Tony rolled his eyes and forced himself to stand, drawing the room’s attention, even as Steve accepted the offered dessert. He smirked as Harry visibly straightened.

“Mr. Stark,” Harry walked over, offering his hand.

Tony stared at the boy’s hand and debated not taking it, but then he saw Peter looking nervous next to Steve. Minimal effort.

“Osborn,” he greeted with much less warmth than Steve had shown, as he shook the offered hand.

“I—uh, well,” Harry paused and took a breath, before meeting his eyes. “I’d like to formally apologize. I realize that I haven’t made the best impression on you, and that my actions may have been unworthy of me. I promise to do better. Thank you very much for inviting me into your home and giving me another chance to become acquainted.”

Tony stood strong. No wonder Peter liked him. This kid was raised learning how to spin words, turn the tides his way. Tony knew all about that; if Osborn thought he was going to be so easy to lead, the boy was sorely mistaken.

“Well, I hope you're hungry, Harry, we made lots of food,” Steve interjected smoothly, showing Harry to his seat.

“Starved,” Harry agreed, with what Tony was sure was a practiced smile.

All things considered, dinner started rather easily. Tony couldn’t help the fond amusement he felt toward Peter, who was babbling on, no doubt out of a mixture of nerves and excitement.

“…So all in all, MJ seems to be settling in to her new place well!” Peter finished, stopping for breath.

“That’s great. I know she texted me the other day, I was thinking of maybe getting her a housewarming gift,” Harry replied.

Tony, to his credit, did not roll his eyes, nor did he glare suspiciously. Despite how he really felt on the matter.

“We should throw her a party!” Peter said in excitement, then caught Tony’s raised brow. “Well, like, a housewarming party! Oh man, I gotta tell Ned!”

“I’m sure she’d appreciate that,” Tony agreed, keeping his responses minimal.

MJ had been an interesting person to meet, though he was glad he did. It was obvious the girl was very bright and had hell of a future ahead of her.

“Peter tells me you’re thinking of starting university this fall,” Steve said, steering the conversation along, since it was a little obvious Tony didn’t want to do it himself.

Harry nodded. “Yeah, I took some time off after high school, but it’s about time I buckled down again.”

Internally, Tony was turning the whole scene around in his head. Harry Osborn painted a picture of a seemingly polite, well-put-together young man. There was no way that was the full story, though;
not when his father was literal Satan. Damien Thorn looked like a normal kid, and he turned out to be the actual Antichrist. Tony was watching for omens of his own.

He was pushed out of his dark musings quite literally when Steve nudged him. He was sending Tony a pleading look, disguised somewhat horribly behind a pleasant Captain America Smile™. Tony met his gaze head-on, challenging. He wasn’t being openly hostile, what more did Steve want? He took another sip of his specially-prepared meal and mentally sighed. It was good, but he was getting real damn tired of all this light food. God, he wanted a burger.

“Harry has lots of great ideas for future projects!” Peter piped up.

“My father’s been trying to train me in the business aspects of the company but, to be honest, I’m much more interested in the lab work. My mother was working on some really amazing things before she passed. I found some of her old notes, and… wow. I’m hoping that I can continue her research in the medical fields.”

Tony felt his stomach twist. He wondered how much of that research was tied to Norman’s horrific experiments. He took a breath and tried to calm his heart rate, and bit back the hundred or so scathing comments that popped into his head. He promised Peter he would give this a go. Maybe he could put a bit more effort in...

“So, Peter tells us you two have been friends for, what was it, ten years or so?”

Peter smiled encouragingly at him, and Tony used his years of practice with the media to throw on a somewhat pleasant expression.

“Married, actually.”

What?

Tony leaned back in his seat, confused and alarmed in equal measure. Osborn spoke with a calm sort of confidence, one that immediately had Tony wondering, and more than slightly worried, about what the actual living hell he was talking about.

His only form of solace was that Peter, when he glanced to him, looked just as confused.

“What?” Steve said.

Exactly!

“Married,” Harry said, then turned to Peter and wrapped his arm around his shoulders.

“What?” echoed Peter.

Harry gasped in mock offense. “I’ve heard of people forgetting anniversaries, but really, Peter, forgetting our own wedding? I’m hurt!”

Peter’s brows were furrowed in confusion, until very suddenly they weren’t, and Tony watched somewhat in horror as dawning and understanding bled over his son’s features.

“Oh my god,” Peter groaned softly, burying his face in his hands.

Harry cackled. “You know, I’m pretty sure I dug up an old photo just in case the topic—”

“No…” Peter whispered heavily with embarrassment, staring at Harry in horror.
Harry pulled out an old Polaroid and showed it to the table. In the picture were two little boys, both dressed in rather adorable suits and matching grins. Tony warmed as his gaze immediately zeroed in on a tiny Peter Parker. Then, of course, he took in the rest of the photo, including the tiny, hand-picked looking bouquets of flowers and the somewhat haphazard decorations in the background.

“So, what, you just—decided to throw a wedding?” Tony asked, feeling perplexed and oddly even more protective over his son, despite the fact that the event happened so long ago.

“May made us a cake and everything,” Harry said. “Plus, it was totally Peter’s idea.”

Peter peeked out from his hands, cheeks flushed pink. “I can’t believe you remember that. How do you even have that photo?”

“This was a parting gift to me from your aunt and uncle!” Harry defended, pocketing the picture after it’d been passed around the table.

“That’s absolutely adorable,” Steve said.

Tony tried very hard not to scowl. He might have failed slightly when he noticed that Osborn didn’t remove his arm from its new place around Peter’s shoulders. He wondered if he could possibly manage to whack the kid with his cane beneath the table and make it look like an accident.

---

Peter thought dinner was going… better than he feared. His dad, though a little subdued, had managed to engage in conversation and not toss Harry out of the building. It was a relief to be able to sit and enjoy spending time with some of his favorite people all in one room, without completely ushering in the sudden onslaught of World War III.

There were moments here or there, sprinkled throughout the evening, that felt a little tense, but for the most part, Peter was really, genuinely enjoying himself. The teen could admit that he’d been a little nervous about how Harry would react to Steve being present as well, but the two seemed to be getting along well. In fact, Peter thought that maybe Steve’s presence was helping his dad, as well. He did catch Steve nudging him or tapping him when he started to look a little too tense or suspicious of something. Peter mostly shrugged it off, though; as far as he could tell, Harry was acting normal and friendly.

“Peter, you’re going to love this,” Harry stated after the dinner dishes had been cleared and Steve brought out the cake Harry had brought over.

Peter’s mouth watered as he looked at the cake, even as he helped pass around dessert plates and forks. It did look amazing, and Peter was always ready for sweets. He eagerly retook his seat next to Harry as Steve began to pass out pieces, giving the first to Harry.

“Here.”

Peter turned to look, and saw Harry holding up his fork with a small bit of the cake on it. He felt his cheeks heat, but leaned in and accepted the treat.

“Oh my god,” Peter moaned. “This is the best thing ever.”

“Ah! Ow!” Harry jolted, and Peter looked at him in alarm.

“Are you okay?”
“Uh—yeah, no, sorry, it’s fine,” Harry recovered quickly, and Peter frowned in confusion as he glanced around, trying to see what could have caused him pain. Harry’s hand was rubbing his leg suspiciously, but his expression gave nothing away, except for the smallest hint of a smirk pulling at his lips.

He saw Steve rest his hand on his dad’s wrist, and they had some sort of silent conversation Peter learned not to bother trying to decode long ago. Instead, he dug into his own slice of cake, savoring a huge bite when Harry straightened next to him suddenly.


Peter looked at him and hoped his face was questioning enough, but Harry was looking between his dad and Steve.

“So how long have you two been together?”

Peter jolted and nearly swallowed his cake wrong as laughter bubbled up from his chest. What? Where had—

“About six months now,” his dad said with a shrug.

What.

“WHAT?” Peter shrieked, gaping. His thoughts were speeding so quickly he couldn’t grab hold of one long enough to make sense of it. He blinked, feeling completely thrown for a loop. His dad—and Steve?

And now everyone was staring at him, in worry, bewilderment, amusement? What?

“Pete, surely—surely you knew?” Tony said slowly.

“I—I—what?”

“Oh my god. You didn’t know!” Tony broke out into wheezing laughter.

“No one told me!” Peter defended, sounding a little hurt, but mostly still reeling, still trying to wrap his mind around—well, everything.

“We weren’t trying to hide anything from you, Peter,” Steve spoke up. “We didn’t mention it because, well, we thought it was obvious.”

“But—how would it be obvious?” Peter demanded.

“Pete, kiddo, Steve’s all but moved into the penthouse! Unless on a mission, he’s been living next to you every time you stay here!” his dad replied, still sounding highly amused.

Peter stopped, his mind immediately hitting rewind and going over every time he’s stayed at the tower.

“Oh my god,” he said as it finally began to hit him. They were right. It was all there, right in front of him. The only other person who was really around as much as Steve was Bucky, and he wasn’t allowed to leave. “My life is a lie.”

Tony snorted, and even Steve began to laugh quietly.

“Uh, sorry?” Harry told him, though the other teen sounded as amused as the others.
Peter groaned and shoved another forkful of cake into his mouth, hoping to quell his growing embarrassment with the sweet, delicious treat.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you all enjoyed the update! Thanks so much for reading!

Feel free to drop by my Tumblr for fandom content, updates, or just to say hi! My ask box is always open!
Chapter Thirty-Eight

Peter tapped his feet in the elevator heading back up to the penthouse. He couldn’t help but feel joyful and accomplished after how well the night had gone. Harry had left in what seemed to be a good mood (and very much alive), and had even hugged him good night. He couldn’t help but hold out hope that maybe this was the beginning of the end of his dad’s unnecessary hatred.

He was still feeling slightly floored by the revelation of his dad’s apparent relationship, though, and his brain was working on shifting his view of Steve. He went over everything he had simply taken for granted before—Steve taking him to the park, offering advice, giving him driving lessons. Had that been Steve trying to bond with him as his boyfriend’s kid? Peter was so busy filtering their every interaction through new context that he didn’t immediately notice when he’d made it back up to the penthouse.

“It went well, then?”

Peter perked up at the sound of Bucky’s voice.

“Yeah, Tony was better behaved than I could’ve hoped, and Harry seemed like a nice enough young man,” Steve replied. “Missed you, though.”

Peter’s offer to help clean up the leftovers died on his tongue as he walked off the elevator and saw Steve leaning in, wrapping an arm around Bucky’s waist, and then kissing him.

His jaw dropped. Shock. Confusion. He didn’t know what to think immediately. His thoughts spun back to dinner, the happy and proud look on his dad’s face when he admitted that they had been dating for months. Peter felt a leaden weight settle heavy in his gut. His stomach churned sickly.

Then all at once, his veins were on fire.

“WHAT THE HELL?”

Peter watched, enraged, as Steve and Bucky jolted and jumped away from one another.

“Seriously, what the actual hell!”

Steve blinked, owlishly.

“Pete—” Bucky tried.

“No! I-I can’t believe you—either of you! How could you do this?” Peter threw his hands in the
air, gesticulating wildly. “My dad trusted you! Both of you! How could you do this to him!”

His yelling must have been alarming, because the next moment, he saw his dad rushing into the room as fast as he could.

“Jesus, what’s going on in here?”

“There’s a misunderstanding and—” Steve cut in.

“Misunderstanding? What’s there to misunderstand about you shoving your tongue down his throat!” Peter pointed.

“What.” Tony blinked.

“Oh god—Dad, I—” Peter felt a rush of dread hit him and he wrung his hands together, nervously. “Steve’s cheating on you!”

Silence.

Tony’s form began to tremble. Then shake. And then, all at once, he was hunched in on himself, bringing his free hand up to cover his face.

Peter took a step toward his dad, suddenly worried. He spotted what looked suspiciously like a tear.

His worry was instantly overshadowed by rage.

“You absolute asshole!” he shrieked, rounding on Steve. “Look what you’ve done!”

“Tony—” Steve begged.

“Don’t you dare speak to him!” Peter fumed. “I should throw you right off the goddamn balcony!”

“Seriously Tony, you can step in any moment!” Bucky said, eyeing the height of the ceiling vent ponderously.

“Look at how much you’ve hurt him!” Peter yelled.

“Dammit, Clint! I know you’re up there, help me up!” Bucky called and lunged, as if to hop up on the table to get himself toward the vent, but he was thwarted by Steve, who grabbed him by the sleeve of his shirt and yanked him back.

“Oh no. We are in this together!” the blond hissed.

Peter breathed in, ready to begin bellowing once more, then pointed at his dad for emphasis—

—his dad, who threw his head back and howled in… laughter?

“Oh my god,” Peter whispered, the breath knocked out of him from shock. “He’s gone mad with grief!”

That only seemed to set his dad off harder, the man’s loud laughter turning into wheezing as he doubled over again, tears running down his face from the force of his laughs.

Opposite him, Bucky had stopped tugging against Steve’s hold and was now rooted to the spot, observing the scene. Steve looked like he was fighting not to show hapless amusement.
Peter stopped, all anger dissipating and being replaced instantly with confusion.

...What?

Suddenly, Tony’s laughter began to turn into painful-sounding coughs, and Steve and Bucky both ran to the man’s side to support him. Peter was feeling too lost to even try to stop them.

Tony sniffled and groaned as Steve rubbed his back and Bucky pulled over a chair. Peter watched as his dad waved the chair away and leaned more heavily on his cane.

“I’m fine. Shoo!” he said quietly to Bucky.

“What?” Peter said aloud when everyone had seemingly calmed.

“Pete, I appreciate the defense squad,” his dad said, eyes sparkling. “But it’s really very unnecessary.”

“But—”

Tony held up his hand, making Peter fall silent.

“I know that Steve’s seeing Bucky.”

Peter pulled a face. His dad’s grin widened.

“Okay, listen, Pete. So, what do you know about poly-amorous relationships?”

‘Huh?’

Oh.

OH.

---

Peter lied sprawled back in his bedroom at his and May’s cozy apartment, enjoying the warm breeze coming in from the window as he listened to Harry rant about the chairmen on the board of his father’s company. A huge grin delighted the teen’s face as Harry swore and growled about ‘bigoted old minds.’

“I’m not kidding, Pete. I don’t think I can do this. It took every damn bit of self-restraint I had in me not to just start screaming—and I didn’t even get to sit through the whole meeting!” Harry huffed.

“Just think, one day, you won’t have to stay silent. Won’t you be, like, their boss or whatever?”

Harry sighed. “It’s a bit more complicated than that but, to an extent, yeah, I guess.”

Peter grinned and put on his best (worst) fake Announcer Voice. “A startling development in the business world today, Harry Osborn of Oscorp, in his first big move as CEO, has said to have fired the entire board of directors for the company…”

Peter felt a rush when Harry snorted and devolved into laughter.

“Oh my God!” Harry wheezed. “Can you imagine my father’s face? Sweet mother of God!”
Peter listened as Harry’s laughter died down, his own grin still stuck in place, all too happy with himself at improving his friend’s mood.

“So, any plans for the rest of the day?” Peter asked.

There was a rustle on the other end, and Peter could picture Harry shrugging.

“Not much,” Harry replied. “I think my dad wants me to look over a few things.”

“Sounds boring.”

“Probably will be. I’d rather be in the labs actually working on projects,” Harry admitted.

“Oh, right?” Peter spared a glance at Ben, and then gave the bot a fist-bump. “I haven’t been down to the labs since Dad’s accident.”

“He looked better than I expected, all things considered.”

“Really?” Peter asked.

In all honesty, Peter still fretted a bit. His dad still hadn’t quite shed the pallor look to his complexion; plus, the general lack of energy, pain, and—well, everything.

“I was seriously expecting a wheelchair, like, at least. I didn’t expect him to be, like, walking around and shit. I mean, the internet’s still going crazy, even though the Avengers and SI both released those statements the other day.”

“He’s… stubborn,” Peter admitted.

“I hadn’t noticed,” Harry said, a little dryly.

Peter grinned.

“So, I know it’s short notice, but do you have any plans for tomorrow?”

Peter stopped and thought about it. “No, I don’t think so. Why?”

“Well… I was hoping I could take you out.”

He smiled brightly. “Sure, sounds like fun!”

Harry let out a breath. “Really?” he said, sounding excited.

Peter pulled a confused face, but kept his grin. “Uh, yeah, definitely. What time?”

“I’ll pick you up at three.”

Peter made an affirmative noise and nodded, even though Harry couldn’t see.

“Oh, and wear something nice!” Harry added.

“Oh, uh, okay, sounds good. I guess I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“Yeah, it’s a date!” Harry agreed.

Peter loved hanging out with Harry, but he couldn’t help but worry over what ‘wear something nice’ meant. Usually he’d go for casual and clean, or semi-casual, but ‘nice’ by Harry’s standards
was probably something vastly different. What if he took him somewhere fancier to hang out?

Peter glanced at his closet. He would worry about it tomorrow. Yeah. Tomorrow.

---

After enjoying a quick dinner with May and playing games online with Ned the rest of the evening, tomorrow came faster than Peter was prepared for.

Peter had tried on three different outfits in various levels of comfort already, and was now close to panicking. He bounced on his toes and chewed on his lip indecisively. How dressed up was ‘dress nice’? Where were they going to be going?

He took a deep breath and forced himself to still and think about what his dad would do. Tony usually wore casual clothes when in the lab or lounging around the tower, but more often than not, he stuck to suits when going out to work or meetings.

Peter wasn’t going to a job or anything but… Harry said to dress nice. His dad told him once that the secret to any suit was confidence, and Peter figured he knew what he was talking about since he had yet to see the man in one that didn’t look good.

Huffing, he reached deep into his closet. Most of the dressier clothes his dad bought him were at the tower, but...

there!

Peter hurriedly threw on the dark charcoal slacks, debating for a moment between red or white shirts, before panicking and texting a picture to MJ.

MJ: The maroon one.

With that decided, Peter finished dressing quickly and began to fiddle with his tie. He was still awkward at it. He peeked into May’s room, then quickly stood in front of her full-length mirror and frowned. Too formal. He yanked off the tie, hesitated, and then shoved it in his pocket, just in case. He then fiddled with his buttons. Buttoned? He undid the top three. Unbuttoned?

His phone buzzed. His breath caught. Time was up.

He glanced in the mirror once more. ‘Confidence, confidence, confidence—’

He just looked sweaty.

Peter mentally groaned, but rushed to his room to grab his wallet anyway. He didn’t want to leave his friend waiting.

---

The thick summer heat hit Peter as soon as he opened the doors out onto the street. It was thick and cloying, and he found himself sweating profusely under his suit coat.

Harry was leaning against the side of his car waiting for him. Peter knew pretty much immediately he had been overthinking his whole wardrobe. Harry was dressed nice, as in he looked good, in dark-wash jeans and a comfortable looking button-up under a leather coat. Peter all at once felt the need to turn and run upstairs so he could change into a fourth, and better, outfit.

Harry lowered his sunglasses and looked him up and down, a wide grin slipping onto his face as he did so. Peter shifted, suddenly feeling shy and extremely out of place. He gulped. “You, uh—you
said to dress nice."

“I guess I did,” Harry nodded. “I can’t say you don’t look good, either,” he continued after a short pause.

Peter tried to smile through his sudden nervousness and bashfulness. He’d expected Harry to really start ribbing him for his mistake, and couldn't help but be relieved that the other seemed to be holding back. “Um, thanks.”

Harry turned and opened the passenger door, gesturing to him. Peter said another thanks as he got into the car and got himself seated.

He silently sent out a thankful prayer for deciding against the tie.

---

Two hours and a close brush with heat exhaustion later, Peter was sighing as he tried on yet another pair of jeans.

“How about these?” he asked, stepping out of the changing room and spinning for Harry, who sat on the complimentary chair outside, sipping on a smoothie.

Harry coughed, nearly choking on his drink, before he cleared his throat. “Turn around again.”

Peter sighed, but did as Harry asked.

“Yeah—yeah, that looks great,” Harry said, sounding slightly strained.

“Good, great. Okay, let me go change back and—”

“No!” Harry said sharply. “Uh, I mean—I’m sure they’ll let you wear it out, just—just let me grab my wallet.”

“Harry, you’re not paying for my outfit.”

“Hey, it’s kind of my fault anyway, so let me make it up to you. If it weren’t for me, you wouldn’t have nearly passed out from heat stroke in that suit.”

Peter’s face flushed. “It was my own—”

“Oh-oh-oh! C’mong, Pete, please?”

Peter shifted on his feet, a little unsure, but Harry looked so earnest, and, well…

“Yeah, okay,” he said, shyly.

He really couldn’t say no to Harry. Plus, the huge beaming smile he got in return might just have been worth it.

---

The rest of their time out together went a lot better. Harry took him out to a cool lounge that was a comic book store in the front and an arcade in the back. Peter nearly had a heart attack from excitement when he saw a cute looking Spider-Man plushie sitting on one of the displays.

*That* prompted Harry asking him if Spider-Man was his favorite, which led to Peter sputtering and
mumbling awkwardly through an excuse for his apparent excitement at the doll. (“A-Actually, Iron Man is definitely the best… Spidey’s cool though, I just—just didn’t realize they had started making merch.”)

After a couple rounds of Street Fighter followed by Mario-Kart in the arcade—where both of them got way too competitive, but still ended up leaning against each other, laughing like children—they headed out to grab dinner.

Harry took him to a nice restaurant that Peter had never heard of before. The inside was tastefully decorated, but obviously, not so upscale that they looked out of place. Or, at least, Peter hoped not as they were led to their table. The other patrons seemed to be in semi-casual wear, so Peter tried not to fret.

“Well, you drink water,” Harry said for probably the fifth time since his dizzy spell earlier that day.

Peter smiled and pointedly took a sip from his glass after their waitress filled their cups. Harry in turn smiled, a little nervously, as if it was somehow embarrassing that he was obviously fretting over Peter’s wellbeing. Peter just thought it was sweet.

He couldn’t help but think of how the day had gone so far as they chatted amicably over menu options. There was something… off, not necessarily in a bad way, but… different. Peter couldn’t quite put his finger on what. They hadn’t done anything out of the ordinary. Sure, Harry had been a little more—considerate? Gentlemanly?—but that wasn’t particularly odd, either.

He watched as Harry laughed over a joke he’d made, his stomach erupting in butterflies and pride as he watched the cute way Harry’s nose crinkled, his cheeks flushed with delight and—what? No.

Peter swallowed thickly and reached for his water glass, suddenly feeling warm. Too warm.

“You feeling okay, Pete?” Harry asked.

Peter flushed and put down his cup, realizing he’d chugged nearly all of it. “Yeah, sorry.”

He ducked his head and decided to focus on dinner and things that made sense.

---

Peter let out a breath as he shut the apartment door, his suit from earlier in hand. He had a good time with Harry and liked his new outfit, but if he was being honest, he was looking forward to getting out of it and into his pajamas. It was, in a word, tight.

“Hey, you home, sweetie?”

“Yeah May!” Peter answered, toeing off his shoes.

“Are you hungry? I was just—oh!” May stopped short as she peeked around the corner and saw her nephew. Peter frowned in confusion as his aunt’s face went from surprised to beaming at him.

“Peter! Did you have a date?” she demanded, her eyes sparkling in excitement.

Peter gaped as his aunt threw down her dish towel and rushed over to him, grabbed his arm and pulled him into their living room.
That really had Peter's mind reeling. He was about to say no, but stopped short and thought over his entire day with Harry, and most notably, the odd feeling he'd been battling most of the afternoon. He swallowed thickly. His mind jumped to Liz in a desperate bid to make sense of his jumbled thoughts and feelings.

“Why didn't you tell me?” she gasped in mock offense.

“I, um—I don't think it was a date, May.”

May looked at him skeptically. “You don't think—what do you mean? You don't know? And you went out wearing *that*?” She looked amused.

“Uhh,” Peter said, smartly.

She must have picked up on his inner turmoil, because the next moment, she led him to sit and was watching him with a slightly more serious eye.

“Okay, honey, you know you can talk to me. What's going on?”

Peter was awash in a sudden affectionate warmth for his aunt.

“Um, I was out with Harry. Tonight. Most of today, actually. He's, uh, the one who got me this outfit.”

May's brows raised in interest.

“Uh huh, okay, and?” she prompted.

“And uh, what?” Peter asked, nervously.

“Peter Benjamin Parker, don't you ‘uh, what,’ me.” She sighed at Peter's sheepish look. “Okay, so, you were out with *Harry* and you don't think it was a date, and yet you're definitely dressed for the occasion.”

Peter blushed, ducking his head to try and hide it.

A gentle touch to his arm had him looking back up.

“Hey, it's okay.”

Peter chewed on his lip nervously.

“I-I don’t—” He groaned in frustration and let himself slouch into the sofa.

May smiled warmly, waiting patiently.

“I like Harry, he’s, like,” Peter waved his hands as he tried to gather his thoughts. “He’s one of my best friends. When—when I met him again, I was nervous, but—but then we just *clicked*, like we —like we just picked right back up so easily. But lately…” Peter trailed off, knowing he probably looked as confused as he felt.

He couldn’t like Harry… like that. It was ridiculous, Harry was his friend. Just his friend.

May sighed, though she didn’t sound annoyed; more like she was gearing up for something.

“Okay, well, are you sure you might not like him as more than a friend?”
Peter sputtered. “May!”

“What? Okay, if you don’t want to talk about it, that’s fine. I’m just saying, Harry is just about all you talk about since he started coming around again.”

Peter looked away from his aunt, his stomach churning nervously in turmoil. He thought about Liz. She had been someone Peter had genuinely looked up to and liked. She was gorgeous, funny, and super smart. He compared the feelings he once had for her with how he now felt about Harry.

He gulped. “And… what if—what if I do, hypothetically speaking, like him—like Harry like that?” he asked timidly.

May smiled gently and brushed a hand through his curls, the way she always would when he needed comfort.

“Then, my advice would be to talk to Harry.”

Peter groaned and pointedly ignored the way May laughed.

---

A week later had Peter once more walking out of May’s apartment to meet with Harry. This time, he was dressed more appropriately for the summer heat, though it did little to stop the small beads of sweat from prickling at the back of his neck and itching his palms. But that had a lot more to do with Peter himself than the temperature.

The teen couldn’t help but pace and fidget as he waited for Harry to pull up in front of the building. He could’ve waited inside with May, but he’d begun to feel like he was suffocating under the pressure of his own nerves, and had forced himself to bolt out the door before he decided everything in his closet was subpar again.

He chewed his bottom lip and frowned. He sort of wished he could have called his dad for advice, but he knew the moment he began asking Tony questions, his dad would have some of his own, and he didn’t want to have to deal with trying to explain this whole mess.

Still, he practiced the breathing exercises he’d been taught and tried to keep May’s words of encouragement in his brain. He remembered how supportive Karen had been when he told the AI about Liz, and suddenly wished there was a way to communicate with her outside of wearing his mask. He decided to ask his dad about that later that night, when he’d be going to spend time there again.

Out of the corner of his eye, Peter saw a flash and looked up to see Harry’s sports car slowing down. He quickly grabbed his newest backpack and ran over so that Harry wasn’t blocking traffic long and hopped into the passenger side.

In his mind, a constant mantra of, you can do this, you can do this, you can do this, repeated over and over.

Harry smiled when he saw him, and Peter felt his stomach flutter as his nerves made him feel both excited and slightly sick. He tried to smile back, hoping silently that he didn’t look as stressed as he felt.

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“You sure you’re not too warm in that?”
Peter shook his head as Harry gestured to his long-sleeved shirt. Despite the long sleeves, the material was rather thin and breathable. Plus, the temperature had dipped since the week before, and there was a nice breeze that made his ensemble comfortable. Not to mention, he couldn’t exactly go around in a T-shirt while wearing his spider-suit. He’d decided to throw it on under his regular clothes in order to do some web-slinging after he and Harry parted ways—regardless of how this went, Peter knew he was going to have energy to burn off after, though he really hoped it was positive energy.

“I’m fine,” Peter replied as they walked together through Central Park, ice cream in hand.

Harry had taken them both to lunch, insisting that he pay, and now the two were enjoying the sunlight. Peter had been able to pet three dogs and gotten pictures of five more. It was a good day. Still, the longer the day progressed, the stronger Peter’s nerves got as he worked himself up to confessing everything to Harry. He was going to do it. He hadn’t lied wide awake in bed for most of the night only to chicken out at the last minute.

Peter took a breath. He might as well get this over with. If he was lucky, and May was right, then maybe Harry would return his feelings and then they could go from there. And if not, well, then Peter only hoped things wouldn’t get too awkward and they could stay friends.

“Harry…?” he said, trying to keep the absolute terror out of his voice.

“Yeah?”

Another dog and its owner came down the path and Peter let himself become distracted. Running over, he asked if it was okay for him to pet the huge, golden fluff monster, feeling only a small pang of guilt at his cowardly actions. He’d get to it, he told himself. He just needed a comfort boost first.

When he turned, Harry was grinning softly at him. “I’m surprised you don’t have one.”

“I used to beg for a dog when I was little, but, well, Ben and May were always really busy and money was tight. And now, the apartment isn’t pet-friendly, so.” Peter shrugged.

“What about Stark?” Harry asked.

Peter scrunched his face. “I don’t think he likes animals much,” he said as he gave the dog a final pet. “Clint wanted to bring a dog in one time apparently, and Dad said no. Though, just between us, I’m, like, ninety percent sure Clint has a dog somewhere. I saw fur on his coat the other week.”

Harry laughed. “Still, I’m sure if you just happened to bring one home, he wouldn’t say no.”

Peter considered it. Could he? Sure, his dad would be mad and probably bitch, but…

“Hey, uh, Pete?”

Peter turned and was surprised to find Harry looking slightly nervous himself.

“Yeah?” he asked, a little hesitantly.

Harry, by default, seemed to always exude a sort of effortless confidence. He could count on one hand the amount of times he’d seen Harry express blatant nervousness, so seeing the other boy in the state he was in now threw Peter.

“I was, well, I was hoping we could talk—oh shit, no, don’t make that face! It’s good—I think?
Well—” Harry sighed and rolled his eyes, seemingly at himself. “Okay, so, we’ve been spending a lot of time together lately, and—”

A shrill scream cut off whatever Harry was about to say, and sent Peter’s already pounding heart jolting into his throat.

For a split second nothing seemed to happen, and then all at once, crowds of people were pushing and shoving to get away from something. Peter struggled to see over the mass of heads, but couldn’t get a good look at what was causing the terror. Harry grabbed him by the arm and began tugging him in the direction of the crowd, despite Peter’s resistance. A roar thundered through the air, followed by more screams. Peter’s heart pounded. He had to figure out what was happening. He needed to do something.

Peter tugged his arm free of Harry’s grasp and shoved his camera into the boy’s hands.

“Go, get somewhere safe!” he shouted.

“What? What do you mean?” Harry demanded, but Peter couldn’t explain even if he took the time. He turned and began to fight his way through the crowd.

“PETER!”

Peter felt a pang of regret at the fear in Harry’s voice as he called out after him, but he knew that he had to figure out what was happening and put a stop to it. He rushed off the crowded path and hid behind some thick shrubbery to quickly strip out of his day clothes and throw on his mask. Peter then shoved his clothes into his backpack and webbed the bag to a tree before taking off.

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Harry cursed as he fought against the surge of the crowd. He’d tried desperately to keep Peter in his view, but lost sight of the other boy when someone had nearly shoved him over. His breath came in sharp pants as his eyes darted about the chaos, and his throat seized as he heard another vicious roar, closer now.

“PETER!” he shouted for what felt like the millionth time.

The fear crawled up his spine and tightened around his throat until it felt as if he could scarcely breathe.

“Dammit, Pete!”

Above the noise of the crowd, new sounds started to become apparent. First was the roaring, which had grown steadily louder the farther into the park he went. Then, the vibrations of crashes through the Earth, stronger than that of the now thinning crowd, and as he grew closer still, the thuds and thwacks of some sort of fight.

Harry gasped as he finally pushed his way through the crowd and trees and saw a huge creature; an awful amalgamation of animal and machine. It stood towering in the huge empty clearing. Harry tore his gaze away and searched helplessly for Peter, panic growing further in his gut when he still couldn’t see him. Another roar pierced into Harry’s ears and sent tremors through the ground. His heart jolted and he had to fight an old and powerful instinct to run.

On any other day, Harry would have found the strange, awful beast fascinating. Now, he just wanted to grab Peter and get them both as far away as possible. He clutched Peter’s camera in his hands as if he could somehow summon the other if he concentrated hard enough.
“What are you doing?” a voice demanded loudly.

Harry spun around and found himself staring at none other than one of New York’s very own heroes. Spider-Man was making his way over, before being intercepted by the large monster. The monster charged with a snarl and Spider-Man was only just able to dodge in time, retaliating by using his webs to try and tie up the creature’s legs.

“Get out of here!”

Harry looked around again, looking over the faces of the few who were brave—or, rather, stupid—enough to have stuck around to film the ensuing battle. Though, Harry noted, he was by far the ballsiest (read: stupidest) one there when it came to proximity.

“I can’t!” he argued back, ears ringing and heart pounding as the monster roared in fury at being temporarily stopped.

“It’s dangerous here!” Spider-Man yelled at him again.

“I can’t leave without my boyfriend!” Harry snapped without thinking.

He groaned when his words caught up to him. Then again, if it hadn’t been for that stupid, sorry excuse for cyborg tech, he might’ve actually had a boyfriend by now.

He had to find Peter, he had to get them to safety and make sure the other wasn’t hurt. Why the hell did he have to run off like that? Why couldn’t he have just acted like a normal person and run away from the danger instead of toward it? And with no explanation! Harry felt his worries and fears twisting into frustration from his apparent helplessness. But he refused to leave. He wouldn’t abandon Peter.

Harry jolted when he heard the grinding shriek of metal.

“Look out!” Harry warned the hero as the huge beast tore away from the webs and charged again.

Spider-Man tried to dodge, but was swatted away with a powerful hit. Harry retreated farther away. There was no use in getting killed.

The battle started up anew and Harry was quick to start circling the area, studying the few remaining figures sticking around for any sign of Peter, to no avail.

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Peter cursed as he was hit again. Despite his healing factor, he could feel the angry bruise that would rise over his eye. He was at a bit of a tactical disadvantage. Not only was this not his usual type of opponent, but being in an open park meant that there was very little he could cling to or swing from.

Something whizzed by Peter's head and stuck into the shoulder of the monster, before going off in a small, fiery explosion. The creature roared and fell backward.

A buzz sounded in his ear as another comm connected to his. “Looks like you could use a hand, kid!”

Peter spun around and spotted Clint kneeling in the branches of a tree.

‘Hell yeah!’
Things wrapped up fairly quickly after that.

Peter took a moment to catch his breath as Clint walked over to him and clapped him on the back.

“Not bad, Spidey!” Clint grinned.

“Thanks! But, uh, I really gotta run, so—” Peter said, already turning to jog off, deaf to Clint’s protests.

His stomach was twisting with nerves. Before the attack, Peter thought that maybe Harry was about to… ask him out. But then, Harry had shouted at him that he was looking for his boyfriend, and… yeah. That had hurt, because he hadn’t even known Harry was seeing anyone.

Maybe that’s what the other was going to say? That he wanted to introduce them?

It didn’t take long for Peter to find Harry. He immediately felt a pang of guilt at the obvious show of strain and worry. The usual confident aura he exuded was gone, he could tell the exact moment when Harry spotted him.

The other teen’s eyes widened and he gasped.

“Peter!” Harry shouted, voice thick with relief.

Peter found himself grinning and waving, though he paused when Harry’s face suddenly turned from relieved to furious.

“Peter!”

Harry marched over to him and Peter took a step back.

“What in the ever-loving-fuck was that? You just—you just disappeared! I had no idea where you were or—or if—!” Harry cut himself off as he caught sight of the bruises marring Peter's face. His expression twisted into worry again, and he raised his hand to brush gently against his bruised cheek.

“God, Pete—”

“I’m sorry, I—“

Peter didn’t get to finish before Harry was tugging him forward and wrapping his arms around him in a tight hug.

“Don’t ever scare me like that again.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m serious, Pete. This is bad enough, I don’t know what I would have done if anything serious happened to you.”

Peter swallowed thickly and hugged Harry back. He felt awful for causing him so much distress. Suddenly, a thought hit him, nearly causing him to jolt. Was he the boyfriend Harry was talking about?

“Harry,” Peter said, a little cautiously.

“Yeah?”
“Um, are we—are we *dating*?”

There was a pause, in which Peter thought his heart might actually jump straight out of his chest. Harry broke it with a groan, which was slightly muffled against Peter’s shoulder, before replying.

“God help me, but yeah, I really hope so.”

Peter couldn’t stop the smile that washed over his face, and he hugged Harry just a little bit tighter.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you all enjoyed!
IT FINALLY HAPPENED
Hope you all enjoyed the fluff....

If you feel like joining a sinking ship, follow my [Tumblr](http://example.com/tumblr)
Hey I'm back with a new chapter!
and just in time for the 100 day countdown to Endgame!

Seriously all these trailer drops have me HYPE

Chapter TW: Anxiety, depression, talk of addiction, and streeeesss

Tony tapped his fingers against the arm of the sofa as his gaze strayed over to Bucky. The man had his hair pulled back and was curled on one end of the living area’s sofa, a soft frown on his face as he concentrated on the book he was reading. A light drizzling of rain pattered against the window panes. Waking up to the darkened skies had been a surprise after the bright sunny weather of the previous days.

Despite the summer being in full swing, it’d been a quiet few days. Steve had been called out on a stealth mission, along with the spy kids for back-up and Sam for air control. Not that he knew any of that, of course, definitely not, it was all very classified. He most certainly did not have Friday doxx Coulson’s new SHIELD mission control. That was the least likely route he would have taken, should anyone ask.

So, Thor was off doing whatever it was gods did on their off time, Vision and Wanda were enjoying their privacy at the compound, Peter would be with May until tomorrow morning, his Rhody-bear was off running military errands, and his lovely Pepper-pot was doing miracle work running his company and keeping the board at bay while he healed.

The point was that the tower was mostly empty. It was quiet.

Usually Tony would have reveled in this, in a chance for solitude, simply because that was a chance to work; to invent and create and build. However, Steve, Bucky, and even (traitorously) Bruce had all mutinied against him and had cracked down on his lab time after he’d had a very slight scare with infection. Now, if anyone had stopped to ask his opinion (they hadn’t), he would have insisted it wasn’t nearly as bad as they were making it out to be, just a little fever. Nothing compared to the on-and-off-again infections the arc reactor had caused, or that stunt with Palladium poisoning.

Nonetheless, even more medication and more bedrest later, Tony was finally on the incline toward health. Even if he was the only one who seemed to believe that.

To put it bluntly, Tony was running out of distractions. Good ones, anyway. He hadn’t dealt with boredom well as a child, dealt with it worse as a teen, and only marginally better as an adult. Now, more than ever, Tony was wishing he could be easily amused. The quiet stillness that had permeated the tower had begun to feel more and more like a tangible thing hovering over his shoulders, breathing down his neck. It brought with it a feeling of restlessness and dissatisfaction that had him craving a smoky single-malt.
Tony wet his lips and rubbed his thumb against the inside of his fingers, missing even the absence of a glass.

It wouldn’t have been quite as bad had Tony not also begun to feel a little neglected throughout the whole ordeal. Now, that wasn’t to say that Steve or Bucky were ignoring him. In fact, he had scarcely had a moment alone since his accident, which only grew worse after Steve had found him sick with fever. So really, Tony was given all the care he needed to recover, but he couldn’t help but feel like there was still a rift between him and his lovers.

Because in a way, Tony was feeling just a little touch-starved. He hated admitting it—even thinking it made him want to shrink down and roll his eyes. But his own aversion to the truth didn’t remove it from fact; he missed cuddling, he missed being touched and held in a way that was less clinical, among other things. He knew that both Steve and Bucky were needlessly worried about hurting him somehow, but a smaller, more vicious part of him taunted that maybe they had simply lost interest in him. He tried to shove those thoughts deep, deep down where they wouldn’t bother him quite so much, but he could still feel the vestiges of his anxiety chipping away at the corners of his mind.

He glanced again at Bucky and debated how next to act. He was torn between just acting on impulse and saying something. At the very least, he was hoping he could get Bucky to move back into his bed tonight. It had been lonely trying to sleep without his two giant space heaters lying next to him. In retrospect, he could understand why they made alternative sleeping arrangements when he’d first been brought home, but that had been forever ago. He wasn’t going to perish under the weight of an arm draped over him.

“You're staring awful hard there, doll. See somethin’ you like?”

Tony snapped out of his musings, his vision focusing again on Bucky, who had not seemed to move or give any physical indication that he’d noticed Tony eyeing him. Not that Tony was particularly surprised; not much got passed Bucky’s notice. He huffed and maneuvered himself until he was leaning up against Bucky’s side, ignoring the pains in his abdomen as he did so.

Bucky lowered his book a bit and Tony could feel the minute shift as he looked down at him. “Hey,” the other said, amused.

Sighing, Tony purposefully took the book from Bucky’s hands, made a note of the page number, and closed it before nudging Bucky’s arm. He felt the laughter more than he heard it, but Bucky still lifted his arm and draped it around him.

“Feeling a little lonely?” Bucky teased.

Tony only hesitated a moment before replying, “Yes,” his tone more serious than Bucky’s light-hearted comment called for.

He knew the other picked up on it by the pause.

“Okay,” Bucky finally said. “Move up a moment.”

Tony scooched himself over and watched as Bucky repositioned himself so he sat lengthwise on the sofa, legs on either side of Tony. When he was done, he gestured for him. “Okay, come here. Lean back,” Bucky said, even as he helped Tony move.

Tony settled partially on top of him, his back against Bucky’s chest. He relaxed more fully as Bucky wrapped his arms around him, careful of his incision, and kissed the top of his head. Tony
breathed out a content sigh and relaxed further once Bucky began to stroke through his hair, alternating between pets and light scratches against his scalp. The closeness soothed an ache deep in his chest and he let his eyes flutter closed as he relaxed fully against Bucky. He didn’t want to waste this moment by falling asleep, and yet his body was hit with a wave of exhaustion, a feeling that had also become far too common for Tony’s liking. Between healing the hole in his abdomen, the withdrawals, and now the infection, he was feeling these crests of fatigue often.

“It’s okay, get some rest,” Bucky said softly.

“Don’t wanna,” Tony sighed, eyes still closed.

Bucky leaned over and pressed a kiss to his temple. “Sleep anyway. You need it.”

Tony sighed, but couldn’t even muster up the energy to open his eyes enough to glare.

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The next time Tony opened his eyes, the light coming in through the windows had darkened and the rain had increased. He shifted and bit back a hiss at the tugging sensation on his stitches.

“Careful,” Bucky warned.

Tony stilled, but felt warm at the realization that the other had stayed with him. Though, as he became more aware, he began to realize that their positions had shifted—or rather, Bucky’s had. Bucky was now sitting back up properly against the sofa, Tony’s head resting in his lap. He didn’t know how Bucky had moved them without waking him, but decided not to question it.

“Here, sit up a bit. I have your medicine ready for you.”

Tony nodded and grumbled, sleepily. It was hard for him to shake the fogginess of sleep off of himself with the medication impairing his senses. “How long was I out?” he finally asked.

“Only a couple hours,” Bucky replied while helping him sit up.

“Thanks,” Tony said, and then dutifully held out his hand.

Bucky nodded, picking up the small saucer that held Tony’s meds, and dumped them carefully in his hand.

Tony took a look and frowned, an instinctual jolt attacking his heart when he noticed there were three more pills in his hand than he was supposed to be taking. He had two more reactions that happened lightning fast, one after the other; the first, flashes of memory, of nearly everyone close to him who had betrayed him, and the next, an overwhelming apathy for his own safety, a small voice that told him he’d be so lucky if it was poison. The thought startled him into full wakefulness.

“Tony? Doll?”

He blinked and lifted his gaze to Bucky, who was staring at him with a light frown, concern written in his blue eyes. “You okay?” Bucky asked quietly, lifting his free hand to lightly brush back the loose strands of hair from Tony’s forehead.

Tony blinked out of the strange trance he was in and shook his head. “I’m fine,” he lied, feeling intensely guilty all of a sudden for even the slight suspect of the man next to him. “Just—hand me that glass,” he continued, nodding to the water glass Bucky held in his other hand.
“Sure, here. There’s also a multivitamin there, a Vitamin B.” Bucky made a face as if he was suddenly unsure. “And, uh, something called L-Glutamine? I think that’s how it’s pronounced. I got Friday to order it while you were asleep. I, uh, read that vitamins are supposed to help you heal, and…” he hesitated, “…also help with withdrawals.”

Tony took the pills in two doses, swallowing multiples at once, wishing he could also swallow down the negative feelings that’d been only growing throughout the day.

“Thank you,” he said, making an effort to meet Bucky’s eyes as he said it.

He watched as an almost invisible tension left Bucky’s form. He took the glass of water from Tony, then smiled crookedly.

“Anytime, doll.”

Tony’s eyes darted to Bucky’s lips. God, he was handsome. Bucky’s smile widened before he was leaning in, meeting Tony halfway. They continued trading kisses and smiles until Bucky finally pulled away to fix up an early dinner.

Later that night, Bucky finally joined him in bed.

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Not even the throbbing headache he woke up with could dampen Tony’s mood. He didn’t allow it. After the little pity party he had allowed himself to sink into the day before, Tony made sure to keep extra vigilant on his train of thought so that he could steer clear of any dangerous territory. Of course, waking up in the arms of one James Buchanan Barnes really helped push him into a pleasant mood.

He got to wake up to a handsome face, sweet kisses and gentle hugs. The only thing that could have made it any better was if Steve had been there.

Regardless, Tony allowed himself to bask in the positive attention and even took his meds without complaint when Bucky passed him the little pills. He even allowed Bucky to help him up and out of bed so they could both get ready for the day.

He couldn’t allow himself to fall into the same pitiful state as yesterday, Peter was coming back today. He didn’t let himself feel ashamed of the excited buzz that followed him throughout the morning, though he was a bit startled by just how used to Peter’s presence he had become accustomed. He was tempted to try and lengthen this visit to longer than the agreed upon week, but Tony knew it wasn’t fair to monopolize all of his kid’s time—especially after he had already done so, no matter how unintentionally, because of his injuries.

Peter would be back to school before they knew it, and May more than deserved to spend some quality time with her nephew. Maybe he should do something about that. He knew how hard May worked, and recent events couldn’t have been good for her stress levels, either. Maybe it was about time he extended a vacation invite, send her and Peter both somewhere nice to really enjoy the last bit of Peter’s free time.

Tony pondered over it as he showered. He almost went ahead and planned something, but was able to stop himself before he got carried away. Truly a feat, all things considered, but he knew it was best he actually call May first and make sure she didn’t already have something planned for the remaining summer.

After, he took time trimming his facial hair to something much more presentable, cleaning up the
sharp lines and getting rid of excess scruff. It was slower going than usual, since staying on his feet for longer periods tended to use much more energy than he cared to admit. Still, he turned down Bucky’s offer to help, and finished up on his own before he went to dress. He debated shortly before settling on casual wear. He had only just woken up, and already his body was beginning to ache and complain.

They enjoyed a light breakfast, but Tony couldn’t quite stomp down his excitement, which resulted in a sort of restlessness that made him want to get up and pace or fidget, an instinct he had to actively fight against. Instead, he caught a nice candid of Bucky with his phone camera and sent it to Steve, along with a quick “miss you” text. He didn’t wait for a reply, knowing that, chances were, Steve was still off the grid and wouldn’t see the message right away.

Tony smiled hugely and caught Bucky’s gaze, the other man rolling his eyes but smiling himself. Bucky leaned over and kissed him, gently. “You’re cute,” he said, laughing when Tony let out an affronted scoff.

“Shut up and help me up.”

Bucky took his outstretched hand in his own and helped pull him gently to his feet, shifting as Tony stood to place a steadying hand against his back and pass him his cane. Tony wrinkled his nose at it out of habit, but accepted it gratefully nonetheless.

He jumped when his phone suddenly came to life before he had a chance to put it down. For a split second, he felt a burst of excitement, thinking perhaps it was Steve. Of course, disappointment was soon to follow when Tony looked at the screen and noted the number. His brows rose. It was his law firm.

“Give me a minute, hun. I need to take this,” Tony said to Bucky before telling Friday to reroute the call to his office phone before limping down the hall.

He leaned against his desk with a sigh and answered the phone.

“You’ve reached Tony Stark.”

“Hello, Mr. Stark. I hope we caught you at a good time.”

“Yes, yeah, it’s fine.”

“Good, I’m glad to hear that. I’m calling on behalf of the case you were helping to build for James Buchanan Barnes.”

An icy feeling began pooling low in his stomach, and an ache began to build in his chest.

He cleared his throat subtly. “Yes, that’s right.”

“Well, as you already know, the case was appointed an official judge, who has been looking over the case files. However, because of the… extent of the crimes in question, a rather sizeable opposition has been built against Sergeant Barnes—”

“What the hell do you mean?” Tony said through gritted teeth.

“Because of the number and severity of the crimes charged against Sergeant Barnes, the judge has called for a trial rather than proceeding straight to an acquittal.”

“Fuck!” Tony swore at the lawyer’s words, his arm beginning to tremble slightly.
“I understand your frustration, Mr. Stark, however, I must remind you that we knew this to be a possibility.”

Tony nodded, trying to calm his breathing while reminding himself of the same thing.

“What’s our next step, then?”

“A court hearing has been scheduled for later in the week. Due to the… unusual circumstances surrounding the trial, it’s been pushed forward. This isn’t reason to panic, however; our defense is strong. You have provided the team with much of the evidence yourself, Mr. Stark, and many of these documents do not mince words.”

Tony tried to calm his rapid pulse. “I have one other thing I can send, another video. I’d rather not show it unless necessary. It’s… graphic.” He shuddered and closed his eyes against the images that plagued his mind. It was one of the many things he wished he could unsee… unhear. He didn’t think he’d ever be able to forget the sound of Bucky’s screams.

“We will keep that in mind. Also, there’s another matter. Due to the sensitive nature of the trial, most of it will be closed court, but because of the Freedom of Information Act, it is possible the media will get wind of the trial. Especially with a big name such as yours attached.”

Tony couldn’t quite silence the groan that escaped him.

“I know not all of our dealings with the media or public have been positive, but I do believe, if we prepare, we could use a public leak to our advantage. James Barnes is considered a war hero in American history, Mr. Stark, that’s something we can use.”

“James Barnes is a hero,” Tony insisted.

“Of course, and it’ll be our team’s job to remind the government and the American people of that fact.”

“There’s no room for error with this. We need to clear his name.”

“Should news of the trial go public, it might be good to show support, not just as Tony Stark, but also as Iron Man. Since the Accords’ amendments and signing, the Avengers’ popularity ratings with the public have skyrocketed. A strong public outcry on Sergeant Barnes’ behalf could also push the courts in our favor.”

“I’ll contact the team and have them updated.

“Very good, Mr. Stark. Now… as for Sergeant Barnes himself—”

“No,” Tony said, predicting where the conversation was going.

“You must understand, no one has seen Sergeant Barnes alive since the debacle in DC—no confirmed sightings, anyway—yet you claim he’s still alive. The courts will have questions, and may demand he be brought into custody while the trial is underway. They may even want his testimony. Hell, Mr. Stark, his testimony could be what throws the trial either way.”

Tony gritted his teeth. “I have supplied you with literal piles of Hydra and SHIELD documentation on both James Barnes and The Winter Soldier! All of which dictates the barbaric practices used against him! This should be an open-and-shut case! Even if I did know his current whereabouts, which I don’t, I wouldn’t dare ask him to stand on that bench and be cross-examined about events more damaging than anyone could possibly imagine!”
"I understand. After all, it’s like you said, we don’t currently know the whereabouts of Sergeant Barnes, do we."

His eyes narrowed at the lawyer’s tone of voice. “No. We don’t.”

"Hm, nonetheless, keep what I’ve said in mind. I’ll forward the details for the trial as we know them."

Tony sighed. “Okay. Thank you.”

"Good day, Mr. Stark."

He pulled the phone away from his ear and took a little too much pleasure in hanging up.

“They want you to turn me in.”

Tony jolted as he swore, “Jesus, I need to get you a fucking bell.”

“They need my testimony,” Bucky continued, walking fully into Tony's office.

He glared. “It’s considered rude to eavesdrop on private conversations, you know.”

Bucky glared back, his gaze steely. “Don’t. Don’t just shrug me off like that, Tony. If they need me there, then—”

“No!” Tony shouted, before taking a moment to compose himself. “If by some stretch the judge finds you guilty, I’m not letting them lock you up.”

Bucky scoffed. “I already am,” he hissed, Tony narrowing his gaze. “I’m already confined here!”

“I can assure you, my literal skyscraper is much different than the inside of a maximum security cell,” Tony sneered.

“And you can trust me when I say, I’ve seen worse,” Bucky growled back.

Tony looked away, a bitter taste in his mouth and a heavy weight in his gut at the words. “I know.”

Bucky sighed, seeming to deflate a little. “Listen,” he said, walking up to him. “I get that you’re trying to keep me safe, but I can’t spend the rest of my life hiding here.”

Tony met his gaze and sighed. “I know. Just—let me try things my way first. Who knows, maybe everything will go right for a change.”

Bucky hesitated a moment, but then he nodded. “Yeah, okay. We’ll try things your way.”

---

The elevator doors opened and Peter all but burst out of them, a large smile on the teen’s face. “Dad!”

“Hey, Pete.” Tony clapped Peter on the shoulder, while eyeing the very notable bruise marring Peter’s pale skin. “How’s it going?”

“Good—great, even!”

“That’s one hell of a shiner, kid,” Bucky added, stepping into the room.
“Oh, that—yeah, I was at the park yesterday, and this huge monster thing came outta nowhere! Luckily I had my suit ready! It was great!”

“Right, Friday pinged us about that,” Tony said, a small smile returning to his face as he brought up the pictures already circling the web.

“Oh, cool!” Peter said, taking the tablet from Tony’s hands and flicking through the images.

“Yep, it looks like the people are happy to see you back, kiddo,” Tony said, referencing the many comments he’d seen celebrating the return of Spider-Man.

Peter’s smile got impossibly wider, no doubt from seeing many of the same ones.

“So, you got everything you need for the week?” Tony asked as he took a seat, Peter trailing behind him like a duckling.

“Yes! I talked to May yesterday and she reminded me to pack, so we’re good.”

“Yesterday?”

Peter pulled a face. “Yeah, she had to take double duty at the hospital, so I had to say goodbye, like, way in advance.”

Tony frowned at that. He was tempted to ask if they were doing okay financially, but at the same time, he didn’t want to overstep his bounds. He made a mental note to talk to May privately, later. Maybe she really could use that Stark-funded getaway.

“Buck, could you grab the bruise cream I have in the first aid kit?” Tony asked, attention returning back to Peter’s injuries.

Peter looked up from the tablet. “Oh, it’s okay! I’m sure it’ll be gone by tomorrow, anyway.”

“Shush, it doesn’t mean we can’t help it along. Plus, that doesn’t look comfortable,” Tony insisted.

Bucky was gone and back before Peter could raise any more objections. He passed said cream into Tony’s hands. “Don’t argue with your dad,” he said teasingly, making Peter crinkle his nose cutely.

“Ah, try not to move,” Tony said as he applied the cream around the bruised, swollen skin. “Hm, maybe I should get Brucie to look you over, make sure you’re not concussed.”

“I’m fine,” Peter insisted, pulling away from him with a huff.

“Okay, okay, just let me know if you start feeling a little sick.”

“I will! Now look at the cool pictures I got at the park before that monster guy tried to ruin my da—aaahhh—walk! Yeah, walk!”

Tony frowned, bemused, as Peter jumped off the sofa and ran to where he’d dropped his bags by the elevator. He caught Bucky’s gaze and watched as the other shrugged minutely. He decided to let it go; his kid was weird and awkward sometimes. It happened. Especially at that age.

“I will! Now look at the cool pictures I got at the park before that monster guy tried to ruin my da—aaahhh—walk! Yeah, walk!”

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“Okay, here, look! Now I haven’t, like, edited these yet, obviously, but take a look!” Peter said, shoving his camera into Tony’s hands and pointing to the display screen, which was showing a picture of a rather large, drooling dog.

Tony mentally filed the picture into the not-so-subtle-hints-Peter-wants-a-dog box that he intended
to otherwise strictly ignore. He had to draw the line somewhere, after all, and Tony’s line was at
drooling, stinking animals that would get hair and dirt all over his suits or, God forbid, chew his
shoes.

Peter eventually got through showing him most of the pictures, and Tony had to admit that Peter
did seem to be improving. He was looking forward to seeing what he came up with during his
photography class come fall.

“Where is everyone?” Peter suddenly asked. “Usually Steve’s around too, not to mention
everybody else.”

“Steve is currently acting as our very own Captain America doing something very classified at:
also classified,” Tony responded, smiling at Peter’s responding eye roll.

“Like you haven’t already figured out the exact what, when, where, and whys of the mission.”

Was Peter always this sassy, or was Tony already influencing him?

Bucky let out a short laugh. “He’s got you there.”

“That is irrelevant,” Tony sniffed, neither confirming nor denying the teen’s very correct
accusations.

---

Peter was lounging on the sofa in the main room when Bucky came storming through, making his
way straight into the kitchen without so much as a glance in his direction. Peter’s brows rose; he
could practically see the dark storm clouds following over the man’s head. In fact, though his dad
and Bucky both hadn’t outright mentioned or spoken of anything being wrong, at least not in front
of him, there still existed an odd, underlying tension that had Peter feeling more out of sorts. Over
the last few days, Bucky had seemed more withdrawn, quiet and sometimes even surly in
demeanor, while his dad seemed plain stressed, often disappearing into his office to take
mysterious calls. It felt at times like both Bucky and his dad were waiting for the other shoe to
drop, or gearing up for some big… thing, but Peter was being left completely in the dark as to
what. It was almost as distracting as it was frustrating.

Luckily, Peter wasn’t alone completely. While his dad and Bucky were making rather poor
company, he still had options. He grinned as his phone buzzed, signaling another text. He had
other things to try and occupy his mind—or at least, someone actively helping to distract him.
Things hadn’t changed between him and Harry as much as he’d feared, and what had changed was
for the better, at least in Peter’s opinion. Harry was still his friend, still the person he felt he could
trust and rely on; who he could nerd out with about cheesy sci-fi movies while debating how real
life science differed, or how they could possibly achieve a similar reaction in a lab. None of that
had been lost, there was just… more, now. An extra layer to their interactions that was new and
exciting. The most notable difference in the way they communicated now was that, Harry in
particular, seemed much more bold and insistent in his flirting and teasing. Peter was… a lot less
smooth in his approaches, and more than once had, embarrassingly, sought tips and tricks online,
as if there was a magic formula he could find that would make him a flirting pro.

He read over Harry’s newest text again, cheeks heating a bit as he tried to formulate a response. He
was so caught up in his own little world for a bit that he had forgotten all about Bucky.

At least until he heard a muttered, “Jesus Christ.”
Peter jolted and looked up owlishly. Bucky was seated across from him in one of the armchairs, apparently having migrated there after fixing lunch. The man leaned forward, depositing his plate and drink onto the coffee table, before fixing Peter with a speculating look.

“It’s that Osborn kid, innit?” Bucky asked in a way that didn’t sound much like asking at all.

Peter sputtered and gaped dumbly for a second as he tried to formulate an excuse. “Psh, whaaat, no way!”

‘Smooth as always,’ he mentally smacked himself, not needing to see Bucky’s unimpressed expression to know exactly how well that went over.

He let his shoulders sag, giving up on pretenses.

“How’d you know?”

Bucky scoffed an amused sort of laugh. “Come on, kid, you don’t need to be a—” Bucky stopped suddenly, pausing for only a moment before continuing. “What I mean is, you don’t need to be… particularly observant to have seen the flame you carry for that kid.”

Peter covered his face and groaned in embarrassment.

“But how? I didn’t know until, like, a week ago!”

“Funny how that works.”

Peter peeked through his fingers at Bucky. “Don’t tell dad.”

Bucky’s face didn’t give anything away, but Peter could still somehow sense the air of disapproval.

“I’m planning on telling him! It’s just—it’s just that I haven’t even had a chance to explain that I’m, well, bi, I guess? I mean, I think that would be the closest—” It was Peter’s turn to stop himself, now. “Look,” he said after a sigh, “I’m not planning on actively hiding it from him. I just want to—want to figure out how to tell him. Especially since I know he’s going to freak out about me dating Harry—and I don’t know what happened while I was gone, but he looks stressed enough right now.”

Bucky hesitated. “Having to put things on hold while he heals has been hard on him.”

Peter knew that wasn’t the whole story, but he also was afraid that if he pressed the issue, Bucky would get that scarily grumpy look on his face that he’d been sporting so often lately.

He was saved from replying when he heard none other than Tony himself coming toward the room. Sure enough, a moment later, his dad appeared from the hall, dressed in a formal black suit. He was leaning heavily on his cane with one hand and carrying a small briefcase in the other. Peter frowned, and then shivered as he felt the atmosphere in the room plummet.

“Pete, I need to leave for a few hours. I’m not too sure when I’ll be back, but I trust that you can handle yourself for a bit,” Tony said, pausing on his way to the elevator.

“Uh, yeah, no problem,” he replied a little hesitantly.

He watched as his dad turned his attention to Bucky, and the two seemed to wage a silent war with one another. Peter didn’t know a wordless conversation could be so loud. Finally, the tension broke
somewhat when Bucky huffed and stood, walking over to Tony and taking the briefcase from his hands. “At least let me help get you to the car. Happy’s driving you, right?”

“Yeah, don’t worry, I’m not going to try and drive myself like this.”

Bucky nodded, still obviously tense, yet he leaned forward and pressed a quick kiss to the corner of Tony’s mouth.

“Be back in a few, kid,” Bucky then said to him.

“Okay, um, bye.”

“See you later, Pete,” his dad said, and then the two were gone.

Peter groaned and turned into the couch so that the cushions muffled his dismay.

---

It took all of Tony’s remaining strength to make it back to the car without screaming. He knew he no longer had much control over the expression on his face based on just how quickly Happy jumped out to open the door for him.

The man opened his mouth, as if to say something, but seemed to think better of it and stayed silent, closing the door once Tony situated himself. Once in the safe confines of the car, Tony let himself sag, hands rising to cover his hanging head. What a mess. His anger simmered, prickling his skin, burning his blood. Yet he couldn’t act on it, he simply didn’t have the health nor energy to exert into action. He breathed as he let his frustration settle over him like a weighted blanket. He went over everything he could think of, every angle of the case, every scrap of evidence he could recite, turning it over and over and over in his head.

“—Boss, Boss—”

He startled and looked up. Happy was looking at him with poorly concealed concern. “We’re back.”

Tony looked out the window, and sure enough, they were parked in the garage. He had no idea how he’d lost time like that.

“Oh. Thanks, Happy.”

Happy assisted him out of the car silently, before fixing him with another look that made Tony want to scream. He held back, too tired, and also knowing he’d be taking out his frustrations on the wrong person.

“If you need anything, just, uh… just call,” Happy said gruffly.

Tony nodded. “Yeah, thanks Hap.”

He led himself into the elevator and quietly instructed Friday to take him to his floor. He needed rest, he needed his meds. His legs shook with the effort of keeping himself upright.

The “trial” hadn’t been a full on disaster, but it hadn’t gone smoothly, either. It was a lot of back and forth and round and round, until the judge finally called for a recess. It wasn’t like any of the trials Tony had been a part of. There wasn’t an opposition in the traditional sense; instead, a panel had been put together to “represent the interests of the American people” or some bullshit. They
spent all afternoon reviewing evidence and arguing its validity. In the end, the biggest argument
issued was in question of Bucky’s current mental state.

They wanted to see Bucky themselves. Said they couldn’t pass fair judgement in favor of a man
who could very well still be under Hydra influence. The worst part was that that was a fair
observation. They didn’t know Bucky the way Tony did, and Tony couldn’t truly vouch for him
without admitting to abetting and housing an internationally-wanted war criminal.

The elevator doors opened and Tony stumbled out, leaning heavily on his cane. The floor was
empty when he took a quick look around, so he made his way toward the bedrooms, pausing
briefly by Peter’s door, where no sound could be heard. He was tempted to knock—he could really
use his son’s infectious enthusiasm at the moment—but he wasn’t about to disturb the teen’s much
needed sleep. He knew Peter was prone to restless sleep and nightmares, and that any quiet night
was a good one.

When Tony opened the door to his bedroom, he saw Bucky staring out the large windows into the
city. It was obvious that he’d been struggling that day, no doubt due to the sudden stress. Tony
sighed, but approached calmly. “Bucky?”

Bucky stiffened, but turned his head and looked back at him.

“You good?” Tony asked.

He didn’t get a response right away, but eventually, Bucky nodded slowly, and it was like Tony
was watching Bucky… come back online, until finally he turned and faced him properly.

“You—did you take you meds? You should rest—you need rest.”

Tony felt the guilt churn in his gut. Bucky was doing everything he could to look after him, care for
him, and he was doing a shit job at returning the favor. Why couldn’t anything be cut and dry?

“I still need to take my last dose for the night,” Tony admitted.

Bucky nodded and walked over to the bathroom to dig through their medicine cabinet.

After, when Tony was ready to crawl into bed, Bucky addressed the elephant in the room.

“It didn’t work, did it?” he said quietly.

“Hey, don’t—don’t sound like that,” Tony said, dread pooling at the somewhat resigned tone in
his lover’s voice. “It’s not over yet. Sure, things… didn’t exactly go over the way I’d hoped today,
but—but they’re reconvening tomorrow to continue deliberations.”

“They need to question me.”

Tony tried to cover his distressed whine as a sigh. “Give me just—just a bit more time,” he
pleaded.

Bucky sighed, but didn’t argue.

Tony wished, not for the first time, that Steve was there. Even if there was nothing he could do to
help the trials, just having another supportive presence would have been nice. Plus, Tony just
missed him.

“Good thing Stevie ain’t here.”
Tony’s brows jumped as he looked over at Bucky.

“Why?” he asked. “Don’t you miss him?”

“Course I do. But if he were here, he probably would’ve been arrested for assault by now.”

Just like that, the tension broke. Tony leaned against Bucky and laughed.

“Seriously,” Bucky went on. “If he didn’t storm the courthouse himself, he would’ve taken one look at you when you got back and grabbed that damn Frisbee of his.”

Tony cracked up harder, picturing it perfectly. “He would!” he said between gasping giggles.

Bucky wrapped Tony in his arms and pulled him close, careful not to hurt him. Tony sighed, content, his laughter dying down as he let himself relax into the hold.

“Thank you,” Bucky said quietly. “For—everything. Giving me a chance here, fighting for me. No matter how this all goes down, I just—”

“Hey,” Tony cut him off. “It’s going to be fine. I know it’s stressful right now, but we’ll get there. I won’t give up until you’re a free man.”

Bucky tucked his face into his neck, breathed him in and held him just a little bit tighter.

---

Tony was riding down the elevator when his phone suddenly rang. He mentally prayed it wasn’t some new hurdle he had to jump; the trials were complicated enough already. He debated letting it go to voicemail, but he knew that if it was anything important, he would regret not picking up.

“You’ve reached Tony Stark.”

“Yes, hello, Mr. Stark. My name is Detective Nicholas Reid with the 110th precinct.”

That. That got Tony’s attention.

“And how may I assist you, Detective Reid?” Tony asked.

“I have information here that claims you are an acting guardian of one Peter Benjamin Parker, is that correct?”

His heart jumped and fell into his stomach. Peter. How did they know about Peter?

His protectiveness and suspicion grew, and he quickly signaled Friday to trace the call.

“I’m not in the habit of giving out personal information,” Tony replied wryly.

“It is rather important that we contact him.”

“Has something happened?” Tony asked.

“Would it be possible to meet in person, Mr. Stark?”

Tony paused. If he met with the officer, then he could very well miss the trial, but if Peter was in some sort of trouble—Tony’s mind raced with about a thousand possibilities. Had Peter gotten caught without his mask? Had his identity been somehow compromised?
“The 110th precinct you said, correct?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“I’m on my way now.”

Tony rubbed his eyes after he hung up. He had to calm his breathing before he sent a quick text to Bucky, asking if Peter was still around. His heart rate calmed slightly when he received a picture of the boy in his pajamas watching TV. Whatever was going on, at least Peter was safe.

‘For now,’ an awful voice at the back of his head taunted. Tony tried to slam it back down into submission. He wouldn’t let anything hurt his kid.

---

The ride down to the precinct was quiet and tense. Tony had snapped at Happy earlier when the man had been a little too curious. He felt bad about it, but honestly, Tony didn’t have the answers, and that in itself was frustrating.

The ride couldn’t have taken more than thirty minutes, but to Tony, it could have been centuries before Happy was pulling into the lot and rolling to a stop.

“Here you are, Boss. Should I follow you in?” the man asked, eyeing the department suspiciously.

“No, thank you, circle around and I’ll signal when I need you,” Tony responded, before exiting the car.

He walked up to the desk where a woman gawked at him. “I’m here to see Detective Reid,” he stated, trying not to sound as impatient as he felt.

“Oh! Um—I mean—yes, let me call him!”

The woman jumped into action and paged the man. Tony tuned out their conversation, losing himself to his own thoughts and worries. He was torn between hoping this wasn’t anything serious, and swearing vengeance on the entire NYPD should he have missed the second trial over nothing.

“Mr. Stark, thank you for coming.”

He turned to see the voice that addressed him. A man, probably close to his own age, stood tall. He had dark hair peppered with grey and deep crow’s feet around his eyes.

Tony shook the man’s hand and nodded. “You must be detective Reid.”

“That’s correct. Please, if you would follow me, we have some matters to discuss that would be better done… away from prying ears.”

Tony eyed the man up. He seemed friendly enough, but there was a tension in him that spoke of piled up stress, and Reid’s smile may have been more a formality than anything genuine.

The detective led Tony into a small side office and closed the door before offering him a seat, which Tony gratefully took.

“Mr. Stark, I understand you’re probably curious as to why I called you today.”

He nodded, tapping his finger against the metal arm of the chair, hoping the man wasn’t about to start beating around the bush.
“My information I have here,” the man said as he typed on his keyboard, “says you are an active guardian to Peter Parker.”

“That’s correct,” Tony finally confirmed. “Peter is staying with me. He splits his time between staying with his aunt and myself,” he said, a little defensively. The judge approved his guardianship and—

The detective's shoulders sagged, before he was straightening up again, his eyes weary. He clicked something on his computer and moved to face Tony more directly.

“Mr. Stark, there’s been an accident.”

“What do you mean?” Tony asked, his brows furrowing. “Peter’s safe at home. I checked before I came here.”

“No, I’m sorry—not with the boy,” Reid spoke. “It’s his aunt. May Parker.”

Chapter End Notes

:)

so...a slight change in tone from last chapter...

Anyway, feel free to comment or my Tumblr askbox is always open! Kudos are appreciated as well!

I wish things stay good for you all!
“Friday, take me to Peter.”

Tony let himself lean against the cool metal of the elevator, wondering if the ringing in his ears was ever going to stop. It started after Detective Reid had given him the news, and had followed him the entire ride home. Tony breathed in even, practiced breaths. He had to stay calm. He needed to—to what? Fix this? There was no fixing this.

The elevator doors opened up and he stepped out, not into the penthouse, but Bruce's lab. Tony walked up to the glass and instantly felt as if he'd been struck. Inside the room, Bruce was showing something to Peter under a microscope. His kid had a huge smile on his face as he spoke animatedly, pointing to something on one of the holographic monitors.

Tony had promised himself time and time again that he would do anything to protect Peter, shelter him in whatever way he could, to keep him safe. There was no way to shelter his son from this.

He'd never been a religious man, he never saw the appeal of begging to some unknown deity when he could put his head down and work for what he needed or wanted, and he never found comfort in the thought of fate or destiny or the existence of some grand plan. Still, the tragedy of loss often saw many people turning to their gods for answers, for comfort, and more than ever, Tony found himself turning away from any such notions, because even if there was some grand deity somewhere in the vast cosmos, it would not be worthy of his praise, his admiration and loyalty. Not if it could create the sweetest, most caring child, and systematically take away everything.

And Tony could not protect him.

Not only could he not protect him from this, he had to be the one to deliver the pain and agony with the news that his son’s life was about to change irrevocably. Tony hovered outside the glass, looking in—into a world where his son was safe and happy. It was if Peter existed in a reality separate from the one Tony stood in, a world a touch less unforgiving and violent. Behind the glass, Peter laughed. Behind the glass, Peter was safe. Behind the glass, Peter was happy, and before its cold, reflective surface, Tony trembled, waiting, terrified of the moment he opened that door and shattered the last boundary that separated and protected his child from the cruelty that stalked its borders.

Time continued to march forward, despite the thoughts running through and plagued his mind. It

Chapter Forty

Chapter Notes

Hi all!

The continuation of that awful cliff hanger is finally here

TW:
Very strong emotions going on this chap, be wary.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
stopped for nothing and no one, no matter the horror. Tony knew he was the catalyst, knew that his next and only possible action would separate everything into before and after.

So Tony chose the only option left available to him. He opened the door.

Peter’s head popped up and he turned instinctively toward the sound of the door.

“Dad!” The teen smiled hugely and rushed to greet him. “You won’t believe—”

Tony’s vision narrowed, the ringing in his ears seemed all the louder. Peter’s lips were moving but there was no sound. His chest was tight and he could feel the weight of the knowledge he carried heavy upon his shoulders, leaving his knees weak, shaky and close to collapse. Part of him was regretting turning down the detective’s offer of accompaniment. He thought it would be a mercy for Peter to hear it from him rather than some nameless stranger in uniform, or a woman in heavy makeup who had no notion of just how calamitous their words would be; someone who had never even met their little family, who would never know how caring, fiercely protective, and loving they were. Someone who would just be reading a name off a clipboard.

He had thought that, maybe, it would somehow be gentler for Peter to hear it from him, yet now, in the face of his task, he found his courage faltering. How was he supposed to utter the words that were going to ruin everything? How could he?

“Tony?”

He blinked out of his stupor and found Bruce eyeing him oddly, cautiously and with concern.

Fuck. How long had he just been standing there? He looked to Peter, and even he was looking at him with slight worry. God, he was already fucking it up.

“Is everything all right?” Bruce asked, hesitant and nervous.

Tony’s mind blanked for a moment. No, nothing was all right. There were no words to describe just how completely, fundamentally awful everything was.

“Bucky—” Tony paused. He hadn’t really meant to say it, but—“Where’s Bucky?”

He didn’t want to do this alone. Didn’t think he could.

Bruce shrugged, taking off his glasses to clean the lenses while he watched Tony carefully. Another nervous tick, Tony knew.

“He, uh, said he had to take care of something. I didn’t really ask.”

Tony didn’t have the time to comprehend just what the hell that meant before Peter was in his sights, again calling his attention.

“Dad, is—what’s going on? Are you okay?”

He tried to smile. Smiling in the face of pain or even panic was something Tony was usually used to; just putting on a face for the cameras. But here and now, it felt off, and wrong, and—he couldn’t do it right. He was sure it looked more like a grimace.

“I—I’m sorry about interrupting—” It sounded awful, but hell, did he mean it. “Pete, let’s head up where we can sit.”

He hated the nerves he could see crawling up Peter’s spine, the same way his own churned his
stomach. Still, Peter followed him out of the lab and into the elevator. It was the longest ride he’d ever taken, the atmosphere stifling and only seeming to grow worse until the doors opened onto the penthouse. Tony looked around, listening for any sign of Bucky’s presence. He knew it wasn’t fair to ask, but god, he really didn’t want to be alone in this.

Peter sat, curled up on the armchair, and Tony didn’t know what to say.

“Dad?”

“Pete, I…” he stopped, swallowed, then tried to continue. “I just got back from the police station.”

He looked around, somewhat helplessly, as if hoping Bucky would just materialize from the walls. Of course, there was nothing and no one. No one besides Peter and himself.

He glanced at the sofa, but it seemed too far away from the armchair, Tony thought, thinking that maybe he should be closer. He hobbled around the coffee table and lowered himself to sit on it, so that he remained only a few feet away from Peter. Tony breathed a brief sigh of relief when the table didn’t protest his weight.

He focused his attention back on Peter, all while trying to reign in his own anxieties. He felt dangerously close to a panic attack. He took a deep breath. He had to push through it, had to stay strong, for Peter.

“Why were you at the police station?” Peter finally prompted, his voice careful and cautious in a way that had Tony's heart aching with guilt.

“I was called in.”

“Are you in trouble? What did they want? Do you need a witness or an alibi?”

“No—no, no, it wasn’t—” Tony paused. It wasn’t what? It wasn’t that bad? No, it was worse, so much worse than even Tony had the capacity to comprehend fully yet.

“Pete…”

“What? What’s going on?” Peter asked, voice pinched in worry.

Tony hated himself all the more as he watched Peter pick at the arms of the chair nervously. He was dragging this out without even meaning to. He just didn’t know—the detective had said to be plain and somewhat blunt—

“I’m sorry, I—” Tony took a deep breath and steeled himself. “I was called into the station because of May.”

Peter’s face scrunched up as he squinted, his nervousness overwritten with confusion. “I don’t… what do you mean…?”

“Peter, there was an accident and, your aunt, she—she didn’t make it.”

He felt the way his own face twisted, in empathy, in his own shared grief. His tongue somehow felt leaden in his mouth.

Peter just stopped.

Tony watched as his son went from nervous fidgeting to frozen. No little tapping, no shifting. His eyes were wide and unblinking. Even his breath seemed to have caught.
He tried to remember exactly how he’d felt when he’d been told about his own parents’ deaths, how he had reacted. Thinking back, Tony thought that maybe his state of shock had been similar to the one his son was in now. Though much of his memory of that time was hazy, he had the distinct recollection of the shock blending into confused relief at his father's loss, followed almost instantaneously by overwhelming guilt over feeling something even close to relief when it meant his mother had been taken from him, too. Of course, then came the drinking. Tony felt the already large lump in his throat grow bigger and begin to ache. He couldn’t even remember his parents’ funeral.

“I… What?”

Tony snapped back to the present and silently scolded himself. He had to stay present, had to remain collected, for Peter.

“I… I don’t understand,” Peter’s voice took on a sharp note. “An accident? What do—what do you mean, she didn’t—she didn’t—no, no, May’s fine, she—she’s working, she—”

“Peter, I’m so sorry, I—”

“No, you’re wrong, there’s been a mistake!” Peter insisted, his voice changed from sharp to desperate, like every word was a plea.

It was agony to watch the expression form in Peter’s eyes. Tony reached out, as if to lay a hand on the teen’s knee, but Peter stood abruptly, halting Tony mid-gesture.

“I-I just spoke with her!” Peter insisted, repeating Tony’s own thoughts after being told the news. The teen paced. “She’s been working lots. That’s all it is!”

Tony could feel his chest aching in misery and empathy. He got his cane up and threw his weight onto it to get himself up onto his shaking legs, a harder feat from his stance lower to the ground on the coffee table, rather than a genuine chair.

“I just—I just—” Peter stuttered, his voice hitching and finally breaking.

Tony’s gaze shot up as he straightened and met Peter’s own gaze. The boy’s wide eyes had turned shiny with unshed tears. His breaths came quick and shaky through trembling lips.

He watched as the reality set in. As a great supporting pillar in Peter’s life was yanked from him. Peter crumbled.

Tony opened his arm wide as his kid threw himself against him with a heartbreaking sob. He wrapped his free hand around Peter and held him as the teen clung to him tightly, sobbing into his shoulder. The sounds of Peter crying finally seemed to rinse him of the last of his own shock and the weight of their loss settled heavy over his body. He let himself lean his head against Peter’s curls as a few of his own tears escaped his eyes.

Eventually, Tony led Peter over to the sofa where they curled up together, Tony holding onto Peter until his sobs died to sniffles.

He pulled away from Peter to look at him.

“I met with the detective who’s trying to figure out what happened. Right now, they’re trying to see if any CCTV cameras in the area caught anything on tape, as well as looking for any witnesses—”
“How do they even know it’s her?” Peter couldn’t seem to get the word out, but his face twisted in frustration.

Tony winced, the vivid image bleeding into his mind’s eye of being led into the morgue, of watching the coroner pull the sheet back.

“I’m sorry, Peter. It was—it was her. They had me confirm her identity.”


Tony took a deep breath and cleared his throat. “They—the police are still investigating, but at the moment, they think it might’ve been some sort of vehicular accident.”

“They don’t know?” Peter’s voice turned sharp and demanding.

“I’m sorry—”

“Stop saying that!” Peter shouted.

Tony’s mouth snapped shut and a pained expression crossed his face as Peter bolted from the couch, running toward his room. His departure followed seconds later by a loud slam. Tony grimaced. He was fucking this up. Peter needed someone who knew what they were doing, not… dammit!

He let his head fall into his hands. This was way over his head. How could he console his son over something so awful? How was he supposed to stay strong for him when he couldn’t even get this right? And when he could barely stay standing for minutes at a time?

He wanted to erase Peter’s pain, and it was the one thing he couldn’t do.

Tony gave himself a few moments to surrender to the loss, to succumb to the overwhelmingly intense ache, but as he tried to pull himself back up, to get his head above the water, he found himself stagnating. It was as if the grief had wrapped around his ankles like vines and was trying to keep him pulled under.

His hands were shaking, his chest felt tight and hot, his throat was dry like sandpaper. If he could only have a drink, just a glass, a sip, to calm his nerves. Tony fumbled for his phone, nearly dropping it twice before sighing in frustration and letting it fall to his lap.

“Friday, where’s my Bucky-bear?”

“I’m sorry, Boss. Mr. Barnes appears to have left the building.”

A somewhat strangled, desperate noise escaped past Tony’s lips.

“Okay, help me out, baby girl. Send text: where are you?”

“Message sent,” Friday confirmed, her voice pitched soft, almost soothing.

Tony rubbed his hands together, then began clenching them into fists and relaxing them, rhythmically.

“If I may, Boss. I have compiled documents on grief, the grieving process, and how to comfort those in need.”

A small, weak smile touched Tony’s lips, and he swiftly tried to swallow back his own emotion.
“Thank you, Fri. Send it to my tablet.”

“Also,” Friday began.

Tony picked up hesitancy in her voice, which was something he couldn’t remember programming in. Then again, if Friday was as adept at learning as Jarvis had been, then it wouldn’t be much of a surprise to him to see her growing her own personality, at this point. “Yeah?”

“Research shows it to be extremely beneficial to seek out professional help while experiencing hardships. Talking to a therapist may prove helpful to both yourself and young Peter.”

He wrinkled his nose in distaste at the thought of sitting in front of a therapist and trying to divulge any of his hardships. He knew it was slightly hypocritical of him, considering his support of steering Steve toward therapy after the incident with Bucky—something Steve continued to take part in, even now, between the drama of their lives.

A part of him knew that, maybe, getting an objective perspective might be a good idea, but he still felt hesitant.

“I’ll keep that in mind. Thank you, Friday.”

“You’re welcome, Boss.”

Tony turned the idea around in his head for a bit before deciding to shelve it for later. He’d talk it over with Peter in a while, maybe. He tried to compartmentalize through his tangled thoughts of messy feelings. He needed to get his tablet to read the documents Friday sent him, he needed to know how best he could help his kid.

He went to get up, but yelped as his legs gave out from under him when his abdomen flared in sharp pain. He tried to hit the sofa, but missed by a hair and hit the ground, not hard, but the impact was enough to send his already hurting body into agony. He curled in on himself unintentionally as he trembled through the aftershocks of the sudden pain, berating himself silently as the hard flooring dug into his hip. He’d missed his last dose of meds.

He’d gotten so used to having Bucky or Steve there to keep the schedule going. Learning about May had made him forget, and with the shock wearing off, he was now becoming all too aware of the increasing discomfort in his body.

“Dad?” Peter’s voice came, sharp and frightened. “Dad! Oh god, no, nonono—”

“Pete—Peter, I’m okay, it’s okay,” Tony managed to get out, turning his head just in time to see his kid, mid-dash toward him. The boy’s face was pale and panicked. Tony cursed himself again.

“It’s okay, kid, just took a bit of a fall.” Tony sighed. “God, I sound eighty,” he muttered flatly.

Peter’s eyes weren’t any less wide or watery, despite his assurances. The teen helped him back up on the sofa and Tony sighed again. “I’m sorry, Pete—”

“I’m sorry—I’m sorry I yelled! Please, please don’t go too, I can’t, I—”

Peter’s panicked words devolved into more tears.

Tony pulled him against him, ignoring his own pain and grief, and held the teen tightly until they both drifted off into an exhausted slumber.
When Tony next woke, it was to the feelings of instant agony. His whole body felt like somebody had doused his insides in gasoline and lit a match. The sky was dark, and the light coming in through the large windows was muted and unnatural.

“Friday, is Bucky back?”

“No, Boss. However, you do have three missed calls from the law firm handling the trials.”

Tony closed his eyes with a tired sigh. He didn’t have it in him to tackle the trial right now.

“Any news from Steve?”

“I'm sorry, Boss, but Captain Roger's team is still in the dark zone.”

Tony tried to push down the helpless frustration that built up in him. He glanced around and was startled to see his bottle of medication and a glass of water sitting next to him on the end table.

“Oh, Pete…”

He was filled with worry at his son’s lack of presence as he sat himself up, before carefully swallowing down the pain meds.

“Friday, where's Peter?”

“Peter is in his room with the young Mr. Osborn.”

Tony grimaced as he rubbed over the sore section of his abdomen. “When the hell did he get here?”

“Mr. Osborn arrived on premises approximately one hour ago after Peter called him, showing signs of distress.”

“Is he in our security? He just came up?”

“Peter granted him access. More than that, Mr. Osborn’s presence seemed to be beneficial at the time.”

Tony sighed. He knew he couldn’t let his own biases rear up now. If Harry was here to play nice, then Tony wouldn't stand in the way.

“Peter's wellbeing is one of my primary directives, mental and emotional wellbeing included. Since arriving, Mr. Osborn has been able to award Peter a level of comfort that aligns with my directives. Should I have felt Peter was at risk, I would not have hesitated to act.”

Tony's brows rose, and then a small smile graced his lips.

“All right, I trust you,” he said, softly.

He got up, making sure he had a good grip on his cane, before pushing down the pain in his body to hobble over to Peter's room. He paused at the sound of hushed voices, then raised his free hand to rap on the door with two quick taps.

“Pete?”
“Y-Yeah?”

Tony opened the door and peered in. Peter’s eyes were still red and puffy, but there was a glassy look to them that made it seem like he wasn’t really all there at the moment. Tony winced in sympathy. No doubt the teen was going through waves of shock.

“Hey,” he greeted softly, only glancing at the other boy in the room to give a subtle nod. “Just wanted to check in. Have you eaten at all?”

Peter shrugged, pulling the blankets around his shoulders tighter. “A bit,” he replied after a tiny delay.

“Okay.” Tony glanced at Harry, then nodded to the door. “There’re some drinks in the fridge, why don’t you go fetch some.”

Harry jumped off the bed, taking the hint and vacating the room after a quick, whispered word to Peter.

Tony waited, then sat down on the bed next to his kid.

“Pete. I just wanted to say that if you need me, I’ll be right here. Okay? Doesn’t matter the time of day, whether it’s three P.M. or three A.M. or what it is, whether you want to talk, or you just need somebody with you. I’ll be there.”

Peter sniffled, his lips quivering, but he managed to nod his head to show his understanding, even if he didn’t voice it. Tony suspected he quite frankly couldn’t talk at the moment. It broke his heart to see Peter suffering so intently. Tony leaned in and pressed a lingering kiss to the top of Peter’s head as he hugged him gently. He didn’t miss the way Peter leaned into him slightly, and Tony wished he could carry the weight of all his grief for him.

“Remember, I’m just a room away,” Tony reiterated, not wanting to leave at all.

“O-Okay.”

---

As Tony settled into his own bed, he prepared himself for a long and sleepless night. He picked up the tablet Friday had compiled all the information she found useful onto and began to read, hoping beyond hope that he would be able to find answers in the texts on how to help his son.

---

By the time the next day dawned, Tony was officially worried. He’d waited up most of the night, hoping Bucky would crawl into his bed with him. He’d kept himself as distracted as he could, thinking about Peter, reading the many, many articles on supporting others in grief. Most of them had been frustratingly vague, but logically, Tony understood that there wasn’t any clear-cut answer or solution. This knowledge was not comforting. In fact, after some hours, Tony had to put his tablet down as his own insecurities and anxieties began to pile up within him.

There was his own grief and sorrow at losing someone who had come to be a dear friend, the knowledge that the loss of May had just made him the sole guardian for Peter, the uncertainty of how to approach Peter’s loss and show support without completely fucking up somehow.

Then of course, there was the entire situation with Bucky; the trials and now his apparent disappearance. Tony’s heart palpitated in a way that caused his breath to stutter. Bucky had a history
of sneaking out of the damn place, sure, but the timing here couldn’t have been worse. On top of
that, there was also the looming, foreboding thought that maybe Hydra had risen from the ashes
and tracked him down somehow. Rumlow’s unit had acted independently, but who was to say that
there still weren’t other smaller groups subsisting underground? If Rumlow found a way to track
Bucky back to the tower, who was to say someone else couldn’t as well?

Then came the other dark thoughts, whispered by his own inner demons and insecurities. Maybe
Bucky had grown tired of him? Maybe this recent tension was a step too far? Tony was… aging…
his recent injuries were slow to heal, and—no.

He took a moment, closed his eyes and breathed, deep and even. He had promised himself before
to not let his own insecurities paint others in poor lighting. It was a disservice to the ones he loved,
especially someone as caring as Bucky. He had to keep a level head. He couldn’t let himself give
into despair or panic—there was too much riding on him, now.

Tony got up and began arranging things in the kitchen in order to try and put together something
somewhat nourishing for Peter. He sighed at the note Steve pinned to the front of the fridge
detailing all his dietary restrictions. NO FAST FOOD had been underlined in red.

He wondered what Steve would do now, if he was here, and suddenly, he ached with how much he
missed him. Steve’s presence wouldn’t have changed the situation he was in, but it would have
been comforting to have that steady line of support.

Also, Steve had a fairly good track record of being able to track Bucky down.

“Any word from Bucky yet?” Tony asked.

“No, Boss. I’m sorry, but there’s been no sign as of yet.”

Tony sighed but nodded, turning his concentration back to the frying pan where he’d just poured
the eggs. He had a rather poor track record when it came to eggs; he tended to burn them on good
days, never mind now that he could barely keep himself upright without some sort of support. He
really didn’t want to mess this up.

He mixed the eggs around in the pan, scrambling them, trying not to let them burn, and jolted when
the toast popped up. Shit, if he didn’t get the toast buttered now, then it would grow cold before
the butter had a chance to melt into it the way Peter liked, but he couldn’t leave the eggs, and—his
chest burned and his throat tightened with a sudden, illogical wave of frustration that nearly had his
eyes prickling. He was of sound enough mind to realize that it was completely ridiculous, and that
there was nothing happening at the moment to cause such a strong emotional response, yet that did
nothing to curb the feelings. In fact, if anything, it only made him feel worse.

Tony took a second to gather his thoughts, trying to push back his initial rush of emotion. Calmly,
he turned the stove element down, then went to prepare the toast the same way he’d seen Peter eat
it time and time again, before plating it and going back to the eggs to finish them off. He grabbed a
juice box from the fridge and put in on a free spot on the plate, before balancing the meal in his
free hand and making his way to Peter’s room.

He used his foot to knock, frowning when there was no response.

“Pete? You awake?”

Still no answer.

“I’m coming in, okay?”
Tony sighed and looked at his two occupied hands. He took a deep breath in preparation, then placed his cane against the wall and opened the teen’s door, gritting his teeth through the pain. He was quick to seize his cane back as he pushed the door open with a foot.

The inside of Peter’s room was dark, and all Tony could see of his kid was a vaguely human-shaped lump on the bed, fully cocooned in blankets.

Tony placed the plate down on Peter’s desk. There was a little, almost sad sounding chirrup as Ben rolled forward to inspect the new addition. Tony gave the robot a small pat and turned on the desk lamp to illuminate the room in soft light.

He maneuvered himself over to the bed to sit upon the edge of it, hesitating a moment before placing a hand over where he imagined Peter’s shoulder to be.

“Hey, come on, I brought you something to eat.”

There was a small shift of movement from within the blankets. “Not hungry,” came the muffled reply.

Tony looked around the room, as if it could reveal the answer of how to make this better.

“Harry left?” he asked instead.

“Had to meet with his dad, said he’d come by later.”

Tony didn’t much care for the reply, but what took him aback was just how tired Peter sounded, as if every word was a struggle.

“Hey, can you come out, just for a couple minutes? I know you’re not feeling hungry, but I want you to have just a couple bites. Okay?”

For a minute, Tony thought Peter was just going to disregard him, but finally, the teen poked his head out and went to sit up. Tony’s heart clenched at just how miserable Peter looked; only one night in, and already the teen had puffy eyes, lined with dark circles.

He reached over and grabbed the plate to pass to Peter, who took it silently. Peter did little more than stare at the plate for a while before he took the fork in hand to nibble at the eggs. Carefully, Tony peeled the plastic off the juice box straw and stabbed it into the box, placing it within easy reach.

He sat with Peter for a while, making sure he wasn’t letting the boy isolate himself completely, while ensuring he ate at least half of what was on his plate. When Peter finally put it down and refused to eat anymore, Tony gathered everything up and took it away. He made extra sure to remind Peter to tell him or Friday if he needed anything at all before leaving.

Tony resolved to let Peter have his time alone, but to also try and get him out of his bedroom later, if he could manage it, even if it was just to make himself into a cocoon on the sofa.

---

“Boss, there’s something I think you need to see.”

Tony lifted his head from his tablet, humming curiously. He was in the middle of setting up a data bank for Friday to start man-hunting. “What’s going on, Fri?”
Across the room, the TV flicked to life. An emotionless news anchor was speaking into the camera, and next to his face was a picture of Bucky. The photo was an old, black-and-white war piece from the 40s. Despite the fact that Tony had seen many such old photos growing up, it still somehow struck him—Bucky in his USSR regalia, hair cut short, face clean shaven—it was almost like looking at another person. Then again, after everything, Tony was sure his Bucky was a very different person from the young soldier in the picture.

“Friday. Volume up.”

“...Today’s trial is not the first, nor is it likely to be the last. Sources tell us that during the document leak of 2014, many previously classified files pertaining to World War Two hero Sergeant Barnes and his apparent crimes were brought to light. When questioned as to why, then, this case took so long to get to the courts, we were told that many of the released files were laden with heavy encryptions that made collection of evidence slow going.”

Tony leaned forward, watching intently as the newscaster went on to talk about Bucky’s past accomplishments (at least, the unclassified versions) while fighting next to Steve in the war, and his close friendship with none other than Captain America.

Tony waited for the other shoe to drop, his breath caught in his chest.

He didn’t have to wait long.

“Until recently, it was believed that Sergeant Barnes had died while on mission in 1945, though no body had ever been discovered. He was officially listed as MIA and it was presumed by all that he had perished. New evidence has apparently come to light that tells a very different story; it is now being suggested that Sergeant Barnes had, in fact, been taken into custody as a prisoner of war, where he was subjected to years of torture, experimentation, and conditioning by the terrorist organization Hydra. The story only gets more bizarre as it’s also revealed that Sergeant Barnes not only survived his mission and time captive, but is also still alive today, much like his once friend, Steve Rogers.

The court has finally convened to try and answer the question, should James Buchanan Barnes be held responsible for the crimes he committed while being held captive, or should leniency be granted in regards to the circumstances of these events?

It is believed that Barnes is currently being held in military police custody, awaiting his chance to testify, and hopefully shed more light on this extraordinary case.”

Tony felt cold and, for a brief moment, startlingly blank. Then, like breaching the surface of water, everything came rushing back to him, leaving him gasping against the tight band that was constricting around his chest. They had Bucky.

They had Bucky in custody. It was too soon—nothing was ready, the deliberations had only just started—there wasn’t enough support yet.

The room spun as Tony stood, muting the TV as he did so. His limbs shook with every step. He had to fix this, he had to fix this, he had to—

Tony blinked as he found himself standing in front of his old bar, hand reaching for the mini fridge. He pulled away, as if burned, and staggered back, almost losing his balance completely. The shaking in his limbs increased. The bar was empty of any alcohol still, and now served as an extra juice and smoothie bar, but that didn’t change the fact that in that moment, Tony had followed his instincts to pour himself a stiff drink. He nearly let out a sob realizing that, even now, aware of his
own actions, if there had been even a single bottle left behind the counter, he would have drank it.

Even with Peter just down the hall, suffering and in need of help. Tony found his breath stolen from him again. He couldn’t let Peter see him like this. He needed to—he needed to get his shit together, he had to fix this. Tony staggered down the hall, pausing briefly to listen outside Peter’s door, which still remained closed, then continued into his own bedroom.

The moment the door closed behind him, it was like he was being sucked into a vortex. All the air was stolen from his lungs at once, his knees gave out, sending him sliding to the floor as unshed tears stung his eyes. Choking back the sobs that suddenly wanted to rise up in his throat like bile, Tony fumbled for his phone. His vision was blurred and his hands shook like leaves, but eventually, he was able to get the damn thing to do what he wanted.

“Friday. Call—call Steve.”

---

Steve was so exhausted by the time they were finally given the OK to clear out that he was asleep nearly as soon as his ass hit the seat of the Quinjet. He wasn’t the only one suffering though; next to him, Sam looked nearly ready to throw up. Whether it was from the exhaustion or the broken arm, Steve wasn’t sure, but he made sure his friend was okay and that the med-bed he was in was strapped down good before sitting himself. The Evac crew had already set the bone and splinted it, as well as given Sam the meds he’d need to make it back to base for a cast, but Steve liked to check in on his team himself. He hadn’t ever trusted the old Shield enough not to, and he definitely wasn’t trusting the new one. No matter what updated screening processes they tooted on about.

Natasha looked somewhat pained, though she had passed through medical with no more than a quick bandaging over a somewhat deep cut to her arm. Steve made a mental note to get her to agree to some x-rays. Just in case. Then again, nearing thirty-six hours without sleep made all of them look a little pained. Even Clint looked drawn and moody, glaring at anyone who got too close. He didn’t even argue when Steve told him he wasn’t flying them home.

Their mission, though not exactly hard, had been tedious and drawn-out, requiring constant vigilance on their parts in order to stay one step ahead of their opponents. Steve was honestly overjoyed that it was over—or, well, he would be, once he’d gained the energy to feel anything at all aside from brain-numbing tiredness. So, once he was sure his team was situated for the flight back to NY, he sat himself down and slept.

It wasn’t until Natasha had shaken him awake some hours later and his boots touched American soil again that he thought to check his phone. He was a little surprised to see the voicemail notification on his screen. Not many people had his number, and the ones who did knew he was in a no-call zone, or were actively with him.

Steve paused in the hall of what was now being used as the New York City Shield branch and signaled Natasha and Clint to go on. Clint shrugged and continued on toward the debriefing room while Natasha walked a bit ahead to give him a bit of privacy, but then paused to wait.

In a few clicks, Steve put his phone to his ear to put an end to his mild curiosity. He frowned—for the first couple of seconds, he didn’t hear anything, except for vague noises. A shuffle, maybe? A breath?

“Steve.”

His whole body straightened to attention as a jolt of ice ran through his blood. There was a feeling...
of dawning dread opening up in his gut to swallow his heart. It was instantaneous and encompassing, the knowledge that something was very, very wrong.

“Steve, it’s—it’s Tony. I know you won’t get this right away, but I still felt like—I still felt like I needed to call.” There was a pause, where Steve could hear Tony taking in a shaky sounding breath. “Some things have—fuck, everything’s gone wrong, and I don’t—I don’t know how to fix it. I’m sorry. I’m sorry, I just—I just really wish you were here right now. Please come home safe.”

There was no other information, no goodbye, nothing but a soft click as past-Tony hung up. Steve had known Tony for a long while, almost as long as he’d been out of the ice. He liked to think that he knew the man pretty well, all things considered, and that he’d seen Tony in many states. Especially after they began dating.

Steve had never heard Tony sound like that.

He hadn’t even realized he’d frozen, that he wasn’t breathing, until he felt a hand touch his arm and Natasha’s face came into his view, her brows furrowed in concern. “Steve?”

Steve took a shuddering breath as he was thrown back into the moment.

“Steve, what’s wrong?”

“I need to go,” he said. “I need to get home. Now.”

Natasha’s expression shifted, less curious and more hardened, serious.

“Do you need backup? I can go back to the jet, grab some arms—”

“No. No, I need to go now—go to debrief, let Clint know. Cover for me.”

She nodded. “I’ll deal with Coulson. Go.”

Steve ran.

Chapter End Notes

God I’m so sorry.

feel free to comment/scream at me on my Tumblr
Tony knocked on Peter's bedroom door for what must have been the tenth time that day. He couldn't hear any sound from within. His eyes closed in defeat.

"Peter, I—I brought you something to eat. I'm coming in, okay kiddo?"

He opened the door and had to blink until his eyes adjusted, his nose crinkling at the stale air.

"Kiddo?"

Hobbling over to the desk and pausing, Tony held back a pained sigh, before removing the plate of old, untouched food and replacing it while side-eyeing the unmoving lump of covers on the bed. He limped over and sat next to where his son was hiding.

"Pete." He placed his hand over the vaguely human-shaped mound of blankets. "Pete, come on, wake up buddy. You need to eat."

The blankets shifted, and for a split second, Tony felt his hopes rise—then Peter rolled away, cocooning himself further.

"Peter. Up." Tony tried a firmer tone of voice, "You need to get up."

He pulled at the thick covers, but Peter hung on tighter. A competition of pure strength definitely wasn't something Tony was going to be winning any time soon.

Sighing, he gave up on the brief tug-of-war before he pulled something or otherwise irritated his injuries.

"Peter—"
"I—I don't feel so well."

Tony stopped and had to strain his ears to translate the muffled dialogue, letting out a breath when he did.

"You'll feel better once you eat," he said, nearly pleading.

"Later. I don't—I don't think I can. I'm sorry—I'm sorry, I—"

Tony felt his heart ache at the distressed sound of Peter's voice.

"Shh, shhh, it's okay bud," he consoled. "Shh, just promise… just promise me you'll eat later. Even if it's just a little. Okay?"

"Okay," the reply came after a pause.

He nodded, despite Peter not being able to see him, and despite knowing it was very unlikely Peter would keep his word.

When Tony finally left the teen’s room, he hesitated at the closed door to listen, hoping to hear Peter move about, maybe go for the lunch. He strained to catch the sound of anything; anything except the muffled cries that started not a moment later.

Tony leaned heavily on his cane as an unquiet breath was pushed from between his lips, forced out of him by the combined weight of all his sorrows and failures settling heavily over his body.

He forced himself to retreat to the kitchen on trembling limbs so that he could dispose of the cold, spoiled food from breakfast. He had every intention of heading into his office afterwards to try and work, but soon found his strength waning and all but collapsed onto the sitting room sofa. The empty pit forming in his stomach opened wider.

He still hadn't heard anything from Steve, and everyday he tried desperately to keep himself and Peter afloat in the wake of the tragedy of their loss. And everyday felt like another tally to be added to his book of failures.

He couldn't testify on Bucky's behalf without outing the fact that he knows Bucky and kept him hidden all this time, which wouldn’t just throw him into jeopardy, but the rest of the team, as well.

He had proven to be all but useless to Peter, his own son. The teen had completely shut down and nothing he tried to do seemed to get through to him. His injuries prevented him from being as persistent as he normally would be, too.

He couldn't help the people he cared for most. So what good was he? He couldn't even act as Iron Man.

The hollow pit in his stomach sunk into his gut, growing wider.

Tony let himself slump over slowly until he was lying curled up on the sofa, ignoring how his incision burned and itched beneath his bandages. He just needed to close his eyes for a little while, let his mind and body rest.

---

Steve was almost unable to slow his pace enough to stop from slamming face-first into the elevator doors as he barreled towards them. Quickly, he jammed his thumb against the security scanner and
was through the doors before they had even fully opened.

He stood stiffly at parade-rest while the elevator began to ascend. For all of five seconds. Then he was flexing his hands and pacing in worry.

The worst thing was that he had no idea what to expect. There was a yawning pit in his chest that churned with foreboding. A multitude of scenarios had been flipping through his head since he had heard that voicemail. It was frustrating to have so little information to go off of. He had no clues, no facts to work with, nothing.

All he knew was that Tony had sounded so… defeated. It was a tone he wasn't used to hearing in his lover’s voice. Tony was a fighter, having to listen to that voicemail filled Steve with dread.

He checked his phone to mark his time, and honestly, he knew he couldn’t have made it there any sooner, and yet worry still clawed at his chest, pushing him to go even faster. He realized then, as he looked down at his phone, that he should have just called Tony back—but it was too late for that, he was already here. He just hoped that he wasn’t too late.

The elevator felt as if it took hours rather than minutes, but finally it brought him to the penthouse floor. He rushed off of the lift as quick as a flash, calling out as he did so. "Tony?"

No response.

"Bucky? Peter?" Steve's voice grew more alarmed at the lack of acknowledgement.

He sped further into the penthouse, almost picking up to a run when something caught his eye, causing him to slide to a stop. Carefully, he changed his trajectory and moved quietly towards the sofa, where he could see Tony lay napping.

Steve's instincts crawled along his spine and up his neck, warning him. The closer he got, the more he realized just how awful Tony looked. His usual, healthy, golden complexion was almost grey, with the exception of a sickly-looking flush.

His chest tightened and his stomach writhed in worry as he knelt on the hard floor next to the sofa. Gently, he brushed a careful hand through Tony's locks of hair, making sure not to tug on any knots. He’d really let his hair grow out. Any other day, Steve would take time to appreciate just how much he enjoyed the loose curl Tony's hair naturally fell into; instead, he was looking for all the signs of sickness and unwell—the dark circles under his eyes, the knotted and slightly oily hair, the look of complete exhaustion, even in sleep.

The distinct scent of sickness lingered around Tony’s form, and Steve wished more than anything that his hunch was wrong, that Tony hadn’t fallen into another infection. His jaw clenched, knowing the answer.

He knew it was a very real possibility that the healing process would not go smoothly for Tony. His immune system had never really recovered after having the arc reactor.

Steve shook Tony’s shoulder, taking extreme care to be as gentle as he could manage. “Tony. Tony, wake up.”

Tony’s eyelids scrunched, and Steve hated being the one to cause the discomfort.

“Sweetheart, hang on, Bruce will be back with the others soon, and we can get you checked over,” Steve continued, more to himself than Tony who, he knew, wouldn’t absorb a thing he said.
Tony’s eyes fluttered open, blinked, trying to focus, then finally settled on Steve’s face. There was a split second delay while Tony’s sleepy mind registered exactly what he was seeing, then his eyes went wide and his whole body jolted, as if he was trying to throw himself upright, but he winced and hissed in pain instead. Steve was quick to support his weight, helping him lie back down. “Careful—”

“You’re home,” Tony gasped, a strange look in his eye.

“I’m sorry it took me so long,” Steve replied. “Tony… what happened?”

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Steve let out a controlled breath as the call to Tony’s lawyer finally ended. There was a part of him that had hoped the information Tony had given him had been nothing more than an awful fever dream. It was only sinking in now that this was reality. Everything really had gone to shit.

He let out another even breath, and then another, and then pocketed his phone. He wanted to rush down to the med-bay where Bruce was taking care of Tony. Unfortunately, it seemed like his suspicions had been correct—Tony’s infection had reared back up with a vengeance. Though, by the sound of things, it didn’t seem like Tony had taken the adequate time to care for himself. He’d been too wrapped up in his worry for Peter and Bucky to realize his health had been slipping.

Steve couldn’t quite fight off the knot of worry making a sickening home within his gut, heavy and off-putting.

Another part of him was furious.

He was trying to wrap his head around the fact that Bucky had turned himself into the fucking police. He wanted to go straight down to the training facility and go through the better amount of the reinforced punching bags. He couldn’t though—he had to stay cool. Somehow, he needed to remain calm. Tony wasn’t the only one relying on him; Bucky needed someone to advocate for him. Who better to sway the panel of judges than Captain America himself?

He couldn’t let himself picture what would happen if he wasn’t able to influence their opinions of Bucky. He didn’t know if he could live with any alternative other than Bucky’s pardon.

And none of this was even touching the loss of May Parker. Steve hadn’t had the chance to get to know her as well as Tony had, but he still felt the loss with a sharp, painful ache in his chest. He hadn’t seen Peter yet since returning, but if what Tony had babbled desperately to him was any indication, that wasn’t a surprise. Apparently Peter hadn’t left his room, for anything, in almost a week. Steve knew loss, had experienced more loss in his life than any one person ever probably should. Isolation was the last thing Peter needed right now.

Steve desperately wished Bucky were here, or that he could even speak to him. Bucky was the one who had always supported him, comforted him and raised him up. Even when he had nothing, he’d had Bucky.

He was feeling that absence of support more acutely than ever now.

The fact that Tony had had to live like this for god knows how long sent him spiralling into guilt. Logically, Steve knew it wasn’t anyone’s fault. It was just coincidental timing, but still, his heart ached and the indignant fury burned.

He needed to stay strong, pick up where Tony left off, and shoulder the burden so that Tony could actually, finally heal. He knew that Tony would never let himself get better if he thought others
needed him more, so Steve needed to convince him that he could handle it. It was up to him to keep their family afloat. He needed to do this.

There was the now ever-present and very real fear that Tony would push himself too far. Steve had read it all over Bruce’s face when the other had told him about the resurgence of Tony’s infection. Steve knew the risks, he wouldn’t let himself fail. He couldn’t.

Tony was running the chance of driving himself into an early grave and Steve had no idea how he would ever be able to move on if that were to happen. The very thought of losing Tony nearly had his breath shortening in panic.

They technically hadn’t been together, officially, for very long, but Steve knew that he loved Tony. And Bucky—Steve had always loved Bucky. He felt it in his very core, like a physical trait. Something he carried with him always, holding so, so close. And now, as he sat alone in their bedroom, he wished he hadn’t coveted it so secretively. He wanted more than ever to hold Tony in his arms and tell him just how much he cared.

He took a deep breath and swallowed thickly, his throat suddenly tight. He wanted so badly to talk to Bucky, to have someone he loved just as much here with him, to hold in comfort. He just wanted to have Bucky and Tony back, safe. Steve stood. Sitting around moping wasn’t going to fix things, he needed to start making things happen. He was going to bring his family back together if it was the last thing he did.

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Peter lay curled on his bed, unmoving. He might’ve only been there for minutes, but he was under the suspicion it had been closer to hours. The acknowledgment did little to startle him into a more functioning form. Instead, it made him want to bury himself deeper into his blankets. The only real way he knew time was in fact passing was through the changing rotation of faces. At first it was just his dad, then Rhodey, and eventually Steve and the others.

Even if he had the motivation to get up, to dress, to eat, Peter didn’t think that he physically could. His body felt heavy, like a great weight had settled over him, forcing him down.

He was vaguely aware that not all was well in the tower, apart from his own personal loss. But Peter couldn’t for the life of him tell what.

His body was stuck in a viciously unhelpful autopilot, and his mind was too scattered from grief to properly analyze anything, other than the swinging emotions of horror and numbness he felt from losing May.

He knew his dad was trying, but Peter simply couldn’t muster up the energy to feel the appreciation he knew he should. A part of him felt guilty for not giving his dad more to work with, but on the other hand, what could he really do? How could he possibly move on from this?

Somewhere a clock was ticking, the eternal clack of the second hand rotating over and over and over blended into a song of no melody, just a constant noise stuck into the back of Peter’s head, waltzing endlessly with the white noise. Again and again, over and over, until Peter lost all sense of its purpose, until he could no longer tell whether it was supposed to be counting the hours, or down to something else.

Occasionally, Peter’s ears would clue him into the others talking in other rooms—sometimes it was shouting. He caught Bucky’s name once, before he zoned back out and the white noise took over, forever getting louder and louder in his head until it encompassed him.
He tried not to study his actions, or lack thereof. Thinking about it would force him to confront why he was currently in the state he was in, and whenever he did that, it often left him muffling sobs into his pillows.

It was hard for him to face the reality he found himself in. The anxiety it caused was so great it twisted his guts and filled him with a strong sense of nausea.

Peter would try and eat the food brought to him, and sometimes he was able to keep it down, but mostly he ended up hunched over his bathroom toilet, heaving—and once, over his small waste bin by his desk. After the next few times this happened, the meals appearing in his room became less heavy, consisting of mainly smoothies, rice, yogurt parfaits, toast with peanut butter and other easily digestible foods.

Most of the time, the food was tasteless and his mouth felt so dry that eating anything felt similar to what he imagined eating ash would be like. Even with the change in diet, the sick feeling never left.

The sickness hovering over him was nearly constant, making him feel vaguely uncomfortable at all times. Every movement seemed to invite an odd sense of vertigo and send his guts twisting unpleasantly. It made him want to stay in bed even more—to simply curl up, unmoving, and sleep.

He did, more often than not.

Peter found no relief with the extra rest. In fact, it seemed to have begun to do the opposite of what it should have. Instead of feeling rested, Peter had never felt more tired. It all seemed to exist in a new, vicious cycle.

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Peter woke up from yet another nap to the soothing sensation of someone gently running their hand over his head. He blinked his eyes open slowly, the sleepiness lingering over his limbs and eyes. The hand brushing over his hair was so soothing it was tempting to just let himself drift back off to sleep.

“Hey, you awake?”

“Harry?” Peter forced his brain to solidify from the liquid mush of sleep.

Harry’s face came into focus, and honestly, that was a pretty great view to wake up to.

“Heya, Pete,” he greeted with a small smile.

The hand on his head stilled, and Peter frowned a bit in disappointment, but used the excuse to try and sit up. The blankets felt unreasonably heavy, especially considering his abilities. Then again, a lot of things seemed harder lately.

“I was thinking, maybe we could go for a short walk,” Harry suggested, more timidly than his usual voice sounded. “It’s a really warm day and a bunch of those ice cream trucks have popped up. I know you said you wanted to go around and compare them sometime.”

Peter felt a pang in his heart at the forced optimistic tone of Harry’s voice, and at how even the mere thought of trying to go anywhere outside his bedroom filled him with a bone-deep exhaustion.

There was a time when Harry’s suggestion would have had him bounding out of the tower—now, he curled deeper into his bed.
Peter didn’t have the guts to look at his boyfriend and turn him down, too afraid that Harry wouldn’t want to spend any time with him. Could he even still call Harry his boyfriend? They hadn't been on any dates since Harry asked him out. They hadn't had the chance.

Harry's defeated sigh shot right through his ears to curl heavy and cold in his gut. The bed shifted, and Peter closed his eyes tight, not wanting to cry and not baring to watch Harry leave. He wanted to reach out and grab onto the other boy, beg him not to go.

He curled in on himself and clutched at his quilt in a white-knuckled grip.

Just when he was expecting the door to open and Harry to finally decide he was too much effort, the hand returned to his head, stroking through his hair, once, twice, and a third time, before stopping and resting on him lightly.

“That's okay. I knew it might be a long shot so, if you'd rather stay in, I planned for that, too,” Harry finally said, his tone much more familiar in its confidence.

Peter blinked his eyes back open, body going a bit slack in surprise. There was a pause as Peter tried to work out how to respond.

“Unless... well, unless you'd rather be alone.” The found confidence seemed to have fled. “I'd understand, I mean—”

Harry moved to get up, but Peter moved almost by instinct, his hand shooting out to grasp Harry's wrist.

“I'm sorry, please—please don't go.”

His voice sounded scratchy from disuse and buried tears, pathetic even to his own ears. But Harry's expression softened, and the next moment, he was curling up next to Peter while simultaneously pulling him to sit up more.

“You have nothing to be sorry for. I'll stay as long as you need me.”

Peter gulped down the emotion that threatened to burn its way up his throat. Harry's tone was so sure, almost blasé, and yet very genuine, as if there really was nowhere else he’d rather be. Peter knew that couldn't really be true; it was hard to be around grief and anguish. But even so, Harry's empathy struck him hard. It warmed a piece of Peter deep in his core, and he nearly couldn't keep his composure at the feel of it. It really made him begin to realize how cold and hollow he'd been feeling beforehand.

He wanted to respond, to reward Harry's effort somehow, but he knew the moment he tried to verbalize so much as a thank-you, it'd turn into a garbled, incomprehensible mess of sobs. So instead, he bit down on his lips and nodded quickly, while giving Harry's wrist a small squeeze, trying to let Harry know that he understood and appreciated his effort.

Peter wasn't sure how successful he was—at communicating with Harry or at keeping back his tears—but if a few slipped out, Harry never called him out on it. Instead, the older boy wrapped his arms around Peter and pulled him close, until he was all but in his lap. Harry buried his face in his hair, not quite a kiss to his head, but it still felt intimate and tender, and Peter basked in it as he struggled to pull himself together, even as the tenderness made him want to fall apart even more.

They never did end up leaving. Instead, Harry unloaded a bag full of snacks and drinks, queued up a couple of movies he knew Peter had loved as a kid, and sat with him as they played. Some of them Peter had watched recently, others he hadn’t seen in years, and was both surprised and
touched that Harry had somehow remembered them. Maybe next time, he'd find the will to get out of bed.

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“Sorry, I know it wasn’t what you asked me over to do, but—”

“No, thank you for coming,” Steve said, cutting off Harry’s apology. “I appreciate you trying.”

“I care about him a lot, and—well, Pete’s lost a lot. If I can help him through this, I want to.”

Steve nodded along to Harry’s words. Despite Tony’s reservations about the kid, Harry did seem to genuinely care about Peter. Steve made a mental note to try and help soften Tony’s initial distaste once the man discovered the two boys were dating.

“Feel free to come by whenever,” Steve invited. “It’s important that Peter has a strong support group now. His da—Tony is doing what he can, but until he’s back on his feet, there’s only so much he can do.”

Harry nodded and was quiet for a moment. Steve waited as Harry sifted through his thoughts.

“Has anyone gotten in contact with Peter’s friends?” the boy asked. “I’m sure Ned and MJ would be here in a blink if they knew.”

Steve looked surprised. “Honestly, I’m not sure. I was unfortunately out of the country when this happened.”

“I understand if you want to keep the news quiet right now, but—”

“No, it’s okay, would you happen to have their contact information?”

“Yeah. Here, I’ll forward it to you,” Harry said, quick to agree.

“Thank you,” Steve said once his phone buzzed to let him know the information had been received.

The two talked quietly for a bit longer, mostly about Peter, how he was acting and his current state. Before Harry left, he asked Steve to call him if anything else were to happen or if he thought Peter needed someone. Steve promised to, touched by the young man’s offer, and walked him out.

Once the apartment was quiet again, Steve went to check on Peter. He had yet to see the boy awake and was more than a little anxious to talk to him and make sure he was holding up, at least partially. He hoped the visit with Harry helped.

Steve knocked, three sharp raps upon the door.

“Peter?” Steve called through the door. “I’m coming in, okay?”

The bedroom was dim, but the windows were at least clear enough to let some of the daylight in. There were a few empty bowls sitting on the desk that Ben was trying to pull across the desktop for reasons unknown to Steve. Dirty clothes lay in a pile between the desk and the door, and Steve could easily imagine that they had been strewn all about before Harry had popped in to say hi.

“You’re back.”

Steve turned to look at Peter, who was sitting against the headboard of his bed, folded in more blankets than Steve thought the kid ever owned.
“Yeah,” Steve nodded, pulling up the desk chair so he could sit facing the boy.

“May, she’s—she’s gone,” Peter said and sniffled.

“I’m so sorry, Peter,” Steve said, and he was. He could feel his chest tighten at the dark anguish in the teen’s eyes.

Steve watched Peter’s eyes grow distant and glassy. “Sometimes, when I wake up, for just a moment, I’ll forget. For a split second, it’s not real.”

“I know how hard it must be for you. Having someone you love die—it’s the worst pain. Is there some way we can help?”

Peter curled further into himself, Steve could see the boy’s mind drifting away. He sighed heavily, feeling a little helpless. “Okay, well, why don’t you try and get some rest. I’ll take care of all of the mess here. Later we can try coming out and eating with the family, okay?”

His suggestions went unanswered, and Steve could tell Peter hadn’t even heard him. It was okay; Peter was grieving in his own way—though Steve was concerned by just how prevalent Peter’s depressive symptoms seemed to have gotten. Tony was right. Carefully, Steve gathered up Peter’s laundry and then the dirty dishes to be washed.

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“Steve?”

He heard Steve hum in question. Tony continued flipping through another brochure, then let it fall onto the nightstand with a huff, being careful of the IV attached to his hand. Everything seemed too exhausting. Frustration burned in his chest worse than the infection that left him bedridden in the first place. He rubbed his tired eyes.

“I don’t know what I’m doing,” he admitted through gritted teeth.

There was a moment’s pause, then the bed dipped next to where he sat. He opened his eyes again to look at Steve.

“I want to do this right. I want to give Peter a sense of closure, if I can. I-I don’t want to fuck this up. God, what if I fuck this up? I tried to involve him more before, but it’s like he just shuts down. I don’t know what I’m doing. I’m not qualified for this!” Tony’s words rushed out faster and faster as he felt all the anxieties he’d been stewing in finally erupt.

“Hey, hey hey hey—Tony, breathe,” Steve hushed, and Tony leaned into the larger man’s side as a warm arm wrapped around his shoulders comfortingly. Tony tried to do as Steve said, but it was hard.

When he signed the papers to be Peter’s guardian, he’d thought about it for so long he’d nearly driven himself mad with how many ‘what-ifs’ he’d thought up, and yet…

“I knew when I signed those papers—I knew what I was doing. It’s why it took me so long to do it. I guess it just never truly sank in, what it’d mean if… it’s just—a lot.”

“I know.”

“I want to do good. Peter, he’s—he’s my son, and I love him so much, Steve, and there isn't anything I wouldn't do for him. But what if I do it wrong? I'm not exactly running with good
Tony took a breath, tried to compose himself, even just a little, before looking to Steve.

“Tony, you’re already an amazing father to Peter. A blind man could see how much you love him. And yeah, it seems like Peter’s way of dealing with this loss is by withdrawing, but that doesn’t mean he loves you any less, either. Okay?”

Tony felt like his throat was constricting, both from his own warring emotions, as well as from the comfort Steve offered him.

“Now, what are you doing up, anyway? You’re supposed to be resting, not working yourself up.”

Tony sighed and picked up the pamphlet, passing it to Steve. He watched Steve’s face darken for a moment, before settling on serious. “Did she leave anything in her will?”

“Just that she wanted to be buried next to her husband. As far as planning of the service and headstones and—well, any of the detail work—there’s nothing. She did have a lot pre-sorted when it came to what she wanted done with her things. I guess she just didn’t get around to the final details. She told me she planned on having it all sorted out, just in case, but I guess she just… ran out of time.”

Tony heard the heavy breath Steve released.

“Okay. Well, has the gravesite been sorted out yet?”

“Yeah, I already purchased the plot. She didn’t seem to have a preference on which funeral home she would want looking after her, or even where she would have wanted a service to be held.”

“Do we have the records of what they did when Ben passed?” Steve asked. “If so, we could follow the same route. May didn’t seem the type to go after some big, grand gesture. As long as we respect those wishes on where she wants to be buried, I’m sure she would be satisfied with what we provide.”

Tony nodded along to what Steve was saying, knowing the other was right. It may have been his initial instinct to go all out, but honestly, Steve was right. May wouldn’t want anything showy or boisterous.

“Has Peter expressed interest in helping? Making decisions might help give him some sense of closure,” Steve suggested.

“I tired bringing it up the other day, but he just… shut down. I didn’t want to force it on him.”

Steve nodded. “No, no of course not. Okay, well, why don’t you rest, and I’ll look into what Ben’s arrangements were once I get back from Bucky’s proceedings? You don’t have to do this all alone, Tony.”

“That doesn’t mean you have to do it all either, Steve. You don’t have to do this. I’m more than—”

“You’re under strict orders to get your rest.”

Tony sighed, and Steve offered him a crooked smile before leaning in and pressing a chaste kiss to his lips.
“Now, how do I look?” Steve asked, standing up to show off the suit he’d dressed in.

“Come here,” Tony said, and reached up from where he was seated on their bed to straighten his tie and lapels. “There. Better. Now go knock ‘em dead. Well, not actually, in fact, please try to refrain from punching anyone. I mean, I know it’s tempting as all hell, but it—”

“I’m not going to hit anyone, Tony,” Steve said, his voice reflecting his amusement. Tony shot him a look. “All right. Wish me luck.”

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Steve repeated the conversation through his mind over and over, in an attempt to maintain self-control, as he looked at the panel of judges before him and digested what they had said. The television screen to his left showed Bucky in a holding cell, his right wrist, legs and torso bound, rendering him practically immobile. The place where his shining metal left arm should have been was vacant.

Steve’s teeth ground together. He promised Tony he wouldn’t punch someone. He looked to the judges, then back to the TV. It felt as if his chest was filling up with hot, molten lava. His fingers flexed and he had to fight the urge to reach for the shield that wasn’t even with him. Tony had said it would negatively reflect on Bucky if he lost his shit in the middle of a trial. He pictured the disappointed look that would be on Tony’s face if he had to somehow bail him out of jail and felt somewhat chastised. He thought about how he’d found Tony sick with stress and obviously at the end of his rope, and immediately felt guilty. If he fucked this up, it would just mean more work for Tony.

So, Steve sat quiet and attentive, pushing down all the rage he felt and made himself look as passive as he possibly could. He listened to every word out of every mouth, analyzed it, analyzed them, began to compile a map of what each judge was thinking, how they were siding. He had a basic argument in Bucky’s defense prepared in advance by Tony and Natasha, but now that he was here, in the battle so to speak, he could begin formulating and advancing his play. He didn’t need to convince them all, just a majority.

The first man, military through and through, was obviously more in favor of keeping Bucky locked up, but he was a bit of a Captain America fanboy, something Steve could use. A woman, the new World Council representative, seemed sympathetic but cautious, while a man who worked closely under Secretary Ross took up another panel seat. It was easy to see that his agenda was not in line with Steve’s. A third man made up the fourth and last seat in the panel; Steve thought he may have been a psychologist, but he couldn’t be sure. He was hard to get a read on, since he seemed to be doing the same thing Steve was.

Steve listened attentively, going over his speech and mentally altering it to fit what he thought would best sway his audience. It was hard, when it seemed as if they were all looking for different things.

He wondered just when the hell Bucky was going to get a chance to speak for himself. That was the whole reason the idiot turned himself in, wasn’t it? At least, Steve was assuming it was. It wasn’t like he’d gotten the chance to ask him himself.

God, if only Steve could wrangle a meeting—

Maybe that was exactly what he needed to do.

Steve’s brain began firing off. He could make a dozen carefully tailored speeches and pleas to
these people and they could still argue that Bucky wouldn’t be safe to be around. But if Steve could show them that the Bucky they had locked away was his Bucky again… then maybe they could reach a consensus.

“Captain Rogers, I understand you’re here in place of Mr. Stark today,” the woman finally addressed him.

“That’s correct,” Steve replied, snapping quickly back to the present.

“Do you have anything to add in defense of Mr. Barnes?” the councilwoman asked.

Steve nodded and stood. He went through the whole spiel Natasha and Tony had prepared for him, the cards locked safely in his memory. He leaned into what a proficient soldier he was when addressing the military man and what a loyal friend when addressing the woman and the man Steve thought was a psychologist. He ended with how the man he knew was good and honorable, and then tied it finally into the tortures he received at the hands of Hydra, pressing the unfortunate truth home of just how hard the organization had to work for Bucky’s loyalty, and even then, it hadn’t seemed to last.

Steve was nervous. How could he not be? This was… he couldn’t image what would happen if they tried to keep Bucky from him. He imagined himself breaking Bucky out of his prison, but then what? Would Bucky even agree to go with him? Would he be resigned to his punishment for crimes that weren’t even his fault? And even if he did manage to get Bucky away, where would they go? They’d both be fugitives.

God, Tony would murder him.

“Yes, however, with your past affiliation with Mr. Barnes,” n nasally voice interrupted his thoughts. “I don’t think it would be unfair to say your opinion may be rather bias,” Ross’ lackey said, with no discretion put towards hiding the condescension in his tone.

Steve’s jaw twitched from the blatant disrespect, but he remained calm. At least outwardly. He had to. He practiced the even breathing his therapist had taught him.

“On the contrary, Councilman,” Steve addressed. “Though it’s true I share a past with Bucky, I watched that man die on a train in 1945. The man I knew was good. The best of the best. But I understand that the person in your custody might not be that same person. After all, I’m sure this council remembers that I too met The Winter Soldier.”

Steve watched as the man’s eyes narrowed, obviously suspicious of how Steve was being so agreeable, but not knowing how to call his play.

“That being said. I can confidently say that The Winter Soldier Hydra conditioned, and the Bucky I remember, are two very different individuals. When I faced the resurgence of Hydra in 2014, I came face-to-face with the Winter Soldier, but I also was able to see at least something of my friend was left—”

“Wishful thinking,” Ross’ soon-to-be walking punching bag scoffed.

Steve stared him down. “The Winter Soldier was tasked to kill me, yet I’m still here now. Only because he hesitated. He started to remember. And when I was taking down the helicarriers Hydra programmed to kill a vast amount of our country’s population, I was caught in the explosion. I would have drowned if it hadn’t been for Bucky, who pulled me from the water.”

Steve paused. He couldn’t help but think of the man he had found hiding away in Romania. The
council wasn’t wrong; the Bucky Steve had gone to war with was not the same man who came out of the years of torture and subjugation of Hydra. That was impossible. And yet, there was a lot that remained. So much that Bucky had grabbed onto, from every snippet of memory he’d meticulously recorded in his journals, to the teasing bits of his personality that slowly had made a resurgence. His Bucky was alive and good and trying so damn hard. But honestly, who the hell wouldn’t change if they had a hundred years more to live? Lord knew Steve himself wasn’t the same person who joined the war all those years ago, and he’d been trapped in ice for most of them.

“And what is it exactly that you are suggesting, Captain?” the woman spoke, cutting down to the issue immediately, eyes sharp.

“If I could be granted access, I would like to question Sergeant Barnes myself.”

“That’s out of the—”

“And what would you hope to gain from this?” the woman interrupted.

“An idea of whether or not he remembers who he is, or has any comprehension of what’s happened to him, to start. Because the fact remains that we have an American citizen who spent years as a prisoner of war, who in turn was forced, whether from coercion or brainwashing, to commit acts of terror in the name of a hostile organization. And I believe it is our duty to protect and help heal those who have been hurt.”

There was a beat of silence, long enough for Steve to feel his nerves relight inside of him, yet he stood tall and kept his exterior calm.

“We will break and consider this matter further. Thank you, Captain Rogers, for your attendance.”

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Peter’s hands shook as he tried to button his shirt. He swallowed thickly, huffing as the button he was working on slipped from his grip before he could slip it into the buttonhole.

He couldn’t quite wrap his head around how he was feeling, though that might’ve been because it felt like his head was ready to float away, even as his feet felt leaden, as if he was about to sink into the floor at any moment. His stomach was doing its best impression of a washing machine and was leaving him vaguely nauseated. It was a conglomeration of off-putting sensations, without any one single word that seemed fitting enough to describe it, at least in his own internal vocabulary.

He groaned quietly and tried again to button his shirt. He stopped when he got to the end and saw he had an extra button, looking up into the mirror and seeing that he had misbuttoned the whole line. Peter nearly burst into tears at the frustration that erupted in his chest. He grabbed the thing closest to him and hurled it across the room. The resulting shatter only seemed to leave him more grief-ridden, and Peter slipped to the floor.

His weeping was interrupted by a startled whistle and a loud thunk.

Peter lifted his head to see Ben zooming over to him, after throwing itself off the desk where it was stationed. The little robot whistled and beeped as it approached him, slowing to a stop next to where Peter had slumped. Peter couldn’t help but smile as he picked up the small bot.

“You could’ve—you could’ve gotten hurt, bud. You shouldn’t do that, okay?”

Ben let out a long, quiet beep, then reached up and tapped at his face clumsily and gently with one of its hands.
Peter swallowed down more tears and hugged the robot to his chest. “I don’t know what to do,” he admitted quietly.

There was a knock at his door.

“Are you all right, Solnyshko? I heard a noise.” Peter distinguished Natasha’s voice.

“Y-yeah, I’m okay.”

“May I come in?”

“O-Okay.”

The door opened, and Peter looked up with a sniffle. Natasha’s lips thinned when she spotted him on the floor, and she let out a soft tsk, but her eyes were soft as she entered the room and closed the door behind her.

“I-I couldn’t do it,” Peter said as he put Ben down next to him.

“Couldn’t do what?” Natasha asked as she sat across from him.

Peter shook his head. His mind was reeling, he felt useless. All he did was sit, or cry, or sit and cry. It was stupid.

“You’re not stupid, Peter. You’re allowed to grieve. What happened wasn’t your fault. Now come here, let me fix your buttons.”

Peter paused, not realizing until she spoke that he had spoken out loud. Then, at Natasha’s beckoning gesture, he shuffled closer to her and let the woman straighten his buttons.

“There,” she said once she was done. “Better. Come on, let’s finish getting you dressed. Do you have your coat?”

Peter pointed to where his suit coat was hanging on his closet’s doorknob.

“Okay. Come on, stand up,” she said, brushing herself off and offering him a hand.

Peter took it and stood, wiping away his tears with his other hand.

“Okay,” he said, trying to calm and regulate his own breathing.

“That’s it. You can do this.”

“Okay,” Peter repeated.

Getting ready went a lot smoother with Natasha there guiding him. A small part of his brain thought that he should feel embarrassed for needing help completing such a simple task, but he was too emotionally exhausted to really feel anything except his own consuming sadness.

Once he was ready, Natasha leaned in and placed a gentle kiss on his brow. “Would you like a moment alone before we go?” she asked quietly.

Peter shook his head. “No,” he replied, just as quiet.

Natasha nodded and silently took his hand.
When the funeral home owners greeted them, Peter realized he recognized them somehow. It wasn’t until later that it hit him that he’d met them before; they were the same couple who had helped him and May bury Uncle Ben. He didn’t know why the realization hit him so hard. When he stopped to think about it, it shouldn’t have been shocking at all.

All at once, everything was too much, too stifling. He felt as if he was choking. Peter spotted a side door and left through it in a rush. It led onto the fire escape, and Peter leaned over the metal railing, taking in deep, gulping breaths of the fresh air.

“Peter?”

Peter didn’t have to turn around to recognize Steve’s voice. He felt like he couldn’t talk, his throat was closed up tight, he couldn’t get the words out. Desperately, he shook his head.

“It’s okay, hey, take your time.” He felt a large hand rub circles on his back.

Slowly, he felt himself unwind and come down from whatever precipice he’d been on, if only by a few inches.

Peter opened his eyes, not knowing when he had closed them, and looked down at the alley and street below.

“I—I keep trying to tell myself that there’s a reason for it all. I want to believe that life has meaning,” Peter finally said, eyes glassy and face drawn. “I’ve tried so hard to make the best of things, over and over, but every time it feels like I get a leg up, something beats me back down.” He let out a humorless laugh. “Is that all life is? All my life is going to be? If it is, then why do I keep fighting so hard? When all's said and done, I’m left with even less than I started with. I got my powers, but I lost my uncle; I got a dad and—I keep telling myself if I just keep going, things will get better, but they don’t, they just… change. And now—and now May’s gone.”

Peter’s voice broke as he said his aunt’s name. He felt cheated. Angry and sad and jaded. He wanted someone to blame, whatever power ran the universe, maybe. He didn’t know. He just wanted to scream.

He sniffled and wiped at a few rogue tears that had escaped his eyes, the movement sharp and angry. “God, I should just—everyone around me ends up hurt or dead,” he finally uttered. “If I were you, I’d run.”

Peter felt himself being turned around, and then pulled into a tight hug. He felt all of his anger melt away, replaced again by his grief… and by fear.

“I don’t know what to do,” he admitted, clinging to Steve. “I don’t even—I don’t even feel like myself anymore. What am I supposed to do without her?”

“I’m so sorry, Peter. I’m sorry you lost May. I know how much you loved her and how much she loved you. It’s okay to feel like you feel right now. You don’t have to do anything, not now. You’re allowed to grieve. You have a lot of people who love you and who are here to support you, okay? Even if it takes time, that’s okay. You take all the time you need. We will still be right here for you,” Steve said, holding Peter close and rubbing his back soothingly.

Peter closed his eyes again, and this time, he let the tears come.
Peter didn’t really register much of the service. It was nice though, he supposed. As much as a funeral could be considered nice. It wasn’t a large event, for which he was grateful. There were faces wishing him well, apologizing for his loss, not many, just people May had known and had known her. Some he recognized, some he didn’t.

“Peter…”

Peter turned when a voice he recognized cut through the fog that had been building in his brain ever since the service.

“Ned—”

Peter found himself stepping forward to greet his friend and accepting the hug Ned pulled him into.

“I’m so sorry. I couldn’t believe it, when I heard.”

“Oh god,” Peter sniffled. “I can’t believe I didn’t call you. I’m sorry, I—”

“No, no! Don’t apologize, dude. Seriously.”

“I think I just… disconnected, I don’t know.”

“Peter, it’s okay. I’m just sorry I wasn’t there for you sooner.”

“Who even told you?” Peter asked.

“Oh, uh, my mom got the call and she told me. I’m not too sure who it was who told her, though. Mom sent me with a fruit platter. She wanted to be here, but her and dad couldn’t get out of work.”

“That’s okay… Tell her thank you. How did you get here?”

“Oh, uh, Harry picked me and MJ up.”

Peter’s head shot up at that, he hadn’t seen them yet. “Oh, they’re here—?”

“Peter!”

Peter turned and found himself being tugged into a tight hug.

“I’m so sorry,” MJ said, sniffling back tears herself. “I was so shocked when I heard what happened.”

Peter felt his heart tug, especially when Harry was next to make his way up. The sudden comfort he felt from being with his friends was almost overwhelming. Peter let himself lean against Harry’s side, and Harry reached down and held his hand. Ned told a funny story about May finding them once, drenched and covered in mud and feathers after the two of them had gotten too close to a duck pond, and that set off a bit of a circle of stories or moments that they remembered that featured his aunt. Peter caught himself smiling, and it felt odd. He was still sad, but the stories were genuinely bringing him some sort of comfort.

He decided not to question it for now, and continued to listen to the story Harry was telling of them as kids.

It still hurt, unbelievably so, but Steve was right. He wasn’t alone.
Chapter End Notes

Also. Fuck Endgame.

Thanks for reading!

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