A Hero's Perspective

by Annie_Walker

Summary

Peter Parker must go into hiding after Thaddeus Ross betrays the objective of the Sokovia Accords. Passed from one guardian to the next, each person Peter comes into contact will have their lives changed and perspectives altered. The questions remains, however, is will they be able to protect Peter long enough for him to return home?

Different viewpoints during the course of A HERO'S RUN. Featuring Captain America, Iron Man, Black Panther and more!
War.

Not the romantic idea that many civilians believe it to be. Wars are often painted black and white. Good guys and bad guys. Right and wrong.

Not in this case.

Both sides had heroes and villains. Enemies and friends were the same. Soldiers and civilians were too. It was a mess. Couldn't trust anyone or anything. There was no innocence.

Steve Rogers looked back to the skinny form curled on the other side of the plane. Spider-Man (or Peter Parker as Stark said) lost his innocence today. His freedom. His identity. His family. His home. All gone. He was so young too. Far younger than Steve when he joined the military to fight a war. How old was he? Fourteen? Fifteen? Something along those lines. In either case, too young to get caught up in this war.

Peter had been out for almost eight hours. Whatever they hit him with, it knocked the lights out of him. Then again, the weapon wasn't built to strike Spider-Man. It was built to hit Captain America. To take him down and make him inactive.

Steve shook his head. How did it all come to this? He remembered the Avengers forming, coming together to stop Loki's plan of world dominance and assassination. He recalled those fond moments afterwards with the team, sitting around to enjoy each other's company. No arguments. No belittling. Just good old fashion conversation and drinks.

Yet, even back then in those happier moments, it was spiraling to this exact point. Steve, sitting alone in a plane with an unconscious, superhero kid. He was not looking forward to when the boy wakes up from his coma.

After escaping the school and meeting with his friends, Steve got Wanda and Scott to help him cleanse the tracking droids out of Peter's system. Couldn't have Ross and his men find them through the boy. It took some difficulty, but eventually they destroyed the tracking devices and they cut the chains that linked Peter's wrists together. He was free from the government's imprisonment. For now.

Steve promised Stark he would keep the boy safe and Steve never broke promises. It was too risky to keep Peter in the United States. Not with Ross and his team (including former teammates) searching for them. Alas, this was the new age of war and Steve needed to learn to adapt to it in order to survive. Along with Peter Parker.

A stir on the other side of the plane caught Steve's attention. The boy's head moved and a hand twitched. Seconds followed and eyes blinked into awareness. Brown eyes alight in confusion of his surroundings, twisting around to survey the area.

Cautiously, the boy began to rise. "W-Where am I?" he groggily muttered as he rubbed the last bits of sleep from his eyes.

Steve inhaled, mentally readying himself. "You're safe, son," he said to Peter. "You're on a plane."

Peter shot his head up to where Steve sat, eyes rounding on him. "Captain America?" Peter gasped through his croaked throat. "W-What... how—what's going on? Where am I?"
"You're on a plane," Steve repeated, getting up from where he sat and moved across the small aisle to sit next to Peter. "You were shot by soldiers at your school. Do you remember that?"

Peter's face crinkled in concentration before slowly nodding. "Yeah... yeah, I remember," he said, becoming fidgety. Most likely a reaction from his memory. "They shot Mr. Harrington! Is he all right? They didn't kill him, did they?"

Steve shook his head. "No, he's fine."


He had no idea who Peter was referring to, but he assumed Ned was the boy who refused to leave Peter's side. "No one was hurt except you and your teacher. Everyone is safe."

That cooled off Peter, but the fidgeting didn't wane. His eyes bounced around the plane, searching for something or someone. "Is this Mr. Stark's plane?"

"No."

The boy's brows furrowed in confusion. "Oh... um... whose plane is this then?"

"King T'Challa’s plane."

"Who?"


Peter's eyes went wide once more. His lips formed a tight oval shape as the recognition settled through the muddled haze. "Oh—wow! That's, um, cool. I guess. Never been on a plane. I mean, I have been on a plane, but not a royal plane," the kid blabbed, clearly his nerves were overworking. "So, are we like heading back to the compound? Will Mr. Stark be there?"

This was going to be difficult. Steve inhaled, his shoulders rising as he did. Ready ing himself like he always did right before going into battle. "We're not heading to the compound."

"Oh. Okay, then like a safe house?" Peter assumed.

He wasn't completely wrong. "We are heading to Wakanda," Steve informed him. "To Africa."

Peter shot up from his seat. "To Africa?!" he exclaimed, stunned beyond belief. "I can't go to Africa! I... I have school! My friends. My aunt—Aunt May! Does she even know what's happening? Does she know where I am?"

"Listen Pete—"

"I can't leave Aunt May," Peter rolled on, spluttering his complaints in a series of short gasps as he paced in short lengths before Steve. "She needs me! She has heart problems and needs medicine. I can't leave her on her own. I can't!"

Peter spun around, looking for the cockpit door. "Turn the plane around!" he ordered. "I need to go back. I need to... turn the plane around!"

Steve didn't move. Only stared at Peter in sympathy. This was why Tony Stark shouldn't have involved a kid in the war. Being away from home was too traumatizing.
When Peter realized Steve wasn't going to have the plane turned around, he took matters into his own hands. "Fine, I'll do it," he said, marching over to the cockpit door.

Steve immediately blocked his path. "I can't let you do that, son."

Peter slanted his eyebrows downward, mouth curled. "Why not?"

"I promised to keep you safe and that is what I'm going to do."

"Promised? What promise?"

"Stark," Steve clarified for him. "He asked me to keep you safe and out of Ross's reach."

Hearing Stark's name shattered Peter's defiance. He stepped back, nearly speechless. "Mr. Stark? He... he told you to keep me safe?"

"Yes."

"I-I thought you guys weren't talking to each other."

So did I for a long time, Steve thought. "Only when we're not saving lives," he quipped. "Stark cares about you, Peter. Or else he wouldn't have asked me to save you."

Peter went silent. His body swaying with the plane as he digested what he heard. The poor boy, Steve thought. He looked so lost. The boy ran his fingers through his hair, spiking it in different direction as he deeply exhaled. "Can I... um... can I speak to Mr. Stark?"

Steve shook his head. "There’re no phones."

"No phones?"

"Government can track us through technological means," Steve explained the predicament the fugitives must face. "That means no computers, phones, social media and other things... I'm not sure exactly what they are, but anything electronic is a no."

"Then how do I get a hold of Mr. Stark? My aunt?"

"You can't," Steve somberly announced. "Not until this is all over."

It almost looked like one of Thor's lightning bolts struck young Peter. His muscles went firm, mouth thinned to a point it almost looked like he had no lips and his eyes had a shiny coat of tears glossing them.

Steve wished he could tell the boy a different answer. Tell him that they were heading to the compound where Stark and his aunt and all of his old friends were waiting for them. He wished he could tell Peter that he could go back home, sleep in his own bed and wake up to find his friends at school. He wished he could tell Peter the government wasn’t hunting him down or that if caught, he would be locked away on the Raft, an unpleasant prison for people like them. Especially for people like them.

But he couldn’t. Sometimes, the truth is hard, but it is better than false hope.

“I’m sorry, son,” Steve gravely said to the stricken boy. “I know this a lot to take in—”

*Pow!*
A fisted matter punched into the side of Steve’s face, embedding his cheek with bony knuckles. It didn’t hurt too badly. A slight sting. But the surprise was what offended him the most.

Steve recovered quick enough to stop Peter from launching over him to the cockpit door. He snagged onto Peter’s legs, bringing the boy back down to the floor. The kid was a slippery fellow and flexible too. He quickly got out of Steve’s grip, shoving his foot right into Steve’s face.

He was definitely Tony Stark’s protégé.

War experience kicking in, Steve stopped going easy. He pushed himself up, leaping right on top of Peter right before the kid could reach the cockpit door. The kid wiggled and wrangled, trying to throw Steve off him. Steve gave the boy credit. He was strong and Steve had to change grips several times to keep hold.

Steve was never fond of wrestling, but since becoming Captain America, he understood the necessity of learning how to take down one’s opponent as swift as possible. Peter, while strong, didn’t have the greatest coordination. He was a bit sloppy, not well-versed in hand-to-hand combat nor wrestling. He must not have been athletic prior to becoming a superhero.

It took a bit of maneuvering, but Steve finally got Peter pinned down. Peter furiously wiggled, doing his best to get out of Steve’s stronghold. Attempt after attempt, Peter’s strength waned under the realization that he could not break out.

Peter then freely cried. “Please! I need to go home,” he cried. “My aunt needs me! She needs me! I’m her only family member she has left. She can’t… I can’t leave her! Please, turn the plane around! Turn it around!”

Steve cringed at hearing Peter’s plea. It brought him back to that moment he woke up and discovered everyone he loved and knew were gone. He too wanted to turn around and go back to him. But he couldn’t. It wasn’t possible.

Just like it is for Peter.

“I’m sorry,” Steve murmured, sprawled on the floor as he held Peter Parker in his strong embrace. “I am truly sorry.”

Tears sprung and rivulets of tears streamed down Peter’s cheeks. “No… no, take me back! Take me back!” he cried, his hands punching whatever part he could get on Steve. “I can’t leave her too!”

Steve took the beatings, but he never once loosened his grip. He knew saying sorry wasn’t going to make the kid feel any better about his predicament and telling him it was all going to be all right wouldn’t subdue the boy’s hysteria. Situations like these left a horrible bile in Steve’s mouth. To think, a year ago life was completely different for them. He was part of a team again. A free man with friends who all believed in the same cause—a better world, a better future.

And yet, here he was on a plane to Wakanda as a fugitive from the government he once served, holding a sobbing teenager who wished only to return to his family.

When Peter went lethargic, still crying on Steve’s chest, Steve loosened his hold and pat Peter on the back. “I know,” he said. “I know.”

The rest of the trip was quiet. Peter hardly said a word. He stopped crying after an hour, refusing any food and only accepting water to refresh his raw throat. Steve sat a seat away from him, giving Peter space to console himself over his new living situation. He kept an eye, watching for any signs of rebellion again, but Peter seemed to have given up hope on that matter. He sat in his seat and stared...
at his knees the entire time.

The plane dipped down and the captain notified Steve they arrived at Wakanda. It didn’t take long for the plane to reach the runway. It was a bit of a bumpy landing, but no broken bones or whiplash for either of them. The plane steered its way to the hanger, rolling up the stretch of runway until it arrived at its terminal.

Steve stood up. “Ready, son?”

Peter blinked up. So lost in his own thoughts, he didn’t even noticed they landed. “Don’t call me that,” Peter grumbled as he rose to his feet.

Steve made a mental note to not address him as ‘son’. A sore topic for another time. He waited on Peter to get his bearings. The boy’s knees wobbled a bit, but he held steady and followed Steve out of the plane.

Wakanda was gorgeous. The surrounding mountains and waterfalls brought a deep sense of peace and serenity. The fresh air smelled of blossomed flowers and fresh greens, which was very contradictory to what stood before him. A vast, advanced technological society. Skyscrapers, ships and even a flying train caught the wild imagination of a child. It was beautiful and powerful and richly growth.


Steve saw King T’Challa standing up ahead, awaiting for them to come forward. Steve nudged Peter, who was still gaping at the magnificent sight of Wakanda. As they made their approach, Steve saw inquisitiveness lurking in the Black Panther’s eyes.

Steve stooped a few feet away and bowed. Peter awkwardly followed his lead and bowed before King T’Challa.

King T’Challa, dressed in his royal gown, accepted their honors. “Captain America,” he greeted, taking Steve’s hand. “I had not expected to see you for some time.”

“Nor I,” Steve admitted. “But, a situation arose. One we need your help with.”

King T’Challa’s gaze dropped to Peter. “Is he the situation?”

Peter curled his nose, but Steve answered. “Peter Parker is in need of protection,” he explained to the king. “Ross attacked him at his school, but luckily we escaped capture. He needs a safe place to hide until the whole thing is over.”

“And you thought it would be a good idea to bring a fugitive,” King T’Challa said, “who is wanted by the United States government, into my country? Into my home?”

Perhaps he was wrong about Wakanda’s assistance. Maybe they only accept one fugitive at a time. “I know it is a lot to ask, but Peter can’t go home. It’s too dangerous,” he said. “If Ross gets his hands on him, Peter will be up in the Raft. He’s only fifteen years old. He can’t go through that.”

King T’Challa gestured in agreement. “So you wish for him to stay here? Under my protection?”

“I know you don’t have extradition laws with the US. He’ll be safe within these walls from any US government operator,” Steve said. “I know it is a lot to ask, but he’s a kid. Stark wants him safe, so —”
“Stark?” King T’Challa sounded surprised to hear Steve say Iron Man’s name. “Stark knows the boy?”

Steve nodded. “So do you,” he said and he nudged Peter to introduce himself. “Go ahead.”

Peter bowed away to King T’Challa. “I’m, um, Peter. Peter Parker,” he stuttered. “Or you’ll know me as Spider-Man.”

Peter’s alter-ego name dawned on the Black Panther. “You are Spider-Man?” King T’Challa asked, curiously looking over Peter as if he expected it to be a joke. “You are only a boy.”

“I’m fifteen… Your Highness.”

King T’Challa shook his head. “Mr. Stark had no business in drawing a teenager into war,” he said in deep disagreement.

Steve agreed, but there was no need to vent. What’s done is done. “So, Your Highness,” he said, hoping King T’Challa would bless Steve with a vow. That he would accept Peter Parker into his kingdom and protect him from the US government. “Will you let him stay?”

King T’Challa eyed Peter one more time, reexamining him in a critical, but soft manner. “Mr. Parker is welcomed to my home and lands,” he declared and he stepped close to Peter. He held out his hand for a handshake.

Peter shook in return. King T’Challa smiled. “Welcome to Wakanda,” he said, strong in his handshake, “Peter Parker.”
Tony Stark was not a man who liked to be threatened. Or controlled. Ask his father. Or anyone for that matter.

When Secretary Ross began executing orders that challenged Tony's own morals and beliefs, it wasn't too difficult for Tony to withhold information or flat-out lie to Ross in order to protect innocent people like Peter Parker. Ross was aware of the Spider-Man vigilante and had been investigating him. Tony was also well aware and had F.R.I.D.A.Y. delete or alter information in Ross's system to keep Peter Parker's identity a secret. Soon, Ross stopped coming to Tony for information or to even yell at him. It unnerved Tony enough to make him concerned. He had Happy check in on Peter, too afraid that if he did it, then Ross would know. Happy reported that the kid was doing well and that nothing was out of the ordinary. It calmed Tony's nerves, but something was off, nagging in the back of Tony's head.

And then it happened.

Tony spent that Tuesday morning in his lab, working on fine tuning different projects that he procrastinated on while away from New York. F.R.I.D.A.Y. informed him of a phone call coming in from Happy, but he ignored it. Figured it was Happy telling him that Pepper's plane took off and that he was returning to the compound. But Happy persisted and on the third attempt, Tony answered. Happy wasted no time. "There's something happening at Peter's school."

No explanation necessary. Tony hopped into his Iron Man suit and jetted off to Midtown School of Science and Technology. Happy, driving off to get May Parker, gave him the full details as he flew to Queens, telling him he received a phone call from a kid named Ned and that all he can hear were shouts and screams. He played the recording to Tony. Yep, sounded terrible. Kids screaming in terror and commanding shouts were sounds Tony never ever wanted to hear.

Arriving at Midtown, Tony saw the broken window and flew straight to it. It was the obvious scene of the crime and where Peter would be. As he got close enough to the window, he freed himself from the suit, leaping out and landing in the disarrayed classroom. All he saw were unconscious soldiers, crying children and Steve Rogers. When he found Peter and discovered what happened to him, Tony knew the horrible truth. Ross knew of Peter's alias and would do everything to get his hands on him. That meant Tony had one option. He hated himself for it.

Tony passed Peter to Rogers. Despite their misgivings and dislike for one another, Tony trusted Rogers to protect Peter when he could not. He hated himself for it, but it was the right thing to do. Or else, Peter would end up on the Raft like Wanda. Tony didn't want that.

After Peter was taken away and Tony engaged in a war of words with Ross, he flew back to his penthouse, gathering up his lawyers and team to take on Ross. Happy returned with a hysterical May Parker. She flew at Tony, fisted hands hitting him mercilessly as she yelled over and over again how much she hated him. No—despised him, really.

Tony didn't blame her. He hated himself and only May Parker could hate him more than he did. Tony swore to her that he would fix the situation. May fumed, barely listening to anything he said before demanding to see Peter.
That was a heartbreak Tony was not equipped to handle.

He explained the situation to her. In a few short seconds, May Parker went from ferocious lioness to a weeping angel, knees breaking upon hitting the tiles as she covered her face. Sobs thundered and raindrops fell. Tony tried to comfort her, attempted to help her up, but she shoved him away. She didn't give a damn about him. She only wanted Peter.

Then the worst happened. Tony didn't think it would get worse, but he was wrong. So far the day has proved him wrong on every account.

May Parker suddenly could not breathe and clutched her heart. Tony remembered Peter saying his aunt suffered from heart problems and realized May Parker was experiencing a heart attack. He called for help and minutes later, a team of EMT doctors came to the rescue. They wheeled her off to the medical bay, working fast to save her life. Tony never left the medical wing. Not once. Not until the doctor spoke to him, giving him an update on May's health. The doctor advised that a stent be inserted. At the moment, May Parker was unable to give her consent due to her unconsciousness and with no other family member available, the doctor sought out Tony's permission for the surgery. Tony gave the go-ahead. "Do whatever it takes to save her."

They called in a heart surgeon specialist and they proceeded with the surgery. It was early in the morning. Night still claimed the sky, but it was morning. Tony's watch told him that. He sat in a chair, head buried in the palms of his hands as he tried to steam off the stress. The clicking of heels alerted Tony someone approaching. He lifted his head, trying to restore his confident nature when he realized it was no stranger. It was Pepper. She returned home.

She stopped and looked at him in sadness. "Oh Tony..."

She hugged him and Tony let himself fall into her. He embraced her, arms linked around her to keep him steady. Pepper was his rock and he needed her the most at this very moment. "I fucked up," he muttered. "I just... I destroyed a family, Pepper. I literally tore them apart."

"We're going to fix this," Pepper assured Tony. "You and I and Happy and the others... we'll fix this. We'll make it right."

"Unless it's too late," Tony said, thinking about May Parker. What if the surgery wasn't successful? What if she died? What would happen to Peter? How would Peter survive another family loss? Tony didn't even want to imagine.

Pepper, understanding Tony's silence, shook her head. "You can't think like that," she said. "You'll find a way to fix this. I believe in that."

At least one person did and he was thankful for Pepper's belief in him. It was then that the doctor came down the hallway, approaching him. "The surgery went well. We inserted the stent without any difficulties. We suggest Ms. Parker remain in bed for a few days and take things slow. We'll have a doctor and nurse on standby to check up on her periodically to make sure she is doing well."

That was great news! A great relief off his arc-reactor chest. He asked if May Parker was awake, but the doctor informed them that she was still in recovery and would probably be unable to have visitors in the next twelve hours. Which meant, Tony had the spare time to start working on his plan to defeat Secretary Ross.

Pepper joined him, throwing out ideas and suggestions on how to handle the situation and press. It was Pepper who suggested he call up Arthur from The New York Times to get an editorial piece on Peter Parker. "It won't be long before news comes out that Peter Parker was the target and that there
is some kind of connection between you and him," she said. "You need to be ahead of the nosey journalists. Especially the ones who want to destroy your reputation."

Tony nodded, agreeing that he needed to stay a step ahead of them. "I'll make a call."

Hours later, Arthur Sulzberger sent over his best writer and editor over to the compound to go over the details of the article. Tony Stark knew he had to be careful in what he revealed. He didn't want Peter's alter ego to be public knowledge. No, he was going to paint Peter Parker as a good, All-American boy--as Pepper suggested. He slipped in that Peter became an intern at Stark Industries the past half-year, which would handle the connection between him and Peter. Tony hated to exploit Peter's personal backstory, the tragedies in his life that he would prefer to keep hidden, but it was necessary in this long, uphill battle with Ross. If they wanted the public to be on their side, they needed to make Peter an innocent victim. Not too hard to do, considering Peter was a good person. Better than all the superheroes Tony's ever met. Including Captain America.

The New York Times promised to send their final draft to Tony to look over once they confirmed sources and wrote everything accurate. Tony thanked them for the favor and they departed, which meant it was his turn to speak to the lawyers. Tony's team of lawyers busied themselves going over the Constitution, the Accords and other international laws which they could sue Secretary Ross. The Accords were useless in their fight. Too many loopholes for Ross to find his way through that kept him from being held responsible. Tony sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. He thought the Accords were atrocious, but it was the best option they had at the time. He figured he would have the time to edit and amend it to make it better for people like Wanda and Rogers. He was wrong. Ross took the power straight to his head right away and acted like a god, doing whatever he wanted. This was going to be a long battle and Tony needed to act accordingly and make all the right moves to avoid the traps that laid in wait for him. If he wanted Peter to return home, he needed everything to be done right.

Happy Hogan informed him of the public's reaction to the video. Apparently, the world wasn't entirely pleased with what they heard. That was good. That was a step in the right direction. The next day, Tony received a final draft of the New York Times piece on Peter. He wrote in his edits and comments, but most importantly, he changed the title from The Face of Innocence to The Face of Casualty. He thought it had a better pull on the heartstrings. He approved of the final copy and tomorrow morning, the whole world would know about Peter Parker.

After he approved of the article, he went down to the medical bay to visit May. She was still on bed rest. Monitored constantly by not only her nurses and doctors, but by F.R.I.D.A.Y. as well. He wanted to check in on her earlier, but Pepper suggested he waited a little longer until her heart was stronger.

He entered her suite, politely knocking to alert her of his arrival. The nurse was by her bedside, checking the chart. The nurse greeted Tony before he departed to give Tony and May privacy to speak. May was sitting up in her bed, her eyes narrowed as they followed Tony around the room. Tony stood at the opposite end, hands in his jacket to hide his nerves from her. For being a hottie, she put up on scary looking face. "How are you feeling?" he asked. "Doctor Redmond assured me that the surgery was successful."

May glared at him. "Unless you have Peter with you," she said between her clenched teeth, "I want you to go away."

That sounded reasonable enough. Unfortunately, he couldn't leave. He had things he needed to explain. He took one of the available seats and moved it close to the bed to sit. "I'm sure you are aware of everything that is going on," he began. "You read the news recently?"
May inhaled. "I heard the recording," she said. "I'm guessing that is your doing."

Tony nodded. He was not going to lie to her. "We need to be ahead of this," he said. "If we want the public to side—"

"I don't give a damn about what the public thinks!" she half-shouted, half-cried. She depressingly shook her head. "I want Peter home. I want my boy!"

Didn't they both? Guilt wrangled Tony's guts. It was his fault for dragging Peter into this mess. Rogers was right. Peter was a child and deserved no part in their war. Yet, Tony's desperation made him reckless and Peter fell into Ross's target range. All because Tony thought the end justified the means. It did not. Not when he had an aunt sobbing over the loss of her nephew—her son.

"I am doing everything I can to bring him home," he told May. "I swear—I'll bring your nephew home."

He didn't know if May believed him or not. He wanted her to believe him. Trust him that he would keep his word. He understood her hesitancy. After all, it was his fault Peter was gone.

May wiped away the last runaway tears from her face. "Can I speak to him?" she asked. "I... I need to hear his voice."

Tony heavily sighed again. She was not making this any easier. "I'm afraid you can't."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't know where he is."

That got her tensed. "What do you mean you don't know where he is?" she curtly demanded. "I thought you knew where he went! You said... where the HELL is he?!"

May's heart monitor rang faster and louder. A sudden beeping noise resonated around the room and her door burst opened, the nurse rushing to her side. "Mrs. Parker—please take a few breaths for me," he instructed to her, demonstrating on how deep he wanted her breaths to be. May did as requested, mimicking the deep breaths the nurse was doing. The monitor slowed and became a bit steadier. The nurse looked pleased. "Good! Good, Mrs. Parker. Now, you need to stay calm and rest."

May threw an accusing glare to Tony. "Easier said than done," she uttered as she allowed the nurse to tinker with her tubes.

The nurse double-checked her blood pressure and the monitor before issuing an order to sleep. "I'll inform Dr. Raymond of your prognosis," he told her. "Um, Mr. Stark? If you follow me out..."

Tony knew when he was not wanted. He got up from his chair and headed to the door, but was stopped by May's sharp voice. "Bring him home, Tony," she ordered. "Bring Peter home."

Tony paused in the doorway, looking back at May's pleading face. He nodded. "I will."

He departed the medical bay. The nurse suggested he keep his distance from Mrs. Parker. She's going through a stressful time and seeing him would only aggravate her and affect her heart. "I know you only want to do right for her, but I think it would be best to keep your distance," the nurse said. "At least until she fully recovers... even then." The nurse departed, leaving Tony feeling even worse than he already did.
Tony meandered to his small lab to unwind from all that tangled him up into a knotted mess. He tinkered on his Iron Man suit, remembering an earlier promise to Peter that he would help adjust his suit next week. Or, he guess, this week. Didn't matter. It wasn't going to happen anyway.

Tony had considered calling Rogers and asking after Peter. Wanting to know where the kid was and if he was doing all right. He stared at the flip phone Rogers sent months ago. Every now and then he picked the phone up, debating whether to call or not. He wrestled and antagonized over it for days, but ultimately he knew it was best to not reach out. Best to remain ignorant on Peter's location to keep him safe. If Tony and company didn't know where Peter was, then no one could lie when if the government subpoenaed them. Therefore, Peter would be safe. And that was far more important than knowing where he was.

The article was a big hit. Public outcry came in droves. Happy and Pepper forwarded him pictures, memes and videos of the public's reaction to *The New York Times* article about Peter Parker. And the outrage wasn't just from the United States. It expanded across the pond, to Europe, Africa, Middle East and Russia. The whole world was condemning the attack, hosting marches with Peter's face on posters. It was almost ridiculous at how well the article worked in their favor. Take that Ross!

The public's dismay over the article forced the United States government to get their asses in gear. The public's outcry was loud and clear, and the Senate could no longer ignore the public's demand for justice. They ordered an investigation into Secretary Ross's department and actions. Tony was more than happy to assist in that department. He assigned F.R.I.D.A.Y. to acquire all information regarding Ross's dealings with enhanced individuals. Up popped his gamma radiation project he did with Dr. Bruce Banner, the one that resulted in Bruce becoming a giant, green mad-machine known as the Hulk. That would most likely not look to good in the public's eye. Tony released the information on the web and sat back in his seat to wait for results.

It didn't take long. Not long at all. Minutes later, every news outlet posted the information on their social media sites and news anchors were breaking TV programs to update the public on the latest development in the case. Tony smirked as he listened to Secretary Ross's name be dragged in the mud.

Pepper called for a press hearing for him. After all, Tony was the PR for the Avengers and all other enhanced humans. Dressed in his normal suit and tie, he hopped up to the podium. No one provided him cards. He didn't need them. "You are all aware of the situation that occurred in Queens," he began to the horde of newsmen and flashes of photographers. "According to our Secretary of State, Thaddeus Ross, the attack on a high school was for the sake of our country's freedom. That having a team of highly trained soldiers to go into a classroom and start shooting at kids meant keeping our country safe.

"One of our own interns was caught in that crossfire," Tony paused to use his gadget to throw up an old, ID picture Peter once used to get access onto the compound. It was large enough for everyone to see. Tony's tone lost its normal charm and color. "This is Peter Parker. I had the pleasure of meeting Mr. Parker when he interviewed for the position. He's a thoughtful, considerate and, to be frank, one of the brightest kids I ever met. What happened to him and his classmates was a tragedy. A disgusting act by Ross and the military—an act of aggression.

"I do not condone these acts," Tony spoke in a loud and clear voice so no one mistaken him. He turned off the gadget and Peter's face disappeared. Like the real Peter Parker. "I hereby withdraw my support of Secretary Ross and assist in ensuring that justice prevails for Mr. Parker."

He stepped down as soon as the reporters leapt to their feet, throwing questions to his retreating back. Tony had no time to indulge them. Happy escorted him to the car, taking him straight to Pepper. She
was busy discussing with someone on the phone when he arrived. When she saw him, she excused herself from the phone.

“How did it go?” Pepper asked.

Tony shrugged. “Said what was needed to be said,” he responded, heading straight over to the miniature bar. He went for the scotch. “Any word on the Senate Committee? Did they receive the donation?”

By donation, he meant the boxes of evidence he sent that detailed every operation Ross managed.

Pepper nodded. “They were delivered this morning,” she confirmed. “I got word they are calling a senate hearing. Monday morning.”

Tony took a swing of his glass. The cool, burning liquid smoothed down his throat. “Good. Good,” he muttered. “We’re getting somewhere.”

Pepper nodded in agreement. “I spoke a little bit with May Parker.”

Tony froze. “Oh.”

“She’s doing better,” Pepper relayed to him. “Doctor Redmond says the tests are all normal.”

“That’s great. That’s wonderful. Good.”

Pepper again nodded. “She asked me about Peter,” she said. “Wanted to know if I knew anything about where he was or if he was okay.”

Tony put the glass down. “What did you say?”

“What do you think I said, Tony?” Pepper said. “I told her that he was doing well and that he was safe.”

“You shouldn’t have lied to her,” Tony moved away from the bar.

Pepper followed him. “I didn’t lie to her. Peter is alive and safe. That’s all that counts.”

“Try telling her that,” Tony said as he fell on the couch. “She nearly had another heart attack when I told her.”

“That’s because she doesn’t like you… and for good reasons.”

“Fair point, but if it wasn’t for me, that kid could have been killed,” Tony argued. “I mean… you should have seen the outfit he used before I made him his suit. Hardly gave him any protection.”

Pepper raised her eyebrow. “Tony—please—promise me you won’t ever say that to May.”

“Pepper—”

“For the love of God, Tony,” Pepper groaned. “Promise!”

Tony held up his hand. “I promise. I won’t tell her that,” he said, but then sighed. “I’ll play the bad guy. Apparently, I’m really good at it.”

Pepper sighed and lowered herself next to Tony. “You’re not a bad person, Tony. All you ever wanted to do was help,” she said. “Even before you were Iron Man, you wanted to help. Maybe not
in the best of ways, but you adapted and changed.

“You did what you thought was best for Peter. You still are doing what is best for Peter,” Pepper said, brushing back Tony’s hair to make it stand up like it normally did. “May Parker will never like you, Tony. In her mind, you endangered her child. Doesn’t matter if you didn’t give him his powers or told him to become a superhero. To her, you will always be the man who brought danger into their lives. That doesn’t mean you have to be what she thinks. I know you, Tony. Better than most. You will always help. You will do whatever it takes to help the Parkers. I believe in that.”

Pepper was not far off from her analysis. He would do whatever he could to assist in the Parkers. Already, he organized a section of the compound for May Parker to have as a residence since the government seized her apartment. He also provided her a new phone, laptop and other items she needed. He even paid for her medical expense along with a salary. After all, her health problems and the publicity of her nephew made it impossible for her to go back to work. So, Tony set her up in a nice living situation until every wrong Tony made was corrected.

Tony smiled at Pepper. “You’re way too good for me.”

“Oh—I know,” Pepper responded. “Without me, you would be a lost cause a long time ago.”

Tony accented. Without Pepper, he would have been like Howard. A thought that strikingly shook him to his core. Tony gave Pepper a kiss, a thankful one.

Tony’s press conference went well with the media. Positive feedback was recognized and the Senate committee that received the papers began the hearing process. Hearings were scheduled and Tony knew he would be called up to stand as a witness. His lawyers wrote out notes to help him fight off Ross’s accusations. But, Tony didn’t need those notes. He faced a Senate committee before and he knew his own personal history and the Accords well enough to stand his ground.

What Tony wasn’t ready for was Secretary Ross’s apathy and tenacity.

During the second hearing, Secretary Ross confessed to the whole world the reason he attacked Peter Parker. It was during the morning hours in Washington, D.C. when senators bombarded Secretary Ross with questions regarding his employment history and duties.

“I am in charge of the Enhanced Human Unit and one of my duties includes searching and evaluating all enhanced individuals,” Secretary Ross informed the committee. “If we determined that an enhanced individual to be a threat to public safety, we must follow the guidelines of the Accords and act as inscribed.”

Senator Deb Fisher pulled her microphone close. “What reason did you have in sending armed forces into Midtown School of Science and Technology?”

Secretary Ross leaned into his own microphone. His hand steady. “My team and I determined Mr. Parker to be dangerous.”

Senator Fisher arched her eyebrows, quizzically. “Why do you determine Mr. Parker to be dangerous?”

“Because Mr. Peter Benjamin Parker is Spider-Man.”

Chapter End Notes
Tony Stark will have multiple chapters that will focus on his viewpoint.
T'Challa

King T'Challa was not ready for a lot of things.

Losing his father to a vengeful lunatic. Becoming king of Wakanda. Taking the mantle as the Black Panther. Alas, he had no choice. He did what duty required him to do.

And that included being the guardian of an enhanced teenager.

Captain America was explicit in Mr. Peter Parker's safety. He went over the details with T'Challa while Peter settled into his new bedroom. Peter needed to stay out of sight. He could not be seen or even pictured in Wakanda in case it gets to the US government. Peter wasn't allowed to communicate either. No access to the Internet or telephone. Again, anything that would catch the attention of the US government, then Peter was not allowed access. All for Peter's protection.

T'Challa was surprised by the strict rules. "What did this kid do?" he asked, thinking if he made a mistake in granting asylum to the teenager.

Captain America sighed. "Nothing. He did nothing other than being Spider-Man," he answered. "Secretary Ross saw him as a threat and attacked him at school."

T'Challa now understood. He didn't particularly like Secretary Ross. His first assessment of the Secretary was a man obsessed with control. He drafted the Accords as a means to collect and control those with special gifts. T'Challa did not believe in the Accords entirely, but his father insisted that responsibility was necessary. Diplomacy was not his greatest strength, but he had hoped to learn more through his father. But that prospect was taken away from him.

T'Challa inhaled deeply and promised Captain America he would care for Peter. Captain America thanked him. "You are a good man," Captain America said after shaking his hand. "I owe you for so much."

"It is our duty as humans to help another when in need," T'Challa responded. "A lesson my father instilled in me as a young boy."

"Your father was an intelligent, kind man," Captain America complimented, despite his uncomfortableness at the topic. "I'm sorry for his death. I wish I knew him better."

"So do I," King T'Challa responded. "Have no fear, Captain. Mister Parker will be taken care of."

"A bit of warning," Captain America said as they walked toward the royal airport. "All of this has been hard on him. He hasn't quite… recovered from it. Be patient and remember, he's Stark's protégé."

Stark's protégé? That was a surprise. He did not consider Tony Stark to be parental nor a role model to anyone. Not an ideal one at the least. It was hard to picture.

He wished Captain America good luck on his adventures before returning to the palace to become acquainted with his newest charge.

Peter Parker was indeed Tony Stark's protégé. T'Challa no longer questioned the matter.

In the first week, Peter attempted to escape the palace grounds by hacking into the security frame so
that no alerts would sound when he hopped over the walls. When that didn't succeed, he snuck into the communication control room to use the computer to communicate outside Wakanda. He snuck in too many times that it got to the point that Nakia set up another security system to the communication center to keep the teenager out.

Peter reacted in a manner not surprising to all the times he was caught. He tried pleading and bartering to call only one person. An Aunt May. The teenager worried for his relative. Something about heart problems and wanting her to know he was safe. T'Challa was sympathetic to the boy, but he had strict orders from Captain America. No communication can be sent out. If the US government got wind that Peter Parker was living in Wakanda under T'Challa's protection, then all hell would be loose.

The best way to protect the teenager was to keep him cut off from his old world. At least, until the situation settled. T'Challa listened to the news. Apparently, America was not doing too well. The recording of the attack made airwaves. T'Challa heard the terrible screams of kids in terror. He only listened to it once. He didn't need to hear it again.

Tony Stark was busy cutting all ties with Secretary Ross. He denounced Secretary Ross publically and T'Challa got a feeling that Stark was involved in the confidential leak in regards to the Gamma Project that resulted in the creation of the Hulk. Stark never liked Secretary Ross. Then again, Stark never liked authority figures, which surprised T'Challa when Stark supported the Accords. But now, T'Challa wondered.

Clearly, Stark shielded Peter from the Accords madness by blindsiding Secretary Ross in regards to Spider-Man's identity. Stark cared for the teenager and had no plans for young Peter to get pulled into the mess that were the Avengers. Thus, he hid him from Secretary Ross, but not well enough. Secretary Ross found him.

Which reminded T'Challa.

Peter spent the better of his days brooding. He moped around the palace grounds, sleeping late into the mornings and barely engaging with anyone. T'Challa was at a lost to what to do, but his mother Ramonda suggested the boy needed direction. Focus. A distraction from his situation.

"Why don't you help him assimilate into our culture?" Ramonda suggested to her son. "It might help him feel more welcomed."

That gave T'Challa an idea.

He found Peter brooding as usual in the guest bedroom and asked the teenager to join him. Peter obeyed and they walked down the corridor in silence. T'Challa side-glanced at his young charge, measuring him up. How odd that the boy next to him was Spider-Man.

"Thoughts of your home?" T'Challa asked.


"I'm sure they are," T'Challa responded. "If not, you would know."

"Would I?" Peter challenged, before immediately and apologetically backing down. "Sorry, Your Highness."

T'Challa merely lifted his eyebrows. "Yes. You would. Just because you cannot communicate to them doesn't mean you are cut off from them. I'm sure if anything happened to your loved ones, you would be notified."
Peter did not look convinced. "Like I was about the Accords?"

"That is different," T'Challa defended. "The Accords were for Avengers. You are not an Avenger."

"That's not how Ross interpreted it."

"Secretary Ross has his own dictionary," T'Challa responded and stopped at a door. "Here we are."

T'Challa opened the door and revealed the massive training arena. A small gasp escaped from Peter's lips as the two walked further into the training arena. Right away, T'Challa spotted Nakia battling with her famous ring blades. She fought in quick sessions, leaving her opponent baffled where to strike. T'Challa couldn't help the small smile growing on his face as he watched her take down her opponent. He nearly stopped to give her a round of applause when Peter asked him a question.

"What is this place?"

"The Dora Milaje."

Peter flickered his eyes back to T'Challa. "The Dora Milaje?"

"An elite group of fighters. The best of the best in Wakanda."

Peter's eyes widened a little and he took a second glance around the arena. "Cool… um, what are we doing here exactly, Your Highness?"

Before T'Challa could answer, the Dora Milaje's leader approached. She bowed deep, before erecting her spine in a straight line. She was stoic in nature, rarely giving any signs of her emotions or thoughts. As the leader, she led by example as to what it took to be a great warrior. She sported a bald head, cleaned shaved that it was as smooth as china doll.

"My King," she said. "What is the honor of your presence?"

T'Challa clapped a hand on Peter's shoulder. "Okoye," he said to the leader. "I have someone I would like you to meet." He turned to Peter, pushing him forward to Okoye. "This is Peter Parker. My latest ward."

Okoye measured the boy with her eyes, analyzing him. "He doesn't look much like an Avenger."

T'Challa gave her a look. "Peter is not an Avenger. Not yet anyway," he said. "Peter—this is Okoye. Leader of the Dora Milaje."

Peter stuck out his hand to shake hers. When Okoye eyed it skeptically, Peter withdrew and timidly bowed, uncertain how to greet the leader of the Dora Milaje. T'Challa stopped the boy from embarrassing himself even more.

"It's nice to meet you," Peter said and he noticed the rest of the warriors make their approach. "Um… are all the Dora Milaje women?"

"You think women are not capable fighters?" challenged Okoye, the muscles in her face tightening.

Peter swallowed. "Er… no. No, I just—I mean—I thought… women are very capable of doing anything," he rambled on. "My Aunt May—she's tough. I wouldn't go up against her… like ever. And I have this friend, she's not one to ever—"

T'Challa ended Peter's ramblings as the Dora Milaje all snickered at Peter's bumbling speech. "Thank you, Mister Parker," he said and Peter went quiet. He looked to Okoye once more. "I would like you
to train him."

The king ignored Peter's surprised face as Okoye took a long look at the teenager. "He doesn't look much."

"I've seen him fight," T'Challa vouched for Peter, who curled his nose at the insult. "He is decent, but sloppy. Needs refinement."

Okoye nodded, taking another measured look at Peter. "We shall see."

T'Challa thanked Okoye and leaned in to Peter. He whispered. "A word of advice," he told the teenager as the Dora Milaje moved away to give their king privacy with his ward. "Do not hold your punches."

"But… I don't want to hurt them," Peter worried.

T'Challa smothered his laughter for Peter's expense. He didn't want to embarrass the teenager. After all, Peter had no idea what the Dora Milaje was about five minutes ago. He wouldn't know of their… deadly skills.

He reaffirmed his original advice. "You won't."

T'Challa backed away as Okoye directed Peter to Nakia, who was twirling her ring blades. T'Challa watched from afar as Nakia began Peter Parker's training. As expected, Peter was beat soundly. His hesitation to hurt the bodyguards gave him no advantage and he was wiped out several times by Nakia, Ayo and Xoliswa. Okoye evaluated him with a disapproving manner. It was obvious to her that Peter had little to no training in marital arts or fighting.

"He needs a lot of work," Okoye stated after Peter lost his footing and wiped out. "He's too… soft."

"He is a boy," T'Challa reminded Okoye.

"He's a man," Okoye corrected. "A naïve man, but a man nonetheless."

"Will you continue his training?" That was all T'Challa wanted to know.

Okoye nodded. "I'll get him in shape."

T'Challa thanked her and left Peter in their good hands. Perhaps his mother was right. All Peter need was a good distraction from the severity of his situation. Get him assimilated into the culture and he would feel more welcomed. From then on, Peter trained with the Dora Milaje every day, improving his marital arts, weaponry and agility.

Next, T'Challa sought out his sister Shuri. His mechanical-genius sister spent most of her days in her workshop since the murder of their father. She worked day and night on whatever came through that brilliant mind she possessed. As expected, he found her there, reinventing the use of a scanner that would report a person's emotions to the owner. Shuri said it was the closest thing to read a person's mind if she could get it to work.

Her head was deep in the machine as she tinkered it to perfection. She hardly heard T'Challa enter. Or she simply heard, but didn't care.

T'Challa drew closer to the table. "How long have you been working on this?"

"Only a couple days," Shuri answered and lifted her head. Her dark eyes on T'Challa. "Do you need
"No," T'Challa said as he reviewed her invention. "I stopped by to say hello and ask if you have met our new guest."

Shuri paused. "Guest?"

"A Peter Parker."

"Is he some prince or dignitary?" she questioned before her eyes narrowed. "Or one of your CIA friends?"

"He is neither. A boy from New York."

"Long way from home," Shuri commented and she switched tools. "What is he doing here?"

"He's a refugee. Seeking asylum from his own country."

"Another enhanced individual then," Shuri deduced. "How many are going to come here?"

"I am hoping it is the last," T'Challa answered. "I cannot house an entire superhero army. That will raise eyebrows and nuclear rockets."

Shuri cranked a knob on her invention and put the tool down, satisfied over the result. "So... you wish for me to meet him?"

"Yes," T'Challa said. "He's around your age. Mother said it would be good for him to be around people his age."

Shuri huffed, doubting the reasoning. "Mother is always trying to get me out of my workshop," she mumbled. "Fine! I'll speak to him, but I cannot promise to be his friend."

"That is fine," T'Challa shrugged. He doubted they would get along. His sister was headstrong and stubborn. "I'm only asking you to be nice."

As promised, Shuri met Peter Parker. Like with the Dora Milaje, Peter acted like a teenage fool. He kept tripping over his words when he met Shuri, shy and embarrassed for his blundering attempts at talking to her. If T'Challa didn't know any better, he would think Peter had never talked to a girl. Ever.

Shuri snuck a glance at him, a vow that he owed her for this. T'Challa accepted that price, mouthing a 'thank you' to her as he left to perform his royal duties.

The news of Ulysses Klaue's return into the country sent T'Challa to blow a gasket.

This was the man who enslaved his own people, stole vibranium from his country and attempted to assassinate his father years ago. All Klaue received was a branding of the word 'thief' and banished from Wakanda. T'Chaka offered mercy, but T'Challa wished he didn't.

Klaue was a maniacal man. Ruthless to the point he showed no mercy to even young children. If anything, Klaue was not only a threat to Wakanda, but to the world in large as well. He only cared about money. Everyone else be damned!

That was not the worst part of the day. After the raid on Klaue's abandoned camp, T'Challa discovered Klaue was not alone. A man named Erik Killmonger acted as a partner based on the
evidence left behind and eye-witness accounts of the survivors who were taken in as brief slaves by the invaders. They described Killmonger as a native. A man with similar ritualistic tribal markings on his chest and torso of nearby tribes.

It didn't make sense to T'Challa. He's never heard of Killmonger before nor was the name native to Wakanda. Yet, according to the survivors, he sported the ritual tattoos. He asked Nakia to help him investigate this Killmonger. Nakia was honored to assist.

The next two days, they spent all their time researching and locating Killmonger. All the tribes returned with messages of not knowing any individual with that particular name. They were at a stand-still until Nakia requested that T'Challa contacted his CIA friend.

Everett Ross was a busy man, but he answered when T'Challa called. "Killmonger," Everett repeated. "Look—I'm busy over here in the States. We have a situation at hand."

T'Challa knew he was referring to the whole Parker fiasco. He received updates from America on his tablet. The US government called for a congressional hearing on Thaddeus Ross for his role in the attack on Peter Parker. T'Challa imagined that Everett's division was in turmoil.

"I am aware of your problems, but it is not as important as the one I am in," T'Challa argued. "This is a matter of national and, very possibly, global security."

Everett inaudibly grumbled. "What is it that you need?"

A few short hours later, Everett called back with his results. Erik Killmonger was an US immigrant, who resided with his family in Harlem, New York. He lived in New York since he was six years old with his mother and siblings. He went on to study at Massachusetts Institute of Technology and after that, accepted a consulting contractor position.

He had no information that connected Killmonger with Klaue. "I don't know if that helps or not," Everett said. "Keep me posted. I'll send you any information that I find."

T'Challa thanked him for the information, but… there was something off. What was Killmonger's end goal? How did Klaue recruit him? What skill did Killmonger have that Klaue needed? These questions needed answers. He asked Shuri to assist in locating Klaue using her advanced finder technology stationed all over Wakanda.

Shuri got down to business, analyzing all the traffic information pouring on the screen that T'Challa didn't quite understand. But, she grew excited in talking about what was occurring on the screen. "The facial recognition is at hundred percent. It can even locate people with similar genes with a simple snapshot of your face," she babbled on. "I got the idea from Peter to expand it. We built the program together and he fixed the glitch…"

She yammered away and T'Challa let her, drawing in his own thoughts on what to do once he located Killmonger. The machine beeped, pulling him back to reality as Shuri pulled up the results. Warrior Falls. That was the last location that recognized Klaue's face.

T'Challa thanked his sister and set off to the falls, with a small group of soldiers and Nakia and Ayo of the Dora Milaje with him. Shuri's locator was correct. T'Challa spotted Klaue's camp and Klaue directing subordinates in retrieving crates of vibranium.

T'Challa wasted no time. He sent his army upon the camp. Their surprise attack was successful. T'Challa brawled with Klaue and easily overpowered the thief. Klaue was arrested and taken into custody with promises of no leniency. Klaue only laughed hysterically, an overpowered,
rambunctious roar as he was dragged away from the guards to their prison. It unnerved T'Challa to see that man happy, especially when he got caught.

He ordered the camp to be searched and have all the items itemized and stored away. Meanwhile, he went to have a little "chat" with Klaue.

As expected Klaue rambled like a crazy man with threats and promises of retribution by an old enemy. T'Challa asked if it involved Killmonger. That only made Klaue grin madly and laugh loud and proud. He spoke of Killmonger almost like a god. T'Challa got a terribly feeling that the information Everett Ross collected was only a façade over the actual truth of the man.

When asked who Killmonger was, Klaue sneered at T'Challa. "The rightful ruler of Wakanda."

That surprised T'Challa. *He* was the rightful ruler of Wakanda. His family carried the royal blood. No one else could claim that title. Realizing that Klaue would not betray Killmonger, he sent Klaue to the dungeons and contacted Everett Ross to update him.

Everett listened to T'Challa without interrupting. "It is possible that he changed his name," Everett said to T'Challa. "He emigrated from Africa back in the nineties. That was the name they gave to the immigration office. Do you know if there was ever a family that challenged yours? Maybe a few generations back?"

T'Challa did not remember at all. The only person to challenge them was Klaue and that was because he did not like that his father stopped his smuggling services. It was the only conflict severe enough that popped in T'Challa's mind. Nothing else came to him.

Everett decided to fly over to Wakanda. Killmonger was an American, which made it the United States responsibility. He would arrive in a couple of days after he cleaned up the mess he was currently assigned. T'Challa accepted, but it wasn't until he hung up on Everett that he realized of the Peter Parker's fugitive status in the United States. If Everett learned of Peter's whereabouts…

T'Challa groaned at the new problems that seem to never stop popping up ever since he was crowned king.

Nakia made her way to T'Challa later that night. She found something that she believed was a clue to Killmonger's true identity. "Kimoyo Beads," she showed T'Challa the advanced communication technology many Wakandans used. "They were not among Klaue's possession and his prints were not to be found on it either."

"You think they belong to Killmonger?" T'Challa raised.

Nakia nodded. "It is heavily coded," she said. "I cannot break into it to find the owner. Perhaps your sister?"

If anyone could hack through their technology, it would be the person who created it in the first place. T'Challa took the Kimoyo Beads. "I'll ask her."

He went straight to her workshop only to find it dark and empty. She was not there. Strange. She was always in her workshop. He asked his mother, who said that she last saw Shuri heading to her bedroom. T'Challa headed to his sister's bedroom. As he approached he heard noise and figured his sister must be installing a new gadget in her room.

He grabbed the knob and turned. "Shuri? I need your assistance in—"
T'Challa stopped dead in his tracks.

Before him, sat Shuri and Peter Parker. On the bed. Kissing.

T'Challa's abrupt interruption jolted the two apart, both jumping away from one another as they turned to T'Challa in a mixture of surprise, embarrassment and anger.

Shuri broke the silence first, snapping at him, "Do you not know to knock first?"

T'Challa didn't say anything. His ears were ringing. Eyes switching from Shuri to Peter. They were kissing. Shuri and Peter. Kissing.

He hadn't realized that he tightened his grip on the beads nor that he suddenly towered over Peter Parker to the point the boy had backed up against the wall. He didn't recall doing that at all until his sister tugged him away.

"Leave him alone!" Shuri demanded as she tried to get her brother's attention. "He didn't do anything wrong!"

Peter looked scared, pressed up against the wall and eyes round as fear filled him. T'Challa breathed out hot air through his flared nostrils before he commanded, "Get out."

Peter fled the bedroom. T'Challa turned to his sister. Before he could scold her, Shuri ranted. "You doos!" she shouted. "Who do you think you are? Barging into my room and bullying him!"

T'Challa scowled. His anger growing as his sister insulted him. "I am your King and brother," he declared. "I will not have my sister be taken advantaged—"

Shuri yelled over his words. "Taken advantaged? It was a single kiss!"

"He should not be kissing you!"

"Why? Because he's white? Because he's a commoner? An outsider?" Shuri vociferated off the list. "What reason, brother?"

"I don't need a reason," T'Challa maintained. "I don't want you to be near him ever again."

Shuri screwed up her face. "You're not father," she coolly retorted, crossing her arms. "If I wish to see him, then I will. I'm not a little girl! I don't need your permission." She stormed out of her bedroom, slamming the doors shut behind her.

T'Challa fumed. He knew Shuri went off to find Peter. If Spider-Man knew what was best, he would be hiding.

He forgot about the beads, Killmonger and even Klaue. Too distracted over what he accidently witnessed. He stewed over the betrayal. He sheltered Peter, provided him food and clothing and allowed him to join the ranks of the Dora Milaje, and in return, he was stabbed in the back by him. He moved on his baby sister, luring her to…

T'Challa didn't even want to think about it. It only got his heart pulsing in a raging fit. To think that he believed Peter to be a naïve, innocent boy. But, didn't Captain America warn him? Peter was Tony Stark's protégé. He should have expected something like this. Especially from someone who was being mentored by Stark.

Contemplating on whether to kill Peter or simply banish him from Wakanda, his mother confronted
"Shuri came to me earlier today. Sobbing," she began as T'Challa refused to make eye contact with her. "She said that you threatened Mister Parker?"

"I did no such thing."

Ramonda tilted her head knowing. "She told me what happened, T'Challa," she said. "What I want to know is why you are upset."

T'Challa finally raised his eyes. "She's too young."

"She's seventeen."

"He was taking advantage of her. In my house. As my guest."

Ramonda watched him strut out his frustration. "He's also a boy. Far from home. With no one of his age except for Shuri," she reminded him. "You cannot fault him for becoming close with her."

"He dishonored her."

"He did no such thing," Ramonda dismissed. "If you had not reacted so badly, you would have learned that it was not he who initiated the kiss. It was Shuri. She kissed him."

That did not make the situation any better. "He's only going to break her heart."

"So will many more I imagine," Ramonda said. "Shuri is a brilliant, young woman. She'll break hearts and others will break hers. That is part of life. Growing up."

Ramonda stood in front of her son. "You were the same as her once," she admonished T'Challa. "You think I was blind to your infatuation with Nakia when you were both children? Did you see me or your father berate you for such feelings?"

T'Challa exhaled. "No, you did not."

"Then do not berate your sister for such feelings," Ramonda gently chided her grown son. "She's not a little girl anymore. Despite my efforts to keep her from growing up. His mother chuckled at her own joke as she turned away from him to the doors. "Apologize to her, T'Challa. And to Mister Parker. They did not deserve your wrath."

The next morning, T'Challa sought Shuri out and extended his apologies to her. His sister gave him a hard time, throwing insults at him for his obnoxious behavior. In the end, she forgave him.

On better terms, T'Challa could not help but ask. "I did not think you liked Peter," he said to Shuri. "If I remember correctly, you said you would not become his friend."

Shuri shrugged. "His first impression wasn't great," she admitted, "but once I got to know him, the more I found myself enjoying his company. He's a good person, T'Challa."

Which T'Challa kept in mind when he requested Peter's presence in the throne room. Peter entered the large room timidly, uncertain if he was arriving to his death or not. T'Challa gestured for Peter to stand in front of him. Peter inched closer to where T'Challa sat. "Your Highness, if I may speak—"

"You will not," T'Challa interrupted, taking command. Peter went silent. "It has come to my attention that I may have... overreacted yesterday." That surprised Peter, but the news was not
enough to make him relax in his presence. "I apologize for my treatment towards you in regards to my sister. As you can see, I am protective of her."

Peter nodded in agreement. "Yes, Your Highness."

"I don't like seeing her hurt," T'Challa continued, staring down at Peter. "Physically or emotionally."

"Of course! I mean, I wouldn't… I would never hurt Shuri, Your Highness," Peter swore, his cheeks tinting a bit red. He swallowed, casting his gaze away from T'Challa. He breathed out slowly and then mumbled, "She's… she's my only friend here."

As always, his mother was right. Peter Parker grew attached to his sister. His only friend in a strange world away from familiarity and comfort. Upon learning of Shuri's skills and intellect must have drawn the two closer than he expected. Remembering his mother's words, T'Challa pardoned Peter.

But not without a last minute warning. "Mister Parker," T'Challa said as he rose up from his seat. "If you do hurt my sister, I will claw your throat out."

And Peter Parker admirably looked terrified.

Shuri did look into the Kimoyo Beads. She hacked into the system and unencrypted the data with little effort. The discovery of the identity sent her running to her brother at once.

Killmonger was no American terrorist. He was N'Jadaka. The son of the late traitor who helped Klaue enslave their people and rob them of their precious metals. T'Challa remembered them well. N'Jadaka family claimed they were forced to work with Klaue, but T'Chaka doubted them and exiled them from Wakanda.

It made perfect sense. N'Jadaka would have sought Klaue to help him in his quest to get revenge. A sense of payment from what Klaue did to them. With Klaue behind bars at the moment, that left N'Jadaka on his own. It gave T'Challa an upper-hand on the situation. N'Jadaka lost Klaue and a portion of his resources.

Shuri claimed that she could use the the Kimoyo Beads to learn of more identities or allies. And, possibly N'Jadaka's strategy against them. T'Challa approved and Shuri recruited Peter to assist her. They retreated to her workshop. T'Challa clenched at seeing Shuri grab Peter's hand. He reminded himself that it was not his business nor were they off to do anything other than hack into the Kimoyo Beads.

Nakia came over and slipped her hand in his, giving a gentle squeeze. "I think they're cute," she commented on Shuri and Peter.

T'Challa sent a look at Nakia. She only returned with a sly smile. "I think she likes having someone else around who understands her and enjoys the same hobbies," she said. "Have you ever seen her smile this much since your father's passing?"

T'Challa could not say he hadn't. Shuri had changed a bit. She no longer locked herself away in her workshop. She's ventured out more, engaging in talk. Mostly with Peter. Still, an improvement since the unexpected death of their father.

"As long as she's happy," was all T'Challa could say on the matter. He would not discuss further on his sister's love life. "We should heightened the levels of security. If N'Jadaka plans to attack, we must be ready."
Shuri and Peter discovered that N'Jadaka recruited the Jabari Tribe. Its leader, M'Baku, detested T'Challa. Even when they were mere children, M'Baku bullied and mocked him. T'Challa got angry, but his father reined him back, reminding him that not everyone liked everyone else.

And it seemed that M'Baku's hatred went to the next level. T'Challa's best friend, W'Kabi, scouted the area. It appeared that the Jabari Tribe did aligned itself with N'Jadaka. According to W'Kabi's account, it looked like they were preparing for battle.

Another war. What was the world coming to? War after war after war. No peace. Not even when the world was blessed with super powered individuals. T'Challa looked down on his ring. The same ring his father once possessed. A symbol of responsibility. Not only to his family, but to the people and the country. Fighting was not always the answer. He knew that. After witnessing the dismantling of the Avengers, he knew war was no answer. It solved nothing.

His father would suggest diplomacy, something T'Challa didn't prefer. But at this moment, if it meant to sparing bloodshed, he was willing to try it. Out of memory of his father.

His advisors tried to convince T'Challa not to seek resolution. If it was truly N'Jadaka, then no amount of bargaining or peaceful resolution T'Challa could offer would satisfied the man. N'Jadaka was on a war path. And it started with the destruction of T'Challa's family.

T'Challa promised to think it over, but he had to believe there was a way to avoid bloodshed. If not, then he would wear the Black Habit and become the Black Panther.

Nakia worried. While she opposed war, she didn't trust the Jabari Tribe, particularly M'Baku. The Jabari Tribe were known to rowdy and rebellious, but T'Challa had to believe that a diplomatic solution could come from it if they were willing to offer a branch. Was that not what his father wanted?

Later that night, Everett Ross arrived at the royal hanger. He looked worn, downtrodden. The problems at home dragged Everett even when he was miles and miles away. Apparently, the situation took a turn for the worse. Secretary Ross broke protocol and revealed Peter Parker's alias to the world. Now, Everett and team were doing their best to clean up Ross's outbursts.

Everett, however, pushed aside that problem and focused on T'Challa. He asked for an update. T'Challa proceeded to inform Everett with the situation and asked for his advice. Everett agreed that diplomacy must be offered first. If things could be easily fixed between two people rather than hundreds of guns, the better. T'Challa nodded, but he shared his concerns on N'Jadaka. If N'Jadaka truly wanted the destruction of his family, then perhaps diplomacy may not be possible.

"If diplomacy cannot be possible," Everett said. "Then the fight is between two individuals. Both fighting for selfish reasons. And those reasons always begin war."

Everett spoke of a truth T'Challa was too well aware of. His father once said something similar to him when he was a boy. "A ruler must not think of himself first," said T'Chaka long ago. "He must think of himself last."

T'Challa made his decision. He would extend an offering of diplomatic discussion, but he would conceal his Black Panther habit underneath his royal clothes in case the diplomacy abrupt into a skirmish. Better to be prepared than dead.

It was a trap.

The acceptance of diplomacy was a lure to lead T'Challa out of his palace and ambush him. T'Challa
was thankful in packing his Black Panther habit. He quickly warped into the Black Panther and, with Nakia, Everett and W'Kabi at his side, his group succeeded in defeating their enemies, killing a handful of Jabari warriors.

M'Baku wasn't amongst the casualties or even fighters. It was strange. He would have believed either M'Baku or even N'Jadaka would have been present to witness his death. Unless… it was only a mere distraction. A trick to lure him out of the palace. Away from...

His family.

Klaue said N'Jadaka wanted to see the end of the royal family. That included his mother and sister.

T'Challa raced back to the palace, contacting the Dora Milaje to alert them of a possible surprise attack. He was unable to reach any of them. No one answered his calls. Heart pounding like a bass drum, breaking his ribs in pieces as it pulsed out. He only hoped he was not too late. That his mother and sister were safe. That N'Jadaka and M'Baku failed to break into the palace. He had to believe. Needed to hold on hope.

But his hope dissipated. Crashed and burned when he saw smoke coming the roofs of the palace. He was too late. T'Challa burst into the palace, still dressed in his Black Panther habit. He was met immediately by his servants and a few soldiers. They rattled on about an explosion, raid and casualties. T'Challa brushed them aside as he stormed through the palace, going directly to where the smoke arose. Nakia was hot on his heels, ring blades positioned to slice any throat. Everett not too far behind with his gun.

They entered the throne room and found it almost in near shambles. A gigantic chunk of the ceiling was gone, its pieces left in a piled heap in the center. His throne was slashed in half and drapes smoldering. Smoke rippled out through the hole from the little fires left behind from whatever blasted through the roof.

T'Challa glanced madly around, praying to not see a familiar face laying on the floor. To his greatest relief (and bewilderment) he did not see a single face amongst the rubble.

T'Challa turned to one of the palace guards. "You said casualties?"

The soldier led them to a makeshift medical bay in the east wing of the palace. A handful of injured men and women were resting on mattresses, their wounds being tended by doctors and servants. One of the soldiers quietly informed him they moved the dead to another room and away from the injured. They reported only seven died in the attack.

T'Challa criticized himself for his absurdity. To believe they would ever agree to a peaceful resolve was outlandish. Klaue warned him. His advisors warned him as well. But he listened to his heart and the memory of his father. And it was the wrong answer. He was the reason these people got injured or… or dead.

"Brother!"

T'Challa jerked his head to the right to see Shuri running to him. She leapt at him, squeezing him around the chest as she embraced him. "T'Challa! You're all right!"

"Yes, I'm fine," T'Challa said, breaking his hug with Shuri. "Are you okay? Where's mother?"

"Mother is fine," Shuri said and that brought T'Challa's heart to settle into a more comfortable pace. "Her arm is broken, but nothing worse."
And his heart rate picked up again. "What?"

Shuri explained they were blind-sided by an attack. N’Jadaka and his soldiers dressed up as soldiers, pretending to be one of the guards before they revealed their identities. They snatched her first, dragging her to the throne room to kill her. "They wanted you to find me and mother dead upon your throne," Shuri said to a sickened T’Challa.

Before T’Challa could ask what happened next, Shuri continued on. She said N’Jadaka was the there. It was he who planned to commit the execution. He mocked her and their mother over the death of father and T’Challa’s weakness. He told them that T’Challa fell right into their planned trap and was probably dead.

"N’Jadaka would have killed us if it weren't for Peter," Shuri stated.

That was not what T’Challa expected to hear. "Peter?"

"W-Who is Peter?" Everett questioned. He looked to T’Challa for an answer as to why a Caucasian name was being thrown around in an African nation. "Should I know Peter?"

They ignored him.

"Yes, brother," Shuri said, face soured as she did not approve of his skepticism. "He swung in and shot a web right at N’Jadaka—"

"A web?" Everett interrupted, eyes glowing in recognition. "Wait! Who is—"

"He dropped the weapon and I picked it up," Shuri rambled on, drowning out Everett's voice. "I slashed his arm and then stabbed his soldier in the chest—"

Shuri explained the daring rescue and the fight that broke out in the throne room, which left it in its current state. Peter fought off N’Jadaka and his men, stringing them up and punching the lights out of some of the warriors who confronted him. Peter even took on M’Baku, a warrior twice Peter’s size. Shuri happily informed T’Challa and his gang that M’Baku was in their custody.

N’Jadaka realized his defeat. He did not expect another enhanced human to be in the palace. To escape, he set off a bomb as a distraction. To save everyone, Peter threw it up to the windows, but it exploded before it went through the gap. It ripped open the roof and the ceiling collapsed on them.

"How are you not smashed to death?" Nakia wondered and T’Challa remembered the chunks of the ceiling in the center of the throne room.

Shuri smiled. "Oh—Peter saved us all," she answered. "He caught the roof and held it up so that we could all get out."

It was well-known that T’Challa was ever hardly impressed. But, hearing the full story of the attack, T’Challa silently admitted that he was impressed. Peter Parker saved his family from N’Jadaka and defeated M’Baku—one of the boorish fighters in Wakanda.

Everett remained confounded, even bemused. "I'm sorry… Peter? As in… Peter Parker? Spider-Man?" He glanced to everyone around him and when he realized the truth, he turned sour. "You had Parker this entire time!?"

T’Challa was not going to discuss Peter's situation with Everett at the moment. "We have more pressing concerns to consider than a fifteen year old." T’Challa looked to his sister as Everett grumbled incoherently. "Where is mother?"
Shuri led T'Challa to their mother as Nakia and Everett stayed behind to give them privacy. T'Challa overheard Everett asking Nakia about Peter.

T'Challa found his mother sitting in a chair, looking out the window and onto the palace waterfalls. Ramonda looked poised and graceful. Like a Queen, despite her arm in a sling and a bandage over his left eye. She smiled when she saw T'Challa. "I knew they could not kill you," she said, coming up to give a kiss on T'Challa's cheek.

"You are injured," T'Challa said as he examined her injuries up close. "This would not have happened if I only—"

Ramonda stopped him with a raise of her hand. "Do not blame yourself for cruel men's actions," she said. "Do not fault your compassion. You did what was right and they abused that goodness. You are the better man, my son. Do not fall to their line of thinking. It will do you know good."

T'Challa nodded. "I am still sorry I was not here for you or Shuri."

"We are safe and alive," Ramonda assured him. "It could have been worse." She paused to take another fleeting look to the waterfalls. "We owe young Mr. Parker our gratitude. He was very brave."

T'Challa nodded in agreement. Peter Parker did not have to fight. He was not a part of Wakanda, but he did anyway. Peter saved his family. T'Challa would forever be in his debt. "Where is Mr. Parker?"

"He's somewhere. Maybe with the Dora Milaje?" Ramonda replied. "Okoye and the others are interrogating M'Baku."

He thanked his mother, wishing her a speedy recovery as he whisked down to the dungeons. He had an appointment with M'Baku.

T'Challa arrived in the dungeons and immediately spotted Okoye standing in front of a one-way mirror. She side-glanced at the door and when she recognized T'Challa, she bowed. "Your Highness," she said, sounding relieved. "It is good to see you alive and well. We heard news of your own attack."

"As I heard yours," T'Challa returned. He looked through the window. It was M'Baku, strapped down and being interrogated by Ayo. "Has he said anything?"

Okoye shook his head. "Only the normal: "death to the royals" and other one liners that are not appealing."

Expected. "Everett Ross would want to take a turn to interrogate him," T'Challa said to Okoye. "Make sure he isn't too damaged."

A cunning smile blossomed on Okoye's face. "Best your CIA pet hurry then, Your Highness," she advised. "We are not known to restrain ourselves in the face of our enemies."

T'Challa was well-aware. He took another look at Ayo burning the flesh off of M'Baku's arm. The warrior grinded his teeth together as he endured the pain. The man did not wince or cringed. He was tough, refusing to bow to their demands or questions. "I fear war is now inevitable," T'Challa said. "N'Jadaka will not broker peace. If there is no peace, then war is bound."

"And we will be ready," Okoye assured him. "After all, you are the Black Panther. N'Jadaka is no match for you. A coward is what he is. And cowards do not have the strength to fight to the end."
T'Challa parted his lips to speak when the door opened and Everett Ross entered. He strode to where they stood, looking through the window to see M'Baku. "So… that's M'Baku?" Everett commented. "Said anything?"

"Nothing," Okoye responded. "Do you wish to give it the old, American try?"

Everett threw a peeved glance at Okoye's snide comment, but said nothing on it. Everett looked to T'Challa instead. "I would also like a word with you about Parker, Your Highness. We need to have a long conversation."

Peter. T'Challa remembered he needed to find the teenager. "Another time, Agent Ross," T'Challa dismissed Everett. "I would focus on M'Baku to see if he could help find your more dangerous American."

T'Challa turned away, heading back to the door. "Keep me posted on what he says."

He had a teenager to find.

T'Challa found Peter in his room. It appeared even Spider-Man did not come away unscathed. Blotches of blue and purple smudged across his right cheek. An open gash was exposed on his forearm to which Peter tried to cover up with a bandage that would not open. It kept sticking to his fingers and the teenager was growing frustrated.

When he realized it was T'Challa that entered his room, he forgot about the bandage and stood. His knees wobbled a bit, but he stayed steady. T'Challa waved him to sit again and he assisted Peter with the bandage.

Peter told him it was nothing to worry about. He healed quickly enough. Still, T'Challa opened the bandage and covered the wound. "You are very brave," he said to Peter. "I am in your debt for saving my family."

"I did what anyone would do."

They both knew that was not true. Not everyone could hold up a five ton ceiling on their own. But, T'Challa did not correct him. Only appreciated his humility. Perhaps he was nothing like Tony Stark at all like he once feared. He began to see what Stark must had seen in the boy. A better version. A better hero. One not roped up in the bickering or animosity. One didn't fight for the world, but rather the individual. T'Challa finally began to understand Peter.

What he didn't quite understand was the teenager's stressed attitude. Peter kept his gaze downcast and his hands fidgeted nonstop. His breathing was somewhat haggard, abnormal than usual. What was wrong with him?

"You did well," T'Challa comforted the teenager. "A lot of people are alive because of you."

"I know," that was all Peter said.

T'Challa furrowed his eyebrows. "Then why are you acting like everyone has died?"

Peter's hand brushed his hair back. A nervous tick. "It's… it's complicated," he murmured. "That whole fight and… and the ceiling falling," Peter let out a deep breath. "It reminded me of something."

"Something?" T'Challa pressed.
Peter nodded, still refusing to look at T'Challa. "Yeah, um… yeah, it kind of reminded me of when a building fell on me."

A building? An entire building fell on him? He must have shown his astonishment for Peter quickly added, "I'm okay! I mean… I wasn't okay then. Hurt a lot. But, I got out," he said, fingers twisting the dirtied, colored fabrics. "And that's when I realized I wasn't ready to be an Avenger. I wasn't strong enough. I wasn't capable… and today reminded me of it."

T'Challa shook his head. He knew all too well of that lingering doubt. "I am sorry you went through that. Young as you are and to be helpless and in pain, it should not have happened," he sympathized, "However, I do not think you give yourself credit. I believe you are far more of an Avenger than the Avengers themselves. You are a hero. In the mind, heart and strength."

Peter didn't look convinced, but he was humble enough to say thank you. Flustered by the compliment, Peter switched to a different topic. One in regards to Everett Ross's presence. It appeared the teenager was aware of the CIA agent's presence in the palace. T'Challa assured him that Everett would not report anything back to Secretary Ross and that he would quickly settled the situation with the agent. "Do not worry," T'Challa said to Peter. "You will not be expedited back to the United States. Not when you are under my protection."

T'Challa left Peter to give him some rest and went to meet up with Everett to discuss what all they have learned. Expectantly, Everett Ross was not happy when T'Challa explained the reason why Peter lived in the palace. Everett argued that to make their alliance work, then they had to be honest with one another and T'Challa keeping Peter Parker a secret was not solidifying their friendship. T'Challa apologized for not acknowledging Peter's existence in their country, but vehemently declared it was done for the teenager's protection. He had seen the news and heard the recording of the violence that took place in Queens, New York. T'Challa had no plans to send an innocent, young man to Secretary Ross's iron grip. Not if he could help it.

Everett, while disgruntled over the secrecy, didn't demand for Peter's custody. "I am loyal to my country," he insisted to T'Challa, "but I do have a conscious."

Everett promised that he would not say a word to anyone about Peter's location. With that promise secured, T'Challa introduced Everett to Peter the next day. Everett was surprised by how young Peter appeared, despite seeing photographs of him. Everett praised Peter on his heroics, but offered nothing else. After all, Everett didn't arrive in Wakanda for Peter Parker.

That afternoon, T'Challa honored Peter for his bravery. It was a small ceremony. No one else attended except the Dora Milaje and Shuri. T'Challa presented Peter with a vibranium ring with an inscription of a saying that roughly translated, "Throw me to the lions and I will return leading the pride." T'Challa explained to him it was a great honor for a warrior to receive a ring. It meant he was a true warrior. One of both spirit and mind. But this ring in particular, symbolized Peter's acceptance into their country. For all intents and purposes, Peter was one of them—a Wakandan.

It was Nakia who managed to pull out an important tidbit from M'Baku during her round of interrogation. She called on T'Challa, reporting what she learned. The news startled T'Challa. Enough to make him call all his advisors and the rest of the Dora Milaje to a meeting. Even Everett Ross joined in, wishing to be privy as the matter involved N'Jadaka.

Once everyone was present, T'Challa informed everyone the grave news. "It appears that N'Jadaka consumed a heart-shaped herb."

A sudden hush fell over the room as everyone absorbed what that meant. If N'Jadaka absorbed the
heart-shaped herb, then it meant he also possessed the powers of the Black Panther. But how could that be possible? Two Black Panthers are unheard of. Possible? They don't know. No one has ever attempted to make more than one Black Panther.

It was disturbing to learn of this truth. Two Black Panthers would divide the country with civilians confused as to who rightfully rules Wakanda. It forced unrest, confusion and fear amongst the people. Things he did not wish upon his civilians. How many tribes would turn against him? If they believe they could follow a new leader without repercussions from the gods, then there was nothing to convince them otherwise to stop them.

N'Jadaka was clever. He hoped for a civil unrest. To bring Wakanda to the brink of doubt and insanity. In the end, N'Jadaka wanted to destroy the Wakanda that T'Challa and his family created. And that meant setting war onto the country.

The meeting lasted hours, but they all came to the same conclusion. War arrived and T'Challa needed to call in all his allies and army to fight against N'Jadaka and his army. T'Challa gave out commands to prepare for war. Everyone shuffled out to enact the procedures set up if another civil war broke out.

As Everett headed out to update his superiors on what was occurring in Wakanda, T'Challa stopped him. "I need you to do me a favor."

Everett waited to speak until the last of the advisors left the room, leaving T'Challa and Everett alone in the room. "What can I do for you, Your Highness?"

"I need you to get Peter Parker out of the country."

Everett stared for a long minute. "I'm sorry… you want me to get Peter Parker out of the country?" he repeated, "I thought you didn't want him to leave at all?"

"Things have changed," T'Challa said. "War is not for children."

"What about the other children? Will they be smuggled out as well?"

"Of course," T'Challa simply answered. "We have protocols that will have children evacuated if war comes to the city."

"But, I gave my word to keep Peter safe," T'Challa carried on. "I fear that since Peter stopped N'Jadaka's attack, N'Jadaka will seek retribution against him. Peter will be a target. I cannot have him killed."

Everett released a stream of air. "I-I don't know exactly what you want me to do," he said. "Do you want me to send him to America or…"

"No," T'Challa said. "I will make contact with a trusted ally to make new arrangements for Peter."

"You mean Captain America or Tony Stark?"

T'Challa did not confirm or deny Everett's guesses. "You will have to smuggle him out of the country. Keep him somewhere safe until my contact connects with you."

Everett looked exasperated. "I'm a CIA agent. Not a babysitter."

He needed Everett's assistance. He could not send any of the Wakandans out of the country with Peter. Not with war looming overhead. Everett was American. He knew Peter and his situation. He
was the only person equipped to handle Peter. "Think of him as an asset," T'Challa offered. "Someone who needs to be looked after and protected."

Everett frowned, not enjoying the prospect that he may be in charge of handling a teenager. "This is not part of my job description," he reminded T'Challa. He inhaled deeply. "Okay. All right. Fine. I'll help the boy. But—only for a week! If I keep postponing, my superiors will become suspicious."

T'Challa clapped Everett on the shoulder in gratitude. "You are a good friend," he said. "I am honored to work with you."

Everett rolled his eyes exasperatedly. "Let's not make it into a habit of human trafficking, okay?"

A joke. Who knew a serious CIA agent like Everett could make a joke. T'Challa promised and then went into discussed details with Everett in regards to Peter's departure.

T'Challa met Peter one last time as they headed off to bed. He told Peter that the teenager was a good person and that world could use a few more good men. "Wherever you with your life," T'Challa said. "I hope you remember your lessons here and, most importantly, that you keep that good heart of yours."

Peter promised he would. His Uncle Ben and Aunt May raised him to be responsible. "With great power, comes great responsibility," Peter said to T'Challa before he wished the king good-night.

T'Challa wished good-night to Peter in return. Another form of goodbye for he would not see Peter Parker anymore after tonight. Starting tomorrow, Wakanda was at war and Peter would be far away from it all.
Everett Ross

At the stroke of midnight—or sometime around then—Everett Ross followed through his promise. He barged into Peter’s bedroom unannounced, but the boy was surprisingly already awake and sitting up in his bed. He looked confused at the abrupt invasion, hair sticking up in different places as he watched Everett approached him.

“What’s going on?” Peter Parker asked in a tired voice.

Everett roused the boy out of bed. “Grab a coat and shoes.”

“What’s going on?” Peter repeated as Everett threw a coat at him. “What’s happening? Is there another attack?”

“Kid, just do as I say.”

Peter didn’t move. “Does T’Challa know about this?”

Did he have to question everything? “Get your shoes on,” was all Everett decided to say to Peter. But Peter held his ground. “I’m not going anywhere—”

“His Royal Highness knows what is happening here,” came Everett’s snark reply, reconsidering tranquilizing the boy. “Now—get moving!”

Peter fumbled a bit as he hopped his shoes on. Dead in the night, moving through the elegant corridors of the palace, they arrived at the royal hanger where soldiers were stationed. Everett watched Peter look on hopefully to the soldiers as if they would stop Everett from taking him away. They didn’t budge a single muscle. They let them pass and board the plane waiting for them.

Everett instructed Peter to strap himself in. Peter, sitting in one of the seats, looked wildly around. “Where are we going? Where are you taking me?” he demanded, still in his sleep clothes and slippers.

“Somewhere.”

“Am I going home?” Peter looked on, hopeful.

“No, you are not.” Everett went to the cockpit to set in the coordinates. He already figured out the best place for them. The doors closed and locked, trapping them inside. Peter stiffened, gripping the armrests as he stared out the window toward the palace.

The boy’s face fell. “Oh,” he looked around as the plane began to rumble. “Can I talk to T’Challa? Or Shuri?”

“Another time,” Everett said as the plane lurched forward, the wheels spinning as the plane went down the stretch of runway. “Seat belt buckled?”

The plane rose up and took off, leaving Wakanda behind.

The hotel wasn’t anything to rave. It contained two twin beds, a television set, a few lamps and a private bathroom. They had no need for anything else at the moment. Everett offered Peter to pick which lumpy mattress he preferred. Peter sunk into the nearest one.
With not much to do, Everett laid on his own bed to read documents. Peter didn’t move, looking straight at Everett that it unnerved the agent.

“Please stop staring.”

Peter blinked, cheeks flushed at being bluntly obvious. “Sorry, it’s just… you work for the government, right?”

Everett lowered his papers. “Yes.”

“Like with Secretary Ross, right?”

“Yes.”

“Aren’t you supposed to like, um, turn me in or…”

“Do you want me to?”

Peter backtracked. “No! I mean… no. I don’t want to go through that again. I’m just curious as to why you are, um, helping me. I mean, your job is to capture me, right? People like me. Enhanced and whatnot.”

Oh boy. Did the kid talk this much per minute? “Look—my job is to keep people safe. To keep enhanced people--like yourself and others--in check,” Everett explained. “I’m not a collector. I don’t collect superheroes to lock them away.”

Peter paused uncomfortably. “Was… was that what Secretary Ross wanted?”

Everett ran a hand down his face. “I don’t know. I’m not… privy to whatever that man thinks,” he said. “All I know is that it’s better you’re not there.”

They left it like that. Everett went back to his papers and Peter remained silent, staring off with only his mind to occupy his time. After a good few minutes of utter silence, Peter asked if he could turn on the television.

“Do you know German?” Everett questioned.

“Er… no,” Peter said. “But I’m sure they have some English channels. Or something.”

Everett didn’t care. He allowed Peter to turn on the television. Peter flipped through the channels until the screen filled out a news station. An anchorwoman sat behind the desk, giving updates on… oh shit.

“Today, Tony Stark appeared in person at the Senate Committee to give testimony over Secretary Ross’s mishandling of the Enhanced Individual Unit,” the anchorwoman spoke as her words were translated to German underneath. “In his testimony, he condemned Secretary Ross’s power overreach, claiming that while the Avengers are being checked, Secretary Ross is not and self-appointed himself with absolute power over the Avengers. Take a look.”

The screen changed to a video of the Senate hearings with Tony Stark sitting right in the center. Like always. “Secretary Ross treats the Avengers as his own personal army for his own agenda. Anyone who is not willing to go along with it are labeled as threats and locked away without any of their constitutional rights. In the case with Peter Parker, Secretary Ross automatically labeled him as dangerous and a threat without a proper evaluation done. Without proper authorization and/or notification, he sent a S.W.A.T. team to a school and attacked not only Mr. Parker but also his
classmates and teacher."

The screen flashed back to the anchorwoman. “Tony Stark’s hearing will continue the next day in Washington. Many senators already shared their thoughts on the situation. Some praising Secretary Ross’s hardline on enhanced individuals and others condemning him.”

Senator Erika Harding appeared on the screen, stationed outside her office with microphones shoved in her face. “I understand the need for the Sokovia Accords and the Enhanced Individual Unit to keep heroes in check, but I am thoroughly disgusted on the means Secretary Ross had used against a teenage boy. Despite the fact Mr. Parker is Spider-Man, this is a case of an unprovoked attack against not only him but the other students there. So many things could have gone wrong.”

The station switched to a text format. A big picture of former Senator Paul Ryan took the screen as his statement was shown next to it. “[Secretary] Ross did the hard and admirable job that is needed. The Avengers, while they might have good intentions, are often the cause of many tragedies that have occurred since 2008. They may think they are doing the right thing, but we need the government to restrain them or else more tragedies could follow. I don’t necessary like the idea of children getting caught up in this madness, but Mr. Parker is an enhanced individual and, like it or not, he’s dangerous.”

Peter’s face creviced into severe lines of disgust. The news continued on the discussion of the Senate hearings before it switched onto sports, relaying the rivalry games coming up on Thursday. When it got to that point, Peter turned the television off. Everett watched him closely. The muscles in the boy’s face were tensed and lips formed a deep pout. He sat a little longer on the bed and Everett worried the boy may lash out. T’Challa did warn him that Peter could sometimes be… reckless.

But, Peter simply got off the bed and headed to the bathroom. Not a word passed. He closed the door. Everett heard the shower turn on. He sighed, falling back against the headboard. The stress of his job reaching up and throttling his heart. Half hour later, Peter came out, wet hair sticking to his scalp and forehead. He had no other clothes than the pajamas he wore. He plopped on his bed and pulled the covers over him. Everett couldn’t tell if the boy was asleep or not. He pondered if he should address what the boy saw on television. But, if the boy wanted to talk, he would. He didn’t, so Everett decided to let the boy rest.

"I'm not a monster."

It was near noon when they both rose from their beds to get a bite of food. Everett ordered in. Too concerned that leaving the hotel would give away Peter’s location. They sat on their respective beds, holding the plastic dishes in their hands as they ate. Peter ate little at the beginning. Mind besieged with what happened last night over the television, Peter barely even register what was happening around him. Too melancholy to even eat or speak.

So, when Peter made that remark, Everett knew it was time for the discussion. He looked up from his plastic plate. "I never said you were."

"Your department thinks so," Peter claimed, "as do others."

"I don't think you're a monster."

"But you consider me dangerous."

Everett stopped eating and lowered his fork. He looked straight at the boy and decided he was not going to lie. "Yes. I do," he confirmed, but added after Peter started, "I think a lot of people are
dangerous. It's my job to figure out who is the higher threat."

"And you think I'm high on that list?"

"You? No. Not even close," Everett shook his head. "Based off my observation, you're no more a threat than a little girl with a water gun."

Peter scrunched up his nose, eyes peering straight at Everett like he was somewhat offended by the comparison. "Thanks... I guess," he took another bite of his meal. "Just to be clear though, I am more threatening than a water gun."

"If you say so."

Peter stirred his rice around a bit with his fork. "So, um... did you know about the, um... attack? At my school? Were you aware—"

Everett shook his head. "No. I didn't know and when I did, I flew straight there."

Peter's eyes widened. Food discarded. "You were there?"

"At the end," Everett cleared up. "I was sent in with a fellow agent to question witnesses. People who may know you." He paused, recollecting his time at Midtown. "I interviewed a friend of yours. A, um, Ned—"

"Ned Leeds?" Peter went ecstatic. He shoved his food away, sliding straight up to the edge of the bed. "You talked to him? Was he all right? I mean... did he look okay? Was he hurt? Who else did you talk to? Was MJ—"

Everett waved the sputtering kid down. "Hold on, all right? Just... sweet Jesus, do you always talk that fast?" he questioned and Peter zipped his mouth to listen. "Yes, I talked to Mr. Leeds. He looked fine. Scared. Worried. Kept clutching his backpack as if we were going to steal it from him. But, overall, he looked well."

Peter let out a small release of air, relieved at hearing the good report. He sunk further back. A little smile brightening those normally dimmed eyes.

Everett picked up his fork again, his heart unintentionally warming at the sight of Peter's happiness. "You have a good friend there, Mr. Parker," he commented, taking a bite. "Refused to give you up, despite my partner's best attempt."

Peter's smile widened, perking up a bit. "Yeah... he is," he said, shifting his weight on the bed. "So, um, do you know how long we'll be staying here? When do I get to go back?"

"Back where?"

"Home."

Everett rolled in his mouth, lips disappearing as he thought. "I don't know. Could be a month. Or a year," he said. "Depends how this whole debacle turns out."

The happiness in Peter zapped out. His jaw slackened, gaping open as he stared incredulously at Everett. "A year?" he uttered. "I can't wait an entire year! What about Aunt May? School?"

"Sorry, kid," Everett said, indifferent. "I'm sure your aunt understands. Better that you are safe and free than imprisoned."
Peter shook his head before dropping it in his hands. Fingers curled over the brown strands. "I can't believe this. I just... I want to go home!"

"I know," Everett said, worried that the boy would throw a tantrum. Not that he expected teenagers to throw toddler like tantrums, but some form of shouting and denial, followed with running out the door. He pushed his food aside, ready in case he needed to spring into action and stop Peter from doing something regrettable. "I wish I could take you home, so I can get back to my job. But, things aren't always the way we wanted."

Peter lifted his head, eyes sore. "Can I at least call my aunt? Tell her I'm okay?"

Everett sighed, shaking his head. "I can't let you call her. The government most likely has her line tapped."

"What about Tony? Can I call him?"

Everett shook his head again. "Calling him would only get him in more trouble than he already is in," he said. "He's charged with aiding a fugitive and breaking the Accords. You saw on the television. He's at D.C. to defend not only you, but himself."

"Yeah, but I thought—"

"Yeah, no," Everett interjected. "It's safe to not call anyone."

Peter slouched and returned to his gloomy demeanor as his eyes roamed around their tiny rental room. "This sucks."

Everett agreed full-heartedly. "Yes, it does," he said, picking up his meal again. "Finish lunch. I'm told you are hungry often and I don't want you complaining about being hungry in the next few hours."

Peter took his meal again, but he hardly ate it. He nibbled here and there, but no big bites. A side-effect to the depression settling into the boy. Everett did feel sorry for the kid. He was a good person, caught in a world of ambitious men who want nothing, but expose and control him. He was alone with no family or friends. His security came in the form of strangers in different countries. No one would feel happy about that predicament.

Luckily, Everett only had to handle the kid for a week. They could hunker down in the hotel for a week and then pass the kid off to his next guardian. One week. That's all. Everett could do this.

A week came and went in a flash and still, no one called to update Everett on the Parker situation. He received no word from T'Challa. He tried calling, but got no response. It didn't look promising. Everett decided to move. A week in one place was too long by fugitive standards. People would soon question as to why they never leave the hotel room. And, maybe a curious hotel worker would recognize Peter and alert authorities. Everett couldn't deal with that drama. Not when it was his responsibility to keep Peter safe.

They loaded up the rental car and ducked out of the hotel, driving north toward a new destination. Everett insisted Peter wore a hat and sunglasses to keep his identity secured from any curious glances by other drivers or passengers.

It was into the fifth hour that Everett decided to scratch the itch that bothered his conscious. Ever since he studied up on Peter Parker's profile, he became intrigued by the development of Peter's powers and its origination.
"I hope you don't mind me asking, but..." Everett began as Peter looked away from the window to him, "how did you get your powers?"

Peter scrunched his face, suspicious as he leaned away from Everett. "What do you mean?"

"Well, I mean, were you always Spider-Man?" Everett clarified for the boy. "Like was it genetic? Or were you experimented on?"

"I wasn't born like this," Peter answered, gesturing to himself. "I was a normal teenager."

Everett's heart clutched. If not born then... "So, you were experimented on?"

Peter shook his head. "No, I'm not... it wasn't like Captain America or any of that."

That didn't relieve Everett's conscious. "Okay, so you weren't experimented on nor were you born with these powers," he listed off, perplexed at what he was missing. "What does that even mean? How did you get them? Magically?"

"No, I just... I don't know. I don't remember much," Peter confessed. "I was just sick one day and then the next morning—I had them."

Everett thought it over, befuddled. "A 24-hour bug gave you powers?"

"Not a bug. A spider."

"Why a spider?" He was curious on why Peter picked a spider as his symbol. From what he told him, his powers could have come from anything.

"Because I got bit by a spider," Peter explained, his sunglasses sliding a bit down his nose. "Got sick and then... Pow! Super strength. Senses all haywire."

Everett now understood. "Your powers came from a spider bite," he deduced, but it still didn't make sense. "Where? I mean... do you remember the spider?"

Peter nodded. "Yeah. It was blue and red."

Everett thought for a moment. He did not recall any blue and red spider species in his research. "Where were you bitten? Park? Forest? In your apartment?"

"Oh, I was on a school field trip," Peter answered, looking back to his window to watch cars pass. "Just touring with my classmates when I felt this prick on the back of my neck. I swatted and realized it was a spider. I killed it, but... yeah. I got bitten on a class trip."

"And where was the field trip?"

"At Oscorp Towers," Peter said, clearly the incident was memorable for him. "They gave us a quick tour on some of their projects. Nothing dangerous. Our school was very specific with the parents about that. My aunt and uncle were worried about me going there. But I convinced them to let me go." Peter stopped for a brief second, lamenting. "Sometimes I wish I didn't."

Everett mentally recorded everything Peter told him. He tucked it away in the corner of his mind to keep focus on Peter. "Being powerful is difficult," Everett said. "People rely on you to make the tough decisions. The right decisions. It's very stressful. Not everyone can handle it. However, I think you are doing an admirable job."

Peter chuckled just short of a snort. His eyes glistened under the light. "With great power, comes
great responsibility."

"Yes. Most certainly," Everett agreed to whatever quote Peter uttered. Was is Buddha? Perhaps Aristotle. The kid was smart enough to know those philosophers. "We all have our responsibilities. They take their toll, but if we don't do it, who will? Right?"

Peter nodded. "Right."

Everett diverted the conversation to something more enjoyable for Peter. They talked about Star Wars, listing off the best Jedi and Sith in the universe (Everett told Peter to stay in canon when the boy started listing off ridiculous names). They grabbed a quick bite to eat at some casual pub with Peter ordering two meals as his hyper-metabolism demanded it. They watched a bit of television at their hostel and then Peter fell asleep, giving Everett the privacy he needed. He pulled out his phone and dialed.

Sharon Carter.

"Sharon? It's me," he said into the phone.

"Everett? Where have you been? Ross keeps pesterus us as to why you haven't return any calls. What's going on? I thought the trip to Wakanda was supposed to be short?"

He wished. "Something unexpected happened. I'm following a trail," he told her. "Something that has connections to all of this."

"What are you talking about? Is everything okay in Wakanda?"

"I'm not in Wakanda. I'm... look—I can't tell you where I am. Not yet," he said, voice hushed as he glanced over to Peter's sleeping form. "King T'Challa gave me an important task. Something that connects to everything that we are doing."

"Everett, if you can't tell me, then don't. Best I don't know even a little. In case Secretary Ross comes back demanding answers. He's gone completely mad! Yelling at everyone to find something on this Parker kid. Anyway, don't tell me. I got enough secrets to handle at the moment."

"I know and I won't tell you everything, but... I need your help."

"In what?"

"I need you to look into Oscorp."

"Oscorp?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"They may be involved in some unethical experimentation."

"Like Steve's?"

"No, more like... arachnids."

Sharon paused for a moment. Everett heard a door close in the background. Are you talking about Spider-man?
"I'm talking to you about a lead that involves in unethical and unlawful experimentation."

So... Spider-man. What's going on? Is he there? With you?

"No! No," Everett rushed to say as he nervously glanced to the boy. "I found evidence that points to Oscorp that I wish to investigate. I would do it, but... I'm following a trail over here."

Yeah, I can do a bit of digging.

"And I know this goes without saying, but--"

This conversation never took place. I got it. No worries. Secret is safe with me.

"I knew I could trust you. If any asks, just say it's a general routine check-up that no one else is trying to recreate the Captain America serum."

I know the drill. Good luck out there. Whatever it is you are doing.

"You too."

He hung up and pocketed his phone. If Peter told him the truth, then Norman Osborn was in serious violation with not only government policies, but also with ethics.

The next morning, Everett didn't say a word to Peter about his investigation nor did he ever bring up Peter's origins again. They got breakfast and went shopping to get Peter new clothes and better shoes. Peter was happy to have new, modern clothes. He purchases a lot of long-sleeves despite that the weather was warming up now that spring arrived. Yet, Everett didn't question him. The kid was happy. He even made a few science puns or jokes that blew over Everett's head. As long as the kid wasn't angry or crying, that was fine with Everett.

"What about my—"

"Forget it," Everett barked and he jabbed a finger to their rental car. "Get in the car. Now!"

Peter took the front seat and as normal, put on his hat and sunglasses to cover his face. Not that it would do any good now. Not when he exposed his presence to a park full of people. Everett pull out of their hostel so fast that small stones broke away from the asphalt. He hit the gas and sped out, driving down the winding roads of France.

Peter gripped the arm rest. "Can you slow down a bit?"

Everett realized he was exceeding the speed limit by at least thirty miles, but his frustration clouded him. "What were you thinking?"

"I was thinking about saving a girl from being run over by a car," Peter bit in return. "I don't even know why you are so angry."

"Oh. Really? You don't know?" Everett grunted as he turned down another road. "You used your powers in public! Why are you even wearing these... what are those?"

"Web shooters."

"What the hell are you wearing those for?" Everett yelled, a strong pulse running across his mind. "What have I told you? Huh? What have I said to you?"
Peter slouched in his seat, arms crossed. "To stay on the down low. Don't let anyone see your face or
cross that you are Spider-man."

"Exactly!" Everett shouted, hitting the steering wheel. "And these... web shooters... well, they aren't
helping that's for damn sure."

Peter glared in defiance. "You wanted me to let that girl die?"

"No—"

"Because that is what exactly would have happened if I didn't save her!" Peter retaliated, cheeks a
crimson color as blood rushed to his face. "You can't ask me to stop saving people. I can't do that! I...
I can't. So, stop yelling at me for doing the right thing!"

Everett's hands curled tighter on the steering wheel. This kid was driving him insane! But... the kid
had a point. If he didn't have his web shooters, the girl would have been hit by the car. A mother
would be weeping over her mangled child's body. A father would be numb from the pain of loss.
And an innocent child would never live again.

He let out a steady steam of air that released the coiling tension from his heart. "Look—I'm not mad
that you saved the girl's life," he said to Peter, tone softening. "It was the right thing to do. I'm only
upset because of the exposure. My job is to keep you safe. Keep you hidden from the very
government I work for. And you carrying around your signature weapons and performing tricks... it
isn't making the job easy."

Peter looked disgusted as his glare narrowed. "That's your concern? Your job? Wow! Way to have
your priorities straight," he retorted. "I don't care about being exposed or figured out! I had the
chance to save that little girl and I did. To hell with my own safety! I don't care! Okay? I don't care!
I'll save everyone if I have to at the cost of my own freedom!"

Everett turned the car off the road and slammed the brakes. Both seat belts dug into their shoulder
blades, keeping their bodies from smacking into the dashboard. "You know, for a smart, good-
hearted kid like yourself, you are incredibly dense," Everett said to which Peter wanted to reply,
but he silenced him. "No, shut up. I'm talking. Do you have any idea what's going around you? I
know you think you do. Let me enlightened you—you don't. You only see it from your
perspective. Do you know what everyone else is doing? For you? To keep you safe? Mr. Stark is
working nonstop, fighting against the very US government to bring you home. T'Challa risked his
own country's relationship with the US and UN to shelter and protect you. I am risking my own job
and neck in hiding you from my own employers!

"You may think the consequences belong to only you, but you're wrong," Everett stormed on. "We
are all risking everything to keep you safe. And if you go ahead with this attitude, then you fucked
us. Okay? Do you get that? Everything we have done for you would be pointless and then we get
the worse end of the deal."

Peter appeared smaller in the seat. He looked down, not once looking up at Everett. There was a
tight scowl, but it didn't reach the boy's eyes from what Everett could see. Everett leaned back in his
seat, taking a few breaths to calm his rapid heartbeat. No one said a word for a moment. Perhaps
longer than a moment. In either case, Peter and Everett simply sat in their seats and said nothing.

It wasn't until Peter broke that peace with his own speech. "I understand," he began, still not looking
at Everett in the eyes. "And I don't mean to be ungrateful for all that you, King T'Challa or Tony did
for me. Or even Captain America. I just... I'm tired of running. I want to see my family and my
friends. I want to go back to my old life."
Everett sighed heavily, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Kid, you can't ever go back to your old life."

"I know, I know," Peter resigned, brushing his hair back with the cap. "I wish I could and, maybe, that's why I'm mad. I don't get to go home. I don't get to see or even speak to Aunt May or Ned. I'm alone. And I hate being alone. It reminds me too much of... never mind. The point is... I'm sorry for exposing us. I don't want to get you into trouble. But, I can't not help someone who needs it. That's not me. I don't think I can ever be that."

Everett understood that. After the quiet reflection, he realized he was harsh on the kid. Peter did the right thing in saving the girl's life. He made the hard decision and Everett couldn't even disagree with his action. If the roles were switched, he would have done the same thing.

"I'm not asking you to change," Everett said. "All I am asking is that you consider the consequences for everyone and not yourself. If someone got a good enough video of you rescuing that girl, then we will be chased by authorities forever. And if you get caught... then there is nothing I can do to help you. I would do what I can, but I don't know how much I can help you if I am put in the cell next to you. So... just think it through the next time you decide to wear your web shooters or whatever. Got it?"

Peter fervently nodded. "I promise," he said. "I'll be careful next time."

"Good," Everett said, satisfied. "Okay... we should probably get back on the road before someone calls in law enforcement to investigate us."

He put the car back in drive and pulled onto the road again. He didn't go over the speed limit. Kept the average limit as they drove through the country roads to remove any possible surveillance that may have been captured. They decided that staying two countries away from France would be the safest bet and Everett had Peter map out their new destination. Soon, another day would come and Everett could only hope that not a single video captured Peter's daring rescue.

If not, then he hoped their new hiding spot would give them the security necessary to hide out.

"Now—put your right foot out."

Peter did as instructed, digging his shoes into the ground. Everett took another look at his position. The boy needed new shoes already. The ones he wore now are in tatters from the constant running. "Okay, now lift the weapon."

Peter raised the gun. About twenty-five yards away, a single can sat atop of a pile of rocks. The target.

Peter took a deep breath, squinting in his attempt to aim. Everett shook his head. "No, no, stop that," he said to Peter. "Don't squint. This isn't Hollywood. Keep your eyes open. Now, move your finger outside the guard. No, that's not the guard. Here—" Everett positioned Peter's finger on the weapon. "Keep it straight and flat. Use your other hand to steady it."

Peter took his other hand and held it underneath the hand gripping the handle of the gun. "Like this?"

Everett examined it. "Move your index finger underneath the trigger. Yeah, like that. Good. Very good," he complimented as Peter adjusted his hand. "Keep it away from the slide or you'll get bitten."

Peter nodded his understanding. "Yeah, I've seen films."
Everett rolled his eyes. "Right. Now, keep your feet shoulder-width... yep. Just like that. Elbow straight. No, not both. This one," Everett adjusted Peter's non-dominant arm to an obtuse angle. "There. Like that. Lean in a bit more. No, just this leg. Lean. Find a balance. Otherwise, you will fall on your back."

Peter steadied himself. "Okay. I'm good."

Everett double-checked. Peter looked all right. "Okay, now... pull the trigger."

"With what finger?"

Everett tapped the finger and then stepped far back. Peter stood for a few seconds before firing it. The gun jerked in the boy's hand the moment it went off. Peter stood his ground. He didn't stumble or fall backwards. But, he missed his target.

Peter's shoulders sagged in defeat. "I missed! How did I miss?"

Everett laughed. "What you think just because you were in position you would hit it?" he teased. "No... you have to aim too."

"You told me not to squint!"

"Yeah. Don't squint, but you still need to aim."

Peter huffed and got back into position. "Am I doing it right?"

"Fix your leg. And keep that index finger underneath the trigger." Everett checked over. "You're good to go. Aim this time."

Peter took a little longer than last time to fire. The bullet cracked the air as it released from the barrel. Everett looked straight at the target and watched as one of the stones rocked and tumble, knocking the entire pillar down. Peter missed again, but at least he was closer than last time.

"Better," Everett said coming up to stand next to Peter. Fortunately, the boy knew to keep the gun pointed down at an angle away from them when not in use. He took the gun from Peter and put the safety on. "Build it back up."

Peter raced across the practice field and rebuilt the tower of rocks. He put the can right on top. "You know," he said as he returned. "My uncle was a Marine."

"Yeah?" Everett was well-aware of Ben Parker's military background.

Peter nodded his confirmation. "Yeah. He didn't speak much about his time in the military," Peter took the gun back from Everett. "I don't think he liked talking about it. You know, the killings and all."

"Any sane man wouldn't," Everett said. "I don't enjoy killing, but if it means keeping myself and others safe, then I will shoot to kill."

Peter took a breath. "I don't think I can," he said. "And I think that's why Uncle Ben never wanted to teach me how to shoot."

Everett side-eyed him. "You don't want to learn?"

Peter shook his head. "No—I want to learn. I was just saying why my Uncle Ben never taught me. I don't think he liked the idea of me learning how to kill."
"Hopefully, you'll never have to," Everett said, stepping out of danger. "Try again."

After Peter hit the target three times and night took the skies, they returned to the rented cottage they were hiding in for the week. Peter called the bathroom first, meaning he was going to take up all the hot water. As Peter showered, Everett looked through the cabinets to see what groceries they had left over to cook up a decent meal. As he decided on spaghetti again, his phone rang.

His phone hadn't rang in ages. Who would be calling him?

Everett answered his phone. "Everett Ross speaking."

Good to hear from you friend.

"T'Challa?" Everett shocked upon hearing his friend's voice after so many weeks of silence. Then he remembered that T'Challa was a king. "Sorry, Your Highness, you... surprised me. Is everything all right?"

Yes. The war in Wakanda is over.

"It's over? Is everyone... I mean, are you--"

My mother is gone. She sacrificed her life to save mine.

A beat. "I'm sorry, T'Challa."

I am too. My mother was strong. A true warrior.

"She was brave," Everett agreed, remembering T'Challa's mother as a strong and independent woman.

It will take time for everything to heal. Our country suffered dearly. But we are now stronger than ever. I have faith in my people.

As did Everett. While some of their culture was bizarre to him, he found that they were far stronger and more advanced than even the western world. He had no doubt Wakanda would recover. Especially under T'Challa's leadership. "And they have faith in you," Everett responded and he glanced to the closed bathroom door. He heard a song whistling behind the door. "So, um, we'll grab the next flight into Wakanda. Or if that isn't safe, we could drive, but it may take a while."

I'm sorry Agent Ross. You cannot come back.

"I'm sorry?"

My country is in recovery. It needs my undivided attention.

"What about Peter?" Everett whispered, anxious. "It's been nearly a month! I can't keep looking after him. My superiors are already suspicious as to why I'm not back yet."

Arrangements have been made for the boy.

Everett's eyebrows furrowed. "What type of arrangements?"

Bring Peter to Aéroport de Lausanne-Blécherette in twenty-four hours.

Twenty-four hours? Everett checked his watch. Would they even have time to make it? "Who are we meeting there?"
No one. The pilot only. Drop Peter off there.

"Where is he going?"

Best you don't know.

Everett rubbed his forehead with his forefinger and thumb. "I understand, but I can't... I can't leave him with a stranger."

T'Challa chuckled. You were a stranger at one point.

True. "Not after a month," Everett reminded him. "I can't let Peter go with someone I don't know."

I understand. Peter will be in good hands, I promise. The person who made the arrangement is diligent and trustworthy. Peter will be fine.

Everett hoped. He looked down at his watch again. They were losing time. "All right. I'll take him. We'll be there in twenty-four hours."

I'll inform the third party. Thank you, Everett. May I ask after Peter? For my sister. She's been worried.

Everett sighed heavily. "He's, um, doing well. Had a few bad days here and there, but... overall he's fine."

That is good. I'll tell Shuri her boyfriend is doing well.

"Boyfriend?"

Joking, Everett. Good luck! I'm sure we will meet again.

They hung up. Everett immediately packed their bags, throwing whatever he found in a duffel to hurry up and start driving. They had a long trip ahead of them if they wanted to make it in time. He banged on the bathroom door, getting Peter's attention. Peter stopped the shower. A few minutes later, he popped his head out from the door, hair soaked. "There's still hot water left," he said to Everett.

"It's not that," Everett said. "We need to go."

Peter stared, befuddled. "What? Why? Did someone see us? I mean... I was careful!"

"It's not that," Everett said. "Got a call from T'Challa. He gave us instructions. Need to leave now."

Peter's eyes widened. "Oh... okay. I'll get dressed."

He shut the door and less than a minute later, reappeared with clothes on and toiletries in his hands. Peter dumped them in his bag, throwing in a few other items he's collected since their time together. "Are we heading to Wakanda?"

"To an airport in France," Everett answered and he threw a book that Peter purchased to the boy. Peter caught it without looking and dropped it on top of his unfolded clothes. "It's a long ways away. We got to be there in twenty-four."

Peter said, zipping his bag. "Where are we going after that?"

Everett shrugged as he did a second check around their shared rental. "I have no idea. Figured we
will find out upon arrival," he said, confirming nothing important was left behind. "Ready?"

Peter threw his duffel over his shoulder. "Always ready."

They drove with very little stops. Peter kept groaning about being hungry and Everett had to basically buy out the entire gas station's food products to satisfy the boy's hunger. His high metabolism still baffled Everett, always surprised by the amount of junk Peter ate without seemingly gaining any weight. Everett picked up a newspaper to give the boy something to read. Peter informed Everett of the latest news regarding, well, himself. Apparently, Europe's leaders were facing backlash for their agreement to expedite Peter Parker if caught. Everett promised to Peter that it won't happen under his watch.

Tired of the grim news, they moved onto the crossword puzzle, an activity they enjoyed doing together in the mornings. Peter went on a one-hour spiel about the discovery of a second moon. Everett almost had the urge to push him out of the car. He was so tired of science talk. Everett's best moments were when the boy was asleep, quiet and unable to babble nonsense jargon.

It went quickly for they arrived at the Aéroport de Lausanne-Blécherette with enough time to relax a bit. Peter nervously glanced around the small airport. It had little to no staff. Only the amount necessary to get a plane off and on the ground. Everett leaned against the car's hood, eyeing everyone suspiciously to make sure they were not walking into a trap. It appeared no one was aware of the boy in the oversized hoodie. Or, they didn't care.

Half hour later, a plane came into sight. It landed on the runway, rolling up to where Everett parked the car. Peter, who was sitting on the roof of the car, hopped off. "Is that the plane?"

It was small. Clearly a private plane of some sort. It didn't belong to T'Challa and didn't have a Stark logo on it to link it to Tony Stark. A plain private jet.

"Possibly," Everett said, checking that his gun was in easy reach. "Stay behind me. Be ready to run."

Peter raised his brows up questionably, but said nothing. The plane's door opened and a set of stairs appeared. A few seconds later, a pilot appeared. He a normal, plain man. Nothing imposing or even threatening. He looked down at Everett and Peter. Not a single smile or friendly gesture. He was relaxed, but strict, clearly on a time constraint.

"Peter Parker?"

Everett stopped Peter from approaching. "Who are you?" he asked.

"The pilot," the pilot answered.

"A name?"

"Does it matter?"

Everett looked closely at the pilot. He was wearing sunglasses and a pilot hat. The only facial recognition Everett could make was a goatee that looked a bit fake from his perspective. His mouth was a straight line, showing no indication of any emotion. Nothing for Everett to use to gauge if the man was someone to trust or not. T'Challa said the arrangement was made and Peter was to go with the pilot, but Everett had a hard time of letting Peter go with that man.

Everett straightened his spine. "It does."

The pilot's head tilted a little, seemingly impressed by Everett's boldness. "Phil," he answered.
"That's all I am going to say." He looked beyond Everett to Peter. "Are you Peter? Best get on board, son. We have quite a long trip ahead of us."

It irked Everett that the man addressed Peter. "Hold on, okay?" he called out to the pilot. He turned to address Peter. "What are your senses telling you?"

Everett was well aware of Peter's spider-sense. The boy explained to him it was like something of a sixth-sense. He could see or predict things happen before they do. It saved them a lot of trouble and Everett grew to trust in it.

Peter lingered on the pilot's face a little longer. "Nothing. He's not a threat."

While Peter's senses were hardly ever wrong, Everett still didn't like it. He looked back to the pilot. "How can I know to trust you with him?"

Phil slipped a quiet smile. "Check your phone, Agent Ross."

Everett pulled out his phone. There was a new text message from T'Challa. He opened it and read the text. *Trust him.*

Everett closed the phone with a sigh. "All right," he said and he nudged Peter to go up the stairs.

Peter picked up his duffel and climbed the stairs to enter the plane. Halfway up, he stopped. Peter looked behind him, straight at Everett. "Are you not coming?"

Everett shook his head. "No, I have other duties to attend to."

"But... I thought you were coming with me," Peter said, the duffel falling off his shoulder. "Aren't you like my handler or something?"

Handler? Oh god, he hoped not! Not that he disliked Peter. The longer they spent together, the more he enjoyed Peter's company. But Everett was not cut out for kids. "No, kid, I'm not," he answered before smiling and adding, "Just a friend helping another friend."

Peter stared, uncertain if he now wanted to board the plane. He glanced back to the pilot and then to Everett, eyes conflicted in decisions. Knowing that Peter must go with the Phil, Everett strolled up to the bottom of the staircase. "Hey, Peter?" he gestured for Peter to come down the stairs. Peter obliged, stopping at the very bottom step. "I know you don't exactly enjoy being tossed from one person to the next, but this is all for your safety. You have to go with that man."

"I don't even know him."

"You didn't know me."

Peter wrinkled his nose, dismissive. "Yeah, but... I still don't know him."

"T'Challa was absolute in his promise that the man was trustworthy," Everett informed him. "I don't like the idea of you running off with an unfamiliar face, but as I told you, I will do whatever it takes to keep you safe. I'll trust this man to keep you safe. Or whoever has you next. If you ever do feel like you are in danger," Everett rummaged through his pockets, pulling out a pen and a scrap paper. He wrote numbers on the paper. "Find a phone and call me. I'll get you help ASAP. Okay?"

Peter took the scrap paper. "Yeah," he murmured. "Got it."

"Good," Everett said, flicking his eyes up to the pilot who tapped on his watch. A signal that it was
time to leave. "You better go on up. Be safe and remember what I taught you."

Peter released an air of tension, a dawning realization that his choices were limited to only one option. "Of course," Peter said, but rather than turn around, he surprised Everett with a hug. "Thank you."

He never expected any gratitude for doing his job. He wasn't even expecting a hug! Yet, Everett found he couldn't deny the boy that last request. He returned the embrace and wished Peter good luck. "You'll be a great hero one day, kid," he said. "I'm looking forward to it."

They parted and Peter hid the scrap paper in his pocket. He hurried up the staircase, with one last glance (and a salute), Peter disappeared inside the plane. Everett's diverted his gaze to the Phil the pilot. "If you hurt him," Everett said, pointing to where Peter last stood. "I'll kill you myself."

Phil only smiled. "I get that a lot."

Phil turned in to the plane. The stairs rose up and the door locked. Everett moved by the car and watched the plane wheel away to the strip. He thought he saw Peter in one of the windows, waving goodbye. Everett raised his hand in farewell. The plane roared and then took off, leaving Everett alone for the first time in nearly a month.

It didn't last very long. His phone rang and for a moment, Everett thought it was Peter. "What's wrong?"

Er... nothing. Just calling back to inform you of my investigation into Oscorp.

Sharon. It was Sharon. Not Peter. "You got anything?"

Oh—you have no idea.

Everett moved to the driver's seat of the car. "Tell me," he said, hopping in the car as he prepared to make his way back home. "Tell me everything."
Tony Stark shut off the television.

Recently, the news have been rather depressing. So far, the European Union's promise to extradite Peter Parker if found brought a lackluster night. Not to mention, tomorrow, he had another round (what was it, now, four?) of Senate interrogations. He stayed in to go over a few more items and prepare a speech that would tug at Americans' heartstrings. He sent Happy out to get food for their all-nighter. When he left, Tony sunk into the bed in hopes of catching a few minutes of sleep.

Secretary Ross was not holding back any punches. He did his ultimate best to paint Peter Parker and Captain America's team as rogue terrorists. Peter Parker was not a teenage boy in Secretary Ross's world. All of the boy's good deeds were twisted into being malevolent tactics, designed to web up mischief and mayhem. Tony didn't hold back the obnoxious laughter that erupted when Secretary Ross indicated how "highly dangerous" Peter Parker was to society. He knew it was rude to do so during a Senate trial, but... he couldn't help himself. Tony knew Secretary Ross was grabbing straws, throwing ridiculous information in front to keep people afraid. And when people were afraid, it kept Secretary Ross in power. It was distressing how many people fell for the Secretary's tricks. It was even more distressing to see May Parker agonize over the unraveling of her nephew's reputation.

Peter's popularity, however, only heightened, especially when a video clip was released online of a person in a hoodie rescuing a girl from being hit by a car. It was hard to see. The video quality wasn't very good, but many people believed the person in the hoodie to be Peter Parker. Aunt May included.

"It's him. I know it," May claimed to Tony when the video was released worldwide. "I would recognize Peter anywhere and that's him!"

Tony had doubts. Again, the film was too grainy and even eye-witness accounts were contradicting one another about what actually occurred. If anything, it was a lucky save, but Tony didn't think it was Peter. It wouldn't surprise him if it was, but Peter wouldn't be stupid enough to reveal his identity in public. On second thought...

Peter or not, Tony couldn't do anything. Ross's men were already on the other side of the pond to investigate and conduct a search of the area to locate the young Peter Parker. Tony hoped it wasn't him. Just so that Peter was away from Ross's hands. Remembering the incident brought Tony to forgo sleep and turn on the news again, watching as newscasters continue to inform the public of Europe's decision to assist in bringing Peter Parker to the United States if found on their soil. Still disappointing to hear.

Happy returned, carrying two bags of take-out. He took one look at Tony and frowned. "Don't tell me that they found the kid?"

Tony shook his head. "No, not yet," he shut off the television to refocus, "but Secretary Ross is going all out to find him based off that crap video."

Tony helped himself to some noodles. Meanwhile, Happy reviewed the footage on his phone. Happy made a face. "You can hardly see the person," he claimed, squinting at the screen. "I can't even tell how the girl was saved. How does anyone know its Peter?"

Tony shrugged helplessly. "People like to see things they believe in," he said. "Like May Parker. She's a desperate mother who wants her kid. She'll see Peter in about anything. Although, if it is
"Peter, I hope he knows not to do something like that again. That's just asking to be caught and locked away forever."

Happy nodded in agreement, putting his phone away. "You think Cap is doing okay with him?"

"Besides this little blimp," Tony said, twirling noodles around his chopsticks. "Yeah. He's doing a far better job than I would have done in his shoes. Taking care of a teenager while on the run... Jesus—I wouldn't be able to handle it."

"I think you could," Happy contradicted. "I mean, if your heart is in it, I think you could do it."

"Thanks for the support, but I doubt I would like living on the run on long-term," he said. "Did it once a few years ago. Had a kid then too. Don't want to do it again. Not fun. I don't do well with kids."

"I think you did fine with Peter."

"And where is he now, Hap?" Tony said. Happy shrugged, which Tony took as an assent. "Exactly. I fucked up and now I have to figure out how to fix this mess. So, yeah—I don't think I'm capable."

Happy shrugged again. "I don't know Boss," he said. "I always thought you had a good heart with Peter."

Maybe. He didn't mind Peter. Sure, he though the kid talked too fast and got excited to easily, but the kid had a good heart and a great mind. And, Tony wanted to at least do something right in the world. He decided to mentor the kid as a way to redeem all the bad things he's done through Peter. The kid already had his head on right, so Tony couldn't ruin him. Turned out that even didn't shelter Peter from Tony's destructive lifestyle.

"Let's just find a way to screw Ross," Tony said, wanting to distract his depressing thoughts on focusing to save Peter from Secretary Ross.

They dug into the food and notes, crafting a speech and answers to any possible questions the Senate may ask.

Tony looked at every politician in the room with a thin veiled of disgust. They all looked the same to him. Stiff and controlling. Like Secretary Ross. And they were repetitive in their questionings. They asked the same questions as before, asking him how long he had known Mr. Parker was Spider-Man. Was he aware of his age? Did he purposefully interfere with government databases to hinder the pursuit of identifying vigilantes? Tony reclined in his seat, arms folded in front as he listened to each repetitive question. His responses were the same too. And when they didn't accept those, he tried a different tactic.

"For my answer please see page five, line 23," Tony riposted.

That didn't earn him any favors, but he didn't care. His patience dwindled to a very thin line and it was going to snap any second if they ask him one of those same damn questions again...

"Mr. Stark? You are aware that sabotaging government intelligence is high treason," came the grail voice of a man lost in time. He no longer belonged in the world. Sagging skin around the face, cataract eyes and a wheezing tuned voice all pointed to a man who outlived many of his own people. Too secured in his own time to face the new world. "I think—"

"I don't give a damn what you think," Tony said, casually enough to insult them even more. "I've
been in this very room far too long and saying the same things over and over again because all you are doing is stalling for time. How much did Secretary Ross promise you? Hmm? A one-on-one meeting with the President? A promise that a bill of yours will pass? Or, my favorite, money to keep you elected in the seat that you appear to never leave. What? Afraid it will be swiped right from under you by a millennial—who frankly, probably deserves it more than you."

"Mr. Stark! You are out of line—"

Tony held up one finger to the congressman. "No. No, I'm not. Because I don't understand what the hell it is I'm doing here, answering the same questions on repeat. Either you understand English or you don't. I cannot make it more perfectly clear. I'm done wasting my time on pointless arguments and belittling questions. What you fail to pursue in your line of questioning is motive. What purpose would it be for me to keep Mr. Parker's identity a secret? What purpose would it be for Secretary Ross to attack and imprison a kid without a warrant or rights? What purpose would a man like Ross be in charge of a group of superheroes when he demonstrates he has no regards in their welfare? And I'm not just talking about Mr. Parker's, but also Dr. Banner.

"This is a man who's obsessed with power and crafted a neat document, tricking all the leaders in the world to sign it without realizing that they handed him the world's deadliest weapon," Tony stood up from his seat, drawing all attention to him. "So, yeah. I did know exactly what I was doing, senators. I kept Mr. Parker away from Secretary Ross. I shielded him so that he wouldn't be abused by Ross. I will not subjugate Mr. Parker to that dismal life. He's too kindhearted and innocent and I will not let him be manipulated by a power-obsessed geezer."

Tony shoved his chair hard enough it to loudly collide against the table he sat upon. "My time was wasted enough," he announced to the entire room. "When you decide to get your act together and actually start fighting for the right thing, we'll talk. In the meantime—"

Tony turned his back to the senators and headed down the aisle to the doors. A commotion roared behind him. He didn't look back. He only looked forward, considering different avenues and approaches on bring Peter Parker home.

Tony hurried down the stairs, not interested in engaging the press. He made his point. There was no reason to say more. Happy was close behind him, jumbling down the steps to keep up. "You caused quite a stir, Tony."

"Good," Tony grunted as he headed to the back door. "It needed a shakeup. I'm not going to waste my time with them if they won't act."

"Well, you certainly lit a fire under their feet," Happy said. "Oh—also, May Parker called. She wants to speak to you."

Tony sighed as he paused right beside the door. "Is this in regards to that video?"

Happy shook his head. "No, um, she wants to know if she can leave the compound."

Tony threw up his shades and squinted at Happy. "What?"

"She went to leave the compound today, but claimed security stopped her," Happy relayed to him. "She had a few selective words in her message—"

Tony massaged his temples. "Damn... why does she want to leave? She has to know it's not safe for her," he said. "What... okay, why did she want to leave?"
"Don't know Boss. She didn't say. Only that she wants to leave."

Cabin fever most likely, Tony thought. She wasn't used to being confined to a single building. After all, she was a free woman a few months ago. "I'll head to New York tonight," he decided. "Talk to her. God—she's a handful. And to think I thought Peter was difficult looking after."

That got a little smirk on Happy's face and Tony brought his sunglasses back down over his eyes. "Let's head back to the hotel and grab our things. No comments to press. Nothing."

Happy understood and he went through the door first. Tony followed. As expected, there were a few reporters lurking around the building and when they spotted Tony, jumped into action. They swarmed them, rattling question after question about the senate session. Tony kept his mouth closed, looking straight ahead to the awaiting vehicle to take them back to the hotel. Happy kept a protective arm in front of Tony, gently pushing the nosy reporters out of their path.

Tony mindlessly walked on, lamenting on everything and anything when he heard a loud shout over the blabbering reporters.

"How do you sleep at night knowing you ruined Peter's life?!"

Tony came to a halt. His head snapped in the direction of the shout to find an unruly, curly haired girl with dark, determined eyes and a stern gaze that cut right through Tony. He peered at her. She looked familiar. Very familiar. But he couldn't picture where he recognized her.

The girl noticed she grabbed his attention. "This is your fault!" she accused. She clutched a poster and used her free hand to jab a finger at him. "You were supposed to protect him!"

The recognition hit Tony hard. He remembered her. The girl from Peter's class. The one who claimed she was observant. "I know you," he said to her, which only earned him a scowl. Yep. That's her all right. "What are you—"

"You're a hypocrite! All you do is destroy people's lives!" the girl yelled on and the reporters' voices shifted to murmurs as they glanced between her and Tony. "Peter looked up to you and you failed him!"

Okay, this was getting out of hand and he saw reporters throwing their tape recorders to the girl's mouth, hoping to catch everyone word she said. Tony looked to Happy, signaling a change of plans. He turned back to the girl. "All right, come with me."

The girl was repulsed. "I'm not going anywhere—"

"If you want answers, I'll tell you," Tony said, sharply, "but not here. So, either stay or come."

The girl thought for a brief second and shrugged, choosing to follow Tony. Happy kept up his guard as more reporters surged around them. Tony kept an arm around the girl's shoulder, helping her through the crowd to the car. The girl curled up her nose at the gesture and shrugged his hand off. "I can walk on my own."

Tony raised his hands apologetically. "Of course you can," he said. "Sorry."

They got to the car door. Happy opened it and Tony gestured for the girl to enter first. Tony followed after and Happy slammed it closed. A little quieter than outside, but Tony could still hear the reporters voices through the tinted windows. The girl sat in the other seat, arms folded in front as her mouth bore a deep frown. Her poster laid on her lap. It was marked up in black sharpie, declaring for Peter's return.
"Nice poster," Tony remarked as he heard Happy hop into the car. "So, um, where can I drop you off? Hotel?"

"I'm not staying in a hotel."

"Got a family member living here?"

"No."

This girl was quite an acidulous kid. "Okay, look, where are your parents then?"

"In New York."

Tony stared. "You came all the way to DC on your own?"

"I'm sixteen," the girl answered. "I don't need a chaperone."

Jesus Christ, Tony thought. Who was this girl? "What's your name again? I didn't quite catch it."

"Michelle," the girl stated. "And you never asked me for my name."

"Yeah, I'm aware, which is why I am asking now," Tony returned, not afraid to be sardonic with her. "So, what? You skipped school to come all the way down here to protest? Parents know?"

"Why? Are you going to rat me out? Like you did with Peter?"

Tony reeled in his seat. "Too much fire in you kid," he warned. "It's going to burn you up."

"I'm not going to take life advice from a man like Tony Stark," Michelle scoffed at the nerve of Tony's advice. "Now, you owe me answers."

"I do?"

"You told me three minutes ago you would," Michelle promptly reminded him. She turned in her seat, sitting upright as she looked directly at him with those accusing eyes. "Now, where's Peter? I know you know where he is."

Tony draw out a long sigh. "Actually, I don't know."

"Yes, you do."

Tony casually arched his brows high over his sunglasses, scrutinizing the girl. "I don't know where you get your sources, but I really don't know where Mr. Parker is," he confessed to her. "In fact, I make sure I don't know. That way I can protect him."

"And yourself," Michelle retorted. "That way you can't be thrown in jail for perjury."

She was a smart one. Had a strong wit. Something he would have admired in a different setting. "The less I know, the less the government knows. Any indication on my part, they'll subpoena my phone calls, emails, documents—you name it. And I would hate myself if I was the reason that led the government to him."

"You already did!" Michelle shouted. "He's gone because of you! He's a superhero because he wanted to be you! Even before all this Spider-Man bullshit, he wanted to be just like you. Especially after that Stark Expo fiasco."
Tony's brows crinkled, befuddled. "What expo?"

"The one in Queens," Michelle replied in a sharp undertone that matched her agitation. "Peter told everyone at school how you saved him from those out of control drones."

"I did?" Tony had no recollection of saving Peter from I. Only that one time from the lake and ferry. "Are you sure?"

Michelle nodded. "Oh, I remember," she said. "He yapped all about it. How he confronted one of those drones to shoot it when you came sweeping down and blasted it. Told him, 'Great job' or something or other."

Tony thought back and a vague memory emerged from the vaults of his mind. A little boy wearing an Iron Man mask confronted one of Justin Hammer's and Ivan Vanko's drones. He remembered blasting the drone before it hurt the kid. He told the kid "Nice work." That couldn't have been Peter. That kid was far too young. No way. But then he remembered it happened seven years ago. Peter would have been around that age seven years ago. Oh shit.

"Shit," Tony muttered upon realizing that the boy he saved was Peter Parker.

Michelle nodded. "Yeah, since then you were his biggest hero. Talked nonstop. Wanted to be just like you."

Tony was well aware of Peter's fan status. The incident on the ferry was enough to remind him of Peter's desire to be like him. "I didn't ask him to be like me. In fact, I specifically told him not to," he said in his defense. "Even said I wanted him to be better."

That wasn't good enough for Michelle. "How well did that work out?"

He inhaled, running his fingers through his hair. "I did my best to keep Ross off of him. Still doing my best."

"Do better."

Tony cocked an eyebrow at her. She was not one for pity or sympathy. Determined and stubborn. Kind of like his old man. "Thanks for the advice," he sardonically remarked. "I'll get right on it."

Michelle's face tightened. Her jawline hard and protruding as she glared. "Don't be an ass," she said. "You know? I wonder at why Peter admires you. You're an asshole."

"Gee kid, you're one to talk," Tony threw back. "Ever since we got in this car, all you have done is shout at me."

"That's because you're treating Peter's troubles as some media circus!" Michelle criticized. "This is his life! And you're treating it like some tabloid shit—"

"Hey!" Tony barked, no longer tolerating her accusations. "You don't know a damn thing what I am doing. You kids think things happen instantly. Well, guess what? It doesn't work like a snap," Tony snapped his fingers in front of her face. "It's not like the movies, kid. This is reality and it's a lot worse and muddier than you think."

"My entire team is working on finding ways to get him home. Twenty-four seven. None of us take breaks," Tony rattled off. "And if you think I don't give a damn, you're sorely mistaken. I can't even sleep at night because of the guilt crushing me. I stay up late. I work around the clock. Every single thing I do is to find ways to get Peter home. And I will bring him home if it kills me."
"So, save your little protest song and point your finger in a different direction, because I'm not taking any part in your blame game," Tony finished, "I have enough people calling me out on shit and I don't need another."

Michelle pouted. Her mouth quivering in the effort to withhold her own blast, but in the end, she said nothing. She flickered her eyes to the windows, watching history pass her. Tony took a deep breath, feeling a little guilty for his sharp attitude to her. She didn't mean to be a brat. She was upset. She missed her friend.

Or maybe... maybe it was more. Tony re-examined Michelle. He remembered she claimed to be observant. But was she observant overall or on one individual? He believed Peter mentioned her in passing once. Something about her being nosey or... God, he can't even remember. The kid rattled off on so many things, but Tony did remember Peter mentioning 'Michelle' once. Tony noted the passion behind her arguments and accusations went far beyond concern citizen, school peer and even a friend. He recognized the hope in those dark orbs and the desperation that pained her. After all, he's seen those same expressions in the mirror.

"Oh... now I understand," Tony acknowledged.

Michelle's eyes pinched. "Understand what?"

"You're in love."

Michelle reacted as he predicted. She shot up in her seat, a flicker of fear passing through her eyes at being caught unaware, before she settled into a mask of indifference. "No I'm not," she tried to convey a dismissal.

Tony wasn't fooled. "Yeah, you are," he said, gently as to not make her be even more defensive. "Hey—there's nothing wrong with liking him. Pete's a good kid. Not surprised that girls want to date him."

"I don't like him! He's only a friend."

Tony lowered his chin, eyes peering over his shades. "Yeah, okay, look kid, I grew up in world of backstabbers and fakes. I know how to read people. You like him. That's why you knew which weapon hit him. Why you skipped school and didn't tell your parents. And, it's the reason you are right here, yelling at me. You like him."

Michelle didn't say anything, but her hands squeezed tighter to her poster, wrinkling it to ruin.

"Does Peter know?"

Again, silence from her end.

He nailed it right on the head. The girl crushed on Peter Parker. And now, Tony had a little more sympathy for her. He silently forgave Michelle for her abrasive attitude. His heart bled for her and Peter. It wasn't fair that these two young kids were separated from one another because of one's man mad desire for power.

Tony removed his sunglasses, exposing his eyes to her for the first time. "I'm sorry. Really—I am," he said, his voice far kinder than a few minutes ago. "Peter is... he's a good kid. The best hero out of all of Avengers. This shouldn't have happened to him. He doesn't deserve it."

"No, he doesn't," Michelle agreed and Tony thought he saw her wipe a tear away from her eye.
"We'll bring him home. I promise," he said to assure her. "Then you and he can go on a date. How about to Paris? I'll pay."

Michelle's brows slanted downward. She lifted her hand, giving Tony the middle finger.

One tough cookie. Tony honestly admired her. Most who confronted him were intimidated, awed or disgruntled by his success and status. Not Michelle. She wasn't like Underoos. She wasted no time in speaking her mind and calling him out. The only person whoever did that was well, Cap and, occasionally, Pepper.

They stayed silent until they reached the front of the hotel lobby. Tony realized he couldn't keep Michelle in his car. "Where do you need to go?" he asked, "Airport? Train station? Bus station?"

"I'll take your private jet," Michelle answered. "I need to get home by dinner."

Tony almost laughed, thinking it was a joke. But when he saw her face, he realized she meant it. She wanted to hitch a ride on his private jet. She's bold. After a quick consideration, Tony figured it was the least he can do after causing her to be separated from her love. "Yeah, fine," Tony decided. "Whatever, as long as you stop shouting."

Happy opened his door and Tony instructed him to bring down the luggage while he stayed in the car to babysit Michelle. The girl grumbled under her breath some random comment that Tony had no interest in knowing. A few minutes later, Happy loaded up the trunk and took the front seat again. He pulled out and half-hour later, arrived at the airstrip that housed Tony's private plane. Michelle refused Happy's hand up the stairs, grabbing the railing instead as she marched onto the private jet.

Happy turned to Tony. "She's fierce."

Tony released a steam of frustration breath. "No kidding," he commented in agreement before a mischievous smirk lifted his face. "Mr. Parker is one lucky man."
Pepper Potts

Pepper Potts had not slept in days.

She’s tried. Multiple times. More times than she can even count the days she missed sleep. It was unfortunate because it hindered her job performance. Kept forgetting things, missing steps and dropping things. Not even several cups of tea helped pull herself together.

The only reason she’s failed to sleep was because her mind continuously worried for her fiancé. Tony Stark hardly slept. Or ate. Or spoke unless it involved Peter Parker and that whole debacle. He constantly worked. Never stopping.

She didn’t mind it. In fact, it gave her a flutter of hope that Tony was dedicated to saving Peter. It showed that, maybe, he could be a good father. That he could care about kids despite his objection that he would make a terrible father. Pepper had never seen this type of devotion to another individual.

She sighed, rubbing her eyes awake. “Okay, um, tell me again,” she said, looking across her desk. “What is Tony doing now?”

Happy Hogan sat in the other seat. “After that whole debacle in D.C.,” he began, “He’s trying to find new ways to get around it. He wants to take it to the UN. Says it’s a UN problem. Not just a US one.”

Pepper let out a steady breath of air. “Okay… okay,” she muttered. “So—how does he plan to set up that arrangement? Or was he asking me to do it?”

Happy inclined his head. “He didn’t say, but let’s admit that you would probably do better than he would.”

Pepper agreed. Tony, while intelligent and charming, lacked tack. “I’ll set something up,” she said, taking out her pen and writing plans.

Happy watched her for a moment. “You okay Pepper?”

“Yes, why?”

“You look… ill.”

“Probably from lack of sleep,” Pepper said, looking up at him. “Haven’t gotten a decent amount of sleep these past few days.”

“Only a few?”

“Maybe a week or two.”

“You look kind of thin too,” Happy pointed to the baggy sweater she wore. “Clothes are looking a bit big on you.”

Pepper pulled the ends of her sweater down instinctively. “Yeah, well, stress can do that. Lost certain tastes for things.”

Happy hummed. “Tony’s the same way.”
“I know,” Pepper admitted. “I think that is one of the reasons that I am up. I worry about him. For him.”

“He’s not doing too well with this whole Parker incident,” Happy said. “Blames himself.”

“As well as many others.”

“You mean Aunt May?”

“Her and others,” Pepper reached in one of the drawers and pulled out a stack of old newspapers. Each headline a mockery toward Stark.

Happy glanced at them. “Well, I don’t think Tony cares about those people.”

“He should be,” Pepper said. “The people are the ones who are going to overpower anything the government may try to impose. After all, power to the people.”

“Power to those who hold money,” Happy grunted.

Pepper didn’t disagree, but she wanted to believe that even the regular folks have some say in the world. Her alarm went off and Pepper checked the calendar. “Oh no… that’s today?” she groaned, pushing back her hair. “I’m really out of it.”

“Why?” Happy said. “What’s going on?”

“I have set up a meeting with myself, May and two government officials.”

Happy’s eyes rounded. “You what?”

“I got a call from the agency asking to speak to May in regards to Peter.”

“Wait… and you agreed to it?”

“They assured me that it has nothing to do what is currently happening.”

“And you believe them?”

“They swore to me that it’s for the benefit of Peter,” Pepper said, although she held doubts ever since she agreed to the meeting. ”Said it had nothing to do with Ross. In fact, they were adamant that Ross knew nothing of what they were doing.”

Happy didn’t look entirely pleased. “Does Tony know?”

Pepper shook her head. “Are you kidding? Tony would only get upset and start a lawsuit,” she said. “Besides, it has nothing to do with the whole Ross thing. Something else entirely different.”

“Like what?”

Pepper shrugged. “I don’t know, but they wanted to speak to May and I refused to let them unless I was there as well. They agreed, so I have a meeting.”

Happy followed Pepper out of the office. “And you’re not going to tell Tony?”

“They asked for me to not inform him while they were there.”

“Sounds suspicious.”
“Yes, it does. If it goes in a different direction, we’ll leave,” Pepper assured him. “Or else, have FRIDAY alert Tony and he’ll come in and go all Iron Man.”

Happy let out a breath short of a chuckle. “Yeah, probably. Look—I gotta get back to work.”

Pepper stopped outside the elevator. “Don’t go running to Tony about this.”

Happy held up his hand in honor. “I won’t,” he swore, “but I hope you know what you are doing.”

The elevator opened and Pepper stepped inside. “You and me both, Happy.”

Pepper did not expect the government agents to be non-threatening. Two of them showed up, as promised. A silver-brown haired man dressed in a suit looked nothing extraordinary. Lines embedded into his forehead from age and stress, but he didn’t look displeased or offended. Only determined and content. The other agent was younger. Much younger. Blonde hair, curled, kind eyes and she wore a smile when introductions were made.

Agent Everett Ross and Agent Sharon Carter sat across the coffee table, notepads and folders on the table. May sat next to Pepper, frowning as she eyed the agents. To her, they were the enemy. No matter how many white flags they came under, May Parker despised them. And they knew it.

“Thanks for meeting with us today,” Agent Ross began. “I know it is—”

“Are you related to Secretary Ross?” May interjected, getting straight to the point as she glared at them.

Agent Ross paused, hazel eyes flicked to her. “Um, no,” he answered. “No, I am not related to him. Just have the misfortune of sharing the same surname.” He opened his notebook, already scribbled with notes. “The real reason for our visit is in regards to Mr. Parker’s abilities.”

May shot up from her seat. “I knew it!” she growled. “You’re trying to find a way to capture him! Hurt him!”

Neither agent reacted to May’s accusation. They both remained utterly unmoved. “Actually, no,” Agent Ross said. “We’re more interested in how he obtained his abilities.”

Alarms went off in Pepper’s head. “Oh my God,” she uttered, shooting up to her feet too. “You want to create more?”

Again, the agents showed no reaction. “If you would kindly let me continue without interruption,” Agent Ross said, glancing to both women, “I will explain.”

Pepper and May looked to one another, their trust of the agents dwindling rapidly. But, Pepper nudged her head to the couch again, willing to allow an explanation before storming off. After all, she was used to being the one of reason whereas Tony was the opposite.

They both grudgingly sat back down and waited. Agent Ross, rested his elbows on his knees. “Thank you,” he said. “I understand your reluctance to talk about Mr. Parker or even talk to government agents, but I assure you, we come to help. Not hinder.”

“I’ll be the judge of that,” snapped May.

Agent Ross nodded in submission. “Of course,” he said. “Now, let me explain the reason for our visit. It is in regards to Peter’s abilities, but more align to how he acquired them. And, no, we have
no intention of building an army of spider-mans. One is quite enough.”

Pepper lifted a hand to her chin in thought. Curious… were they telling the truth or not?

Agent Ross continued. “We have evidence to believe that Parker’s abilities may have come from an illegal genetic experimentation,” he said. “And our mission is to stop it from happening again.”

All the muscles in May’s body tensed. “What? Are you saying that… that Peter was experimented on?”

“Not willing,” Agent Ross reassured her. “On both sides. We came to the conclusion that it was an accident and neither party were aware of it until later.”

“I’m sorry,” Pepper interrupted. “What do you mean no one was aware? How could no one be aware?”

Agent Ross flipped through his notebook. “Ms. Parker… can you confirm to me that Peter Parker attended a class trip to Oscorp on December 1st, 2015?”

May clutched the cushion of the couch. “What… why are you asking me that?”

“Please answer the question.”

Pepper took May’s hand, supporting her. May took a deep breath. “Yes, Peter and his classmates went to Oscorp on a field trip. I can’t remember exactly what date, but… that seems right.”

“Did you notice anything odd about Peter after that date?”

May scrunched up her face. “Um… no. No, nothing,” she said, weary. “I mean… he had a few mood swings, but he was just hitting puberty and a new school. It was all new to him.”

“What about illnesses?”

“Um, he never got sick.”

“Not once?”

May dropped her head in her hand, thinking. “Well, there was one time he was very ill, but it was just the stomach flu. He was better by the next morning.”

“What about illnesses?”

“Er… actually, yes,” May sounded surprised. “It was the day of the field trip. I remember because Ben teased Peter how Oscorp made him sick too.”


May shook her head. “No, just vomiting and cold sweats,” she said. “But again, he was fine the next morning. Temperature down and everything.” She paused, watching the agent scribble again in his notebook. “What is this all about? Are you saying that… that Oscorp is the reason Peter has these abilities?”

Agent Ross looked up to both women. “We believe that Oscorp may have unintentionally been involved in Mr. Parker’s abilities.”
May choked out a sob. She wrung her hand free of Pepper’s and covered her face. Pepper immediately went to her side, stroking May’s head and half-embracing her. While Pepper wasn’t a fan of Oscorp either (it’s a rival company after all), she was surprised by the company’s involvement with Peter’s abilities.

It took a moment. A long moment. Eventually, May wiped away the tears, but her hands were shaking. “I should have listened to Ben,” she murmured. “He didn’t want Peter to go, but I convinced him. God—it’s all my fault.”

Before Pepper could comfort her, the door to the conference room burst opened. Tony Stark stormed in, glasses off and a scowl twisting the corner of his mouth as he zeroed in on the two agents. His hand was covered by a piece of the Iron Man machinery. Oh no…

Pepper jumped to her feet. “Tony!”

Tony didn’t even look at her. “What the hell are you doing here?” he demanded to the two agents. “Get your asses off my property!”

Pepper rushed over to Tony. “Tony! Calm down,” she stressed, cheeks reddening. “This isn’t—”

Tony turned to her, betrayal shining in his eyes. “I can’t believe you let them up here,” he said to her. “After everything—“

“No, you’re not listening to me,” Pepper said, frustrated. “Calm down. Lower that gauntlet, okay?”

Tony glared at the two agents for a second, but did as Pepper ordered. He lowered his weapon. Pepper breathed out a sigh of relief. “Thank you,” she said before lowering her voice to a sharp whisper so only Tony heard her. “Now—I can’t believe Happy told you what was going on here.”

“Happy didn’t say a word,” Tony informed her. “I put the pieces together myself.”

Well, at least she didn’t have to get mad at Happy Hogan. Tony paced, darting dark looks to the two agents. “Now, what I can’t figure out is what the hell two cronies of Secretary Ross’ are doing here.”

While Agent Carter swallowed nervously, Agent Ross showed no signs of distress. “Thank you for joining us, Mr. Stark,” he said pleasant enough, but with an underlying caustic tone. “Before you interrupted, we were discussing the incident in which Peter got his powers.”

Tony scowled. “Oh yeah?” his eyebrows jutted downward. “For what? Want to build your own army? Or figure out if you can possibly kill him? Is that it?”

“No,” Agent Ross responded, unafraid. “Your imagination is as wild as your personality, Mr. Stark. We are not ‘cronies’ of Secretary Ross. We do work under him, but we are currently not working for him—if you understand.”

“Of course I understand,” Tony snipped in return. “I’m a genius.”

Pepper groaned, raising a hand to her forehead. This was the reason she didn’t want Tony engaging with the agents. Nothing would get done. Only resentment and blame. “Let’s all take a breath and sit down,” she suggested, mostly to Tony. Tony grumbled a few insults in the direction of the agents before taking a seat on the couch, hand drooped over the back as he glowered at the agents. Pepper let out a steady sigh and took her seat beside Tony. “Agent Ross—please continue.”

Agent Ross cleared his throat. “As I was telling Ms. Parker and Ms. Potts, we are currently
investigating Oscorp in relation to Mr. Parker’s abilities.”

“Oscorp?” Tony repeated in surprise. “As in Norman Osborn’s company?”

“The very same,” Agent Ross confirmed and Agent Carter passed papers to him. Agent Ross handed the papers to Pepper. “We found evidence that correlates with Ms. Parker’s story.”

Pepper took the papers and, she and Tony, quickly scanned them over. She passed what they finished off to May Parker, who was oblivious to what she was reading. "What is this? Are these... spiders?"

"You are correct, Ms. Parker," Agent Ross clasped his hands together. “As you can see, a project involving arachnoids was dismantled on December 7th, with all test subjects destroyed. Luckily, we salvaged a few records and my partner found that one of their test subjects was unaccounted for.”

Agent Ross turned a photograph around of the spider. It was red and blue. Similar to the colors of Peter’s suit. Agent Ross waited to gauge their reaction. “As you can see, the coincidences are hard to ignore,” he said, passing the colored photograph of the spider to May. “We believe that Oscorp may have been illegally experimenting on genetic mutation without government permission and that Mr. Parker accidentally got bitten by an escaped spider during the field trip.”

“And rather face the consequences,” Tony added on, fingers twirling his Starkphone, “they tried to cover it all up. Delete everything.”

Agent Ross inclined his head in agreement. “It appears that way, yes.”

“Are they working with Ross?” May inquired, picking her fingernails as she spoke. “Is that how Ross found out about Peter?”

Agent Ross shook his head. “No. No—he found out through his own investigation,” he said. “He knows nothing of Oscorp’s involvement with Mr. Parker’s mutation.”

“Huh,” came an obnoxious snort that Pepper knew only belonged to Tony. This was not going to go well. “That’s funny.”

May sharply turned to Tony and Pepper nudged him with her finger to his ribs. A reminder to not piss anyone off. Tony winced, but continued, changing his accusing tone to a dark, cheerful version. “I’m curious… how did two lowly agents uncover this great secret,” he pointed. "Especially if what you say is true about our good, old Secretary not having any knowledge of this.” Tony gestured a circle around the papers and notebook. “How did you make all these connections? I mean, what made you even think Oscorp was involved?”

Tony had a point. Pepper flickered his gaze back to the two agents. How did the two agents before them connect Peter Parker to Oscorp? From what Pepper knew, not even Tony made that connection about Peter’s abilities. Peter always said he obtained them, but he never explained how, or when, or where. Oscorp wasn’t ever mentioned. Not even in a blurb.

Tony asked a valid question. How did these two agents connect Peter to Oscorp?

Pepper caught the quiet, knowing exchange between the two agents. It was quick. One look and Pepper knew the two agents had another secret up their sleeves. One they were hesitant to mention.

And she was not the only one who noticed. Tony clicked his tongue in displeasure. “That's what I thought,” he said. He rose up from the couch. "See yourself out.”
"It isn't what you think," Agent Ross insisted. "We are not working under Secretary Ross's orders. This investigation is only between me and Carter here. We are the only two who are aware of Oscorp's involvement."

"And we are to believe that?" Tony shot back. "I know who you are, Everett Ross. The man who insisted on the Sokovia Accords, sided with Secretary Ross."

"So did you, if I remember," Agent Ross volleyed.

"I admit that I signed because I was told it was the only option," Tony responded. "But seeing it being used as a personal army for the Secretary's agenda, I backed off. You, on the other-hand, have yet to prove anything to me or Pepper or May here that you are against Secretary Ross's agenda. This whole meeting could be a way for you to spy on us, gather intelligence on what we have."

"You haven't given us anything that we don't already have," Agent Carter stated, and she was right. So far, only the agents have shared any information in regards to Peter. "We came here to find justice —"

Tony snorted loudly. "Don't give me that crap," he said. "You don't give a damn unless it's useful for you. So—what are you really after? And no more bullshit. None of this 'I care' or 'we aren't really working for Ross'. Okay?"

Agent Ross breathed deeply, seemingly ready to surrender the truth. Pepper was disappointed. She hoped Tony was wrong, but it seemed his instincts were right again. Never trust anyone from the government. Pepper sighed, rising up to her feet as well, brushing her skirt to remove the wrinkles. "FRIDAY? Please send a car around," she said. "Our guests are leaving." Pepper turned to May. "I'm sorry for wasting your time. Let's head—"

"You're making a mistake," Agent Ross said as tiredly sliding a hand down his face. Both Pepper and May stopped and turned to him. "We are not here under Ross's orders. We came on our own, asking for your help."

"Did you?" Tony cocked a brow. "I don't recall you asking for help."

"That's because you won't shut up for a minute," Agent Ross retorted and then he looked straight at Pepper and May, ignoring Tony. "We're not here to sabotage you or Peter. We only want to prevent another incident, prevent another child being abused by authorities and scientists. That's why we are here."

"Touching story. Not good enough," Tony said, strolling over to Pepper. "Do you really expect us to believe you are the good guys? After everything that has happened?"

Agent Carter leaned in to Agent Ross. Pepper heard her whisper. "Tell them."

"Tell us what?" Pepper questioned, arms crossing in front of her. May backtracked from the door, wishing to know.

Agent Ross fervently shook his head. "No."

Tony sighed, expected. "You see... this is why we don't believe you," he said and he pointed to the doors. "Get out before I call my full armor to me."

Agent Carter grew more insistent. "Tell them, Everett," she said. "They won't say anything."

But Agent Ross refused to budge on his first answer. "I promised."
"What promise?" inquired May, hotly and no longer patient to listen to the agents bicker. Pepper wanted to know too. What promise was the agent referring to?

Both agents didn't listen. Too focused on confronting one another. Agent Carter's lips thinned. "Either you tell them or I will."

"Sharon—"

"They have the right to know," she hissed and nudged her head in May's direction. "Especially her."

Agent Ross flickered his gaze passed Pepper to May. He knew something. Something about Peter. He grumbled incoherent words, but conceded to whatever Agent Carter persuaded him to do. He reached for his phone, twirling it his hand. He looked grim, serious as he tapped on his screen. Then, he passed it onto Tony.

Tony’s eyebrows knitted in confusion. “What is this?” he asked, taking a glance. “It’s encrypted.”

“You’re a genius,” Agent Ross remarked. “Figure it out.”

Pepper wished the two men would stop antagonizing one another. It did nothing to help Peter—which was what they both claimed to want. Tony bristled at Agent Ross’s challenge, but gladly accepted to wipe away the rude smirk off the agent's face. He snatched the phone from Agent Ross and started to work. Like he always did.

"Oh—I can solve this in my sleep," Tony said as his fingers worked on the screen. "Hell, I don't even need to look at the screen to solve this basic coding."

And, he didn't. He stared right at Agent Ross the entire time he worked on undoing the encryption. It didn't impress either agents. Pepper shared an exasperated sigh with May Parker, who was exhausted from the whole debacle.

A few minutes passed and nothing happened. “Tony…” Pepper began, wanting to continue on.

The phone buzz in confirmation of Tony's victory. "Aha! Now, let's see what we have here," Tony raised the phone to eye-level to read what Agent Ross presented. The triumphant smile drooped and his face blanched. Dark eyes darted from the phone to Agent Ross. “What the hell is this?”

“A video,” Agent Ross said, hands in his pant pockets. “Go ahead. Hit play.”

Pepper moved to Tony's side, peering over his shoulder. There was a frozen picture on the screen. A picture of a brown-haired boy that looked similar to...

Tony hit the play button. The picture came to life, moving as a young boy took up the screen. He started to speaking. The voice was familiar. Pepper remembered hearing it once before—somewhere. But, May Parker... she instantly recognized that voice.

She dashed to Tony, basically colliding into him. She snatched the phone right out of his hand, staring directly into the screen. "Peter?!"

Pepper shared a surprised look with Tony before they both glanced back to the phone. May kept muttering Peter's name, covering up the video message. May hit the playback button.


What are you doing?
That sounded like Agent Ross and, a second after, the image switched from Peter's young face to Agent Ross, who appeared to be driving. The video focused on Agent Ross.

*Your phone doesn’t have any games on it,* came Peter's voice.

*How the hell did you get my phone? Give it to me*—

Sounds of a struggle was heard as the screen blurred from jerky movements. Then the screen froze on Peter’s face again. Just like it did at the beginning.

They all stood in utter silence. No one said a word. May was shaking. From anger, sadness or surprise, Pepper didn’t know. Tony was speechless, lips pressed together in deep thought. Almost as if he was trying to figure out if the video was real or not. Pepper knew it to be real. There was no other way Agent Ross would have a video of Peter unless he truly was with Peter. And that was concerning. If Peter was with Agent Ross, then did it mean the government captured him?

Tony must have thought on the same lines for the gauntlet came to life in his hand. Then it wrapped around Agent Ross's throat, squeezing enough to make Agent Ross’s face color a bit.

Pepper yelled. "Tony!"

Tony didn't loosen his grip. "Where did you get this?" he demanded. "How did you get this?"

Agent Ross's fingers tugged at the Iron Man's grip, but to no avail. Pepper hurried to Tony's side, pulling at his arm. "Tony! Stop!" she urged. "Let him go!"

She worried she may be unable to convince Tony to stand down, but her words calmed him. Begrudgingly, he unlocked his hold on Agent Ross's throat. The agent gasped deeply, hand rubbing his sore neck where red-purplish bruises of a hand print. Agent Carter was at his side, supporting him as he got his bearings. Pepper stayed by Tony, hand snared in hers to ensure he didn't leap at the agent again.

Tony stood his ground, jaw hard as he glared at the two agents. "You have thirty seconds to explain how you obtained that video," he snarled.

Agent Ross stabilized from the attack, looking peeved at Tony. "I told you... we are on the same side," he breathed. "We're here to help."

May pried her eyes away from the screen. "W-Where is he? Why do you have him?" she asked, stepping around Tony to confront him. "Is he okay? Is he scared? Hurt? Why—"

“He’s fine,” Agent Ross interrupted her ramblings. “Safe and away from Secretary Ross at the moment.”

May’s eyes alight. “Where? Where is he? Where can I find him?”

“I don’t know.”

Tony scrunched his brows together. "How do you not know?" he argued. "You have a video of him for Christ sake!"

"I don't know!" reiterated the agent. He sighed, massaging his temples. "Look—I only took care of him for about a month. After that, I have no idea. He could be anywhere."

That was not the answer May wanted to hear. "Took care of him for a month? What does that even
"mean?" May looked between the two agents. "Where is Peter?"

Both agents shared similar sympathetic looks to May. "I'm sorry, Ms. Parker, but for security reasons, I was not privy to his next destination. I don't know where he went," he confessed in a soothing tone to keep May placated. "All I can say is that he's safe."

"How would you know that?" May snapped, a flood of emotions twisting her face. "You don't even know where the hell he is! How would you know if he's safe or not?"

Agent Ross backed away, head inclined in agreement. "You're right. I don't know for sure, but I trust the people involved in keeping your nephew safe."

"And exactly who is that?" Tony stepped up next to May. "Last I check, Captain America had him."

"Can't tell you," Agent Ross answered, but quickly added. "I know it may be difficult for you to trust us with everything that has happened, but as we keep trying to tell you, we are here to help!

"You want to know how I got the information about Oscorp?" Agent Ross directed his question to Tony. "Because Peter told me. He trusted me enough to tell me about his powers. Shouldn't that count as something?"

"Unless you tortured it out of him," Tony quipped and Pepper heard May let out a small whimper at the thought of Peter in pain.

"Mr. Stark, we understand your hesitation to trust us," Agent Carter stepped in, taking over for Agent Ross before he could blow a punch to Tony's face. "You have every right to be wary of us and our agenda. Agent Ross and I, while under the supervision of Secretary Ross, are not collaborating with him to solve Spider-Man's genetics. We only want to hold the person who was responsible for Mr. Parker's transformation accountable. However, we can't do that with Secretary Ross hovering around.

"What we are trying to say is that... we need your help," Agent Carter continued on with her point. "You have access to resources we need and you also have business connections with Oscorp—"

"I wouldn't say connections," Tony remarked. "Just a good, old-fashioned rivalry. Similar to what I had with Justin Hammer."

"Whatever," Agent Carter brushed aside the comment. "The point is, we came here to confirm our evidence with Ms. Parker and to ask for your assistance in helping us hold Oscorp accountable." Agent Carter stepped closer to Tony, invading his personal space. "Will you help us? More lives will be at risk if we let Oscorp get away with this."

Pepper watched Tony reassess the situation. To Pepper, the agents sounded sincere. Then again, she also thought Obadiah Stane was in grief over the "death" of Tony Stark. What did she know about people? Tony, who grew up in madness, knew how to spot the liars and cheats. He had a knack for that. But, seeing him silent as he hashed out his decision, she noticed the tension around his eyes softened.

Tony sighed heavily, almost regretfully. "It's not me you need to convince," he said and he looked to May Parker. "It's her."

Everyone turned to May Parker. Agent Carter put on a brave face. "Ms. Parker—I am sorry for the loss of your nephew," she began. "What we did—what Secretary Ross did—was wrong and we are all paying that price. Especially you and Peter. Agent Ross and I only want to help you and Peter. We want to make sure that another child doesn't suffer the same way Peter did. Please, would you let
May didn't react. Not at first. Too overwhelmed by all that was exposed in the past few minutes. Her eyes were red and shinier from the unshed tears. A hand threaded through his auburn hair, tangling at the end as her teeth bit the bottom of her lip in thought. When it seemed the agents would not get their answer, May nodded. "Okay," she said, her voice cracking a bit. "But on a few conditions."

"You name it," Agent Ross said.

"First—I want all videos or pictures of Peter that you have since he left," May stated, raising Agent Ross’s phone in her hand.

Agent Ross's brows wrinkled forward. "I only have the one," he said and he plucked his phone out of her hand, "but I can send it to you if you like."

"Yes," May said immediately, though she regretfully stared on at Agent Ross’s phone. "Second—you must report everything to me. I want to know everything you find. Got it? I'm not going to remain passive anymore. I'm going to help."

Pepper and Tony exchanged looks with one another, impressed on how leveled May Parker sounded. And the fact that she was bossing two government agents around was an added bonus.

"Third—you better tell us all the information Secretary Ross has on Peter," she said. "No more playing two sides. You are either with us or them. I want to bring my boy back home and I won’t cooperate with two people I can’t trust. Understood?"

The agents nodded, acquiescing to her demands, which included allowing one of their own team members join them in their investigation. Tony also amended it to ensure he received updates on their investigation and that, under no circumstances, were they allowed to carry out any of the information from the compound. No need for the media or Secretary Ross to get wind of this covert operation.

Once it was all settled and agreed upon, Agent Ross sent the encrypted video to Stark and transferred all their files to Pepper, passing her their notebooks and paperwork. "That's everything we have," Agent Carter said, although she looked sad to depart from her notes. All her hard work was not out of her hands. Pepper understood the feeling. "Includes information on the OZ project, Norman Osborn and spider genetics."

"Thank you," Pepper said, graciously accepting the stack of paper in her arms.

May Parker frowned, looking over at the stack Pepper held. "What about Richard and Mary? Do you not have their files?"

The two agents stared. "Peter's parents?" Agent Ross inquired for clarification. When May nodded, he followed up. "Why would we have their files?"

"They worked at Oscorp," May answered. "Worked there for about ten years. I thought... did you not know?"

By the manner of how both agents remained stunned, Pepper doubted they were aware of Richard and Mary Parker's work history.

Agent Ross deeply hummed. "Um... no, we were not aware they worked at Oscorp," he confessed. "In fact—I don't recall any information on Parkers at all. And we did a search through their database, just to see if they stalked Peter by chance. Came up with nothing."
"That's impossible," May now looked stunned. "No—they worked there. Both of Peter's parents worked at Oscorp before they quit."

Agent Ross took one of the notebooks out of Pepper's hands. He flipped it to a blank page and jotted down notes. "Are you quite sure they worked for Oscorp?"

May fervently nodded. "Yes, I'm positive."

"Until when?"

"Um... shortly after Peter was five," May said. "They had become... disenchanted with Oscorp's leadership. I'm not quite certain. I was never into the whole science thing. I mostly tended to Peter than listened in on their work conversations. All I know was that Mary and Richard decided they no longer wanted to work for Oscorp, so they quit."

"What were their job titles?" questioned Tony, who also whipped out his phone, typing the information into his Starkphone.

May shrugged, bringing her hands up to her arms. "I don't know. Richard and Mary were scientists. They once explained their jobs to me, but... again, I don't know science that well. It was hard for me to even understand their profession let alone their titles. I know Richard graduated with a mechanical engineering and physics degree. I know that's not helpful—"

Agent Ross shook his head. "Quite the opposite," he said. "You were most helpful. If Mary and Richard did work at Oscorp, then their files should have shown up in our first run of reports. But they didn't."

"Which means Oscorp is holding more than one secret," Tony concluded, stern and bristling as he kept working on his phone. "Makes you wonder what other secrets they have."

Pepper led May back to her small apartment. After the whole affair with the agents, May Parker was exhausted. The emotional toll was too much for her to handle at the moment. Tony went with the two agents to investigate further into Oscorp, leaving Pepper to handle May. Then again, Tony was too afraid of May to ever be alone with her.

They got to May's apartment and Pepper immediately went to make a cup of tea for May. "Black or green?"

"Black please," May responded as she sunk into the couch.

Pepper boiled water and prepared the tea. When she delivered it to May, Pepper noticed she was staring at a photograph of her and Peter on her phone. Pepper gently squeezed May's shoulder in comfort. "Peter is lucky to have you," she commented, taking a seat beside May. "A caring aunt who would do anything for him."

"Of course," May said, taking the cup but not a drink from it. "He may not be my biological son, but I love him as if he was. Peter never got the chance to really know his parents that well. Ben and I often babysat him when his parents had to leave town for work-related reasons."

"Must have been hard on him," Pepper offered. "But as I said, he's lucky to have such a kind-hearted aunt to raise him."

May was silent for a moment. "Do you think I'll ever see him again?"
"Of course!" Pepper exclaimed. She had no doubt in Tony's capabilities in clearing Peter's name. And even then, they would find a way to bring aunt and nephew together. "You'll see Peter again. And soon. I believe in that. Especially now that we know that not everyone in intelligence sides with Secretary Ross."

May smiled, but it was brief. Barely convincing. "That video of him," she began. "He looked so different. In little things. I mean, I recognized it was him and yet... it was almost as if it wasn't really him."

"But it was. It was Peter," Pepper attempted to assure May.

May sighed, sadly. "I miss him. I wake up, expecting to see his face at the table or hear him talk to himself in the bathroom mirror. And when I realize he's not here, my heart breaks. It's like losing another family member all over again, except it happens every day. People say time heals all wounds, but mine won't heal. It can't heal. Not until I have Peter back."

"You'll get Peter back, I promise," Pepper did her best to encourage hope within May Parker. "I know Tony for a long time. He'll do whatever he can to bring Peter home. Even if it kills him, Tony will do the right thing for you and Peter. He'll bring him home."

"Peter would be home if Tony never got him involved in the first place," May snidely countered. "I blame Tony for this. He should have known better than to involve a kid into this whole Avengers affair. Especially my kid!"

Pepper wholeheartedly agreed. When she discovered Peter's actual age, she was furious with Tony. She ranted at him for being irresponsible and selfish. To bring a kid into the Avengers world was reckless and dangerous. Tony admitted his fault and explained he was trying to make it up by being a mentor to the kid, giving him an upgraded suit and everything to keep him safe from enemies. What he didn't expect was that he needed to keep Peter safe from their own allies.

"I get it," Pepper said to May. "I would be furious too. I would probably even sucker-punch Tony in the face."

May looked at her skeptically, but Pepper insisted she would. "Trust me, I have slapped Tony once before when he was being a pain in the ass," she said. "And this whole incident is way above the 'pain in the ass' level. I would have punch him. Maybe even tried to run him over. Definitely have his AI destroy his suits and cars."

That garnered a small, but true smile from May. "Would FRIDAY even listen to you?"

"Of course," Pepper said. "She likes me better than Tony anyway."


"True," Pepper acknowledged. Those were qualities that she didn't like about him, but what the public didn't know was that most of the time, those traits were all for show. "But, he's more than that. It might not be easy to see because of what he appears to the public, but Tony... he cares. More than he lets on and that's half the reason he acts like an ass. He's afraid of getting hurt. He's afraid of hurting the people he loves. He'll do whatever it takes to keep his friends safe. Build a legion of Iron Men, a spider-man suit or just even an AI, he does all of this in order to keep the people he cares about safe. Tony had a difficult childhood. It's hard for him to relate to people.
"You don't know this, but Howard Stark, Tony's father," Pepper said to May, who leaned in to listen, "He never once told Tony he loved him. His mother did, but not his father. And, that really messed Tony up. Makes it hard for him to become emotionally attached to people. But, when he does, he's all in it. He's not one foot out the door type of person. He'll be there for you. Always."

Her words must have shocked May because Peter's aunt didn't say anything. No comment or retort or even a challenge. Only silence followed.

May suddenly stood up. "I think this calls for the hard stuff."

She went back to the kitchen and a minute later, reappeared with a bottle of pinot noir and two wine glasses. May poured wine in both glasses and slid one towards Pepper. May raised her glass. "Congratulations! You somehow made me feel pity for Tony Stark," May took a small sip of her wine. "I guess I understand why he's apathetic at times. That's messed up. His own father never said 'I love you'?"

Pepper shook her head. "Nope. Not once," she said, holding her own glass. "Tony said his father loved Captain America more than him. Constantly talked about him and complimented on how great Captain America was. Tony resented that. At least, I think he resented his father's favoritism for Steve. It was almost like competing against an older brother you never met."

"That explains Stark's attitude toward Captain America," May commented, taking another sip. "I'm guessing Captain and Stark never got along?"

"Actually, they did," Pepper countered. "It only started to fall apart near the end before that whole battle royale took place at the airport." Pepper swirling her wine, watching it rise up on the sides. "Anyway, Tony is far more than what the media portrays. The media only knows his mask. Not him personally. And, Tony is a far better man than what you see at first glance. He'll do anything—everything—for those who matter most to him."

Pepper raised her eyes from her glass to May. "And that includes Peter," she said. "Tony, while he regrets how he handled Peter's situation and age, he does care about your kid."

To Pepper's surprise, May agreed—albeit, reluctantly. "Yeah, I know."

"You do?"

May nodded. "If he didn't care about Peter, he wouldn't have kept in contact with him after the whole airport showdown," she said, "or made him a modified suit or gave him that supposed 'internship'. Or... or send him away to protect him from the government."

"Despite my objection, Tony is Peter's new father figure," May continued, solemnly. "He came into Peter's life right when Peter needed a male figure. I confess, having Tony around did help Peter out of his depressed slump and I understand that Tony and Peter are of similar minds, which is great because Peter needs another adult in his life who at least understands him. Ben was that person for him, but after his death, Peter didn't have anyone he could talk to about his hobbies. With Tony, Peter at least has another adult who can understand and engage him in those hobbies."

"So, yeah," May said, brushing away invisible dust from her pants. "I get that Tony is important to Peter and that Tony has some kind of bond with Peter. Don't get me wrong. I'm still not a fan of Tony and I will kick his ass whenever I see him. But... I am grateful that he helped Peter and will be there for him. Peter needs that and, anyway, happy that there is another person looking out for him."
Pepper's face froze. Too stunned to even believe she heard everything accurately. "Are you actually happy with Tony Stark?"

"Don't go spreading it around," May grumbled. "All I am saying is that I get it. I'm not happy about it, but I can still appreciate the effort Tony took to befriend Peter. Even if it was for selfish reasons at the beginning."

Pepper nodded, a warm smile spreading across her cheeks. "I won't say a word," she promised. "Don't need to freak Tony out anymore already. Besides, I don't think he would believe it even if I told him."

"Probably not," May said. "I think he's scared of me."

"He is."

They shared a good laugh. One they didn't realize they needed until then. Once they calmed down and they both slouched in their seats in deep thought, May shocked Pepper with another question.

"So... when are you going to tell Tony you're pregnant?"

Pepper nearly dropped her wine glass. It tipped, the wine drizzling over her fingers. "I, um, what? Why would you say that?"

"Because you are."

"No, I'm not." May gave her a look and Pepper succumbed underneath that knowing gaze. She moved the wine glass to the table. "How did you know?"

"One—your baggy clothes. They're not old clothes. They're new, which means you purposely bought them a bigger size," she pointed out. "Meaning you're either expecting to get bigger or you are hiding something. In this case, both I imagine."

May nailed it on point. "That's it? My clothes?"

"And the fact you haven't taken a sip of your wine," May said. "That was a big indicator. You've held it and kept swooshing it around, bringing it to your mouth, but not once did you take a drink."

May folded her legs under her and faced Pepper. "I may not be a science genius like Peter or Tony, but I do know women. So... how long have you been pregnant?"

"Just a few weeks ago," Pepper confessed. "At first, I thought my missed periods were due to the stress of everything that was happening, but then I felt nauseated in the mornings and other little signs kept popping up."

"Like a rounder belly."

Pepper nodded. "Yeah, I went to the doctor and they confirmed it. I'm pregnant."

"Congratulations," May said, but it didn't sound congratulatory. More like sympathetic. "I'm guessing Stark doesn't know."

Pepper shook her head. "I don't want to distract him," she said. "He's got a lot on his plate. And, telling him I'm pregnant... it's too much."

"You shouldn't go through this alone though."

"I won't. I'll tell him soon. Very soon," Pepper lied. She didn't know when she would tell him, but
doubt it would be soon. "Just... not now. Not when he's trying to bring home your kid. I don't want to force Tony to make a choice."

May understood, at least, Pepper thought she did. May set aside her wine glass and moved closer to Pepper, taking Pepper's hands into her own. "Look here, I am grateful that you are taking my feelings and Peter's well-being into consideration, but this isn't a matter of choice," she said. "This is your life! Your child. His child. And while I don't necessary like Stark, he deserves to know he has a child on the way."

Pepper blinked to hold the tears at bay. "But, what about Peter?" she said. "I can't have Tony drop everything to take care of his child when you can't have yours."

May offered her a small, but tight smile. "That's a decision he has to make," she said. "Besides, Tony isn't the only person working on Peter's freedom. There are others to help pick up the slack so that he could help you and your unborn child."

Pepper shook her head. "No, I can't let Tony do that. Peter is gone because of him. You said so yourself! How could I let Tony abandon Peter for another kid?" she said, dropping her head back against the couch's cushions. "Besides, Tony doesn't want a kid. He always said that he would be a terrible father. And he doesn't know how to deal with kids or babies or..."

"Pepper?" May interrupted her. "Pepper... this isn't going to be an argument you can win. You can keep making excuses and reason yourself out of telling him, but eventually, Stark is going to find out. Especially, when you are holding a baby with his name on the birth certificate.

"Now, you say Stark doesn't want kids or that he wouldn't be a good father and I believe you. Stark has no business being around kids, but that isn't my decision to make. It his," May said to Pepper, eyes locked on her. "Stark has to make his own decision and he can't do that if you don't tell him."

"But what about you and Peter—"

May held up her hand in honor. "I promise, I won't get all mother grizzly on you or him if he does drop everything to help you and your child," she avowed. "I— I understand the difficulty of raising a kid and it is always better to have two people instead of one." May took Pepper's hand again and gave them a gentle squeeze. "You have to tell him. Sooner rather than later."

Pepper bit her lower lip, looking down at where her belly hid. May was right. She needed to tell Tony. Whether either of them wanted a child or not (and Pepper did. She always wanted a baby), they were going to have one together. She resigned, soberly nodding her head. "You're right," she said. "I have to tell him." She let out a long stream of air. "Oh, God... it's going to break him."

"Welcome to parenthood," May said and she picked up her wine glass. "If it makes you feel any better," she said to Pepper, "Peter always wanted to be an older brother."

Pepper and May continued to talk for another two hours before Pepper realized it was around her bedtime. She thanked May for the support, promising she would tell Tony the minute she saw him again. She wished May a goodnight and departed to her bedroom she shared with Tony. Except, Tony was hardly ever there. Not with Peter Parker still missing. Tony was probably working with the agents or in his lab. So, when Pepper stepped into the room, she was startled and gave a little yelp. She did not expect Tony to be in the room, dressed in sleep attire.

"I thought you were with the agents?" Pepper said, slipping off her shoes to allow her bare toes to squish the carpet flooring. She angled herself away, hoping to hide her figure from Tony.
Tony, who paced in front of the window, shook his head. "Something came up," he said, not even aware of her hidden agenda. "Sent them home. Coming back in two days."

Uh-oh. That didn’t sound good. "What happened?"

Tony stopped his pacing and brought a screen to life in between them. It took up the entire space. "I expanded the search on Peter's parents after we came to a dead end at Oscorp," he started. "I searched the databases in Stark Industries and the Avenger archives and this—" Tony enlarged the screen so Pepper could read it better, "is what I found."

Pepper peered at the screen and gasped. It was a folder labeled: Parker, Richard and Mary. She stared through the screen to Tony. "Where did you find this?"

"In the Avengers archives," Tony answered. "Part of the merger from SHIELD. But that's not all of it."

Tony tapped on the folder and... it disappeared. Nothing. "Is it empty?" Pepper questioned. "Did someone erase everything?"

Tony shook his head. "Not quite," he said. "Every time I click on it, the folder disappears. Vanishes. When I reboot it, it returns. I click on it and it's gone. Again."

Pepper scrunched up her face in concentration. "So, you're telling me that the folder is unreadable?"

"There's some kind of programming that makes it impossible to open. Tap it and it disappears," Tony said. "Some kind of high-end security measurement. Whoever created this file, they didn't want anyone to read it. Ever." Tony turned the screen off and pocketed the device. "Which leads me to one person."

"Fury," Pepper answered. "Can you even contact him? I thought he was playing dead?"

"He is, but I have ways to make contact," Tony said. "I already sent out a signal asking him to meet."

Pepper changed into her pajamas, listening and thinking. "You think there is a conspiracy."

She heard Tony sigh, falling onto the bed. "I... I don't know," he admitted. "Too many questions are floating around with no answers. Too many coincidences. I mean... Parker's parents worked at Oscorp, but then quit. Six months later, they die in a plane crash. That isn't strange?"

"And then Peter visits Oscorp on a field trip and becomes Spider-Man," Tony continued to list all the connections and coincidences. "But, most of the records on the project was destroyed a week after Peter got the bite. Come on, there's a lot more going on behind the scenes. Something isn't right."

"Strange, yes, but the crash was ruled as an accident," Pepper reminded Tony, throwing on her oversized shirt to cover her belly. "No foul play."

"So was my parents' accident," Tony returned. "People have ways to make things look like accidents all the time."
Pepper walked out of the closet, moving her way to the bathroom. "You really think it was murder?" she said. "Tony, I know Norman isn't the nicest guy in the world—"

"That's putting it simply," Tony quipped as he got up the bed and leaned up against the bathroom door, staring at Pepper in the mirror. "He's a lunatic, Pepper. Manic depressive. I heard all the rumors from every circle. I even heard his board of directors are terrified of him. Mood swings—"

"You have mood swings."

"Severe mood swings," Tony corrected. "Pepper—he's a lethal cocktail of psychotic, psychopathic and bipolar disorder. I wouldn't be surprised at all if he committed murder."

Pepper put down her make-up wipes and turned to look directly at Tony, assessing his facial expression and posture. "You're serious," she concluded. "You really think he murdered Peter's parents."

Tony raked his fingers through his hair. "I think there is a possibility that the Parkers may have been assassinated," he said. "May not have been Osborn, but... I find too many links leading straight to him."

Pepper's heart raced, thudding in her chest as she comprehended the news. "Oh God," she said, falling against the bathroom sink. "If it's true and Peter—"

"Well, we're not going to go public on it yet," Tony assured her. "Need proof. Plus, Agent Ross doesn't want Oscorp to know they are being investigated in case they try to destroy any evidence."

Pepper pushed her hair away from her face. "Yes, I get that, but Tony... what about Peter? May? To know his parents were murdered..."

Tony went up to Pepper, wrapping an arm around her for support. "I know. I know," he said. And he did know. He knew all too well. "We'll solve this problem and maybe, by the end of this madness, we'll make all those sons of bitches pay for their crimes."

Pepper hoped so. She finished getting ready for bed, pulling the covers back to slip in. She tried to be discreet as Tony started fiddling with his device again. She watched him from the bed. "Are you going to bed anytime soon?"

"In a few minutes," Tony responded. "You can turn off the lights and sleep. I'll be in bed soon."

"Or are you going to head down to the lab?" teased Pepper.

"Nope. FRIDAY locked me out," Tony said. "Apparently, her health programming indicated that my sleep deprived state would cause an explosion that would harm me. So, she locked me out of the lab for my own safety."

"Good FRIDAY," Pepper mumbled as she snuggled in the bed. "You do need to sleep more."

"As do you," Tony pointed out. "Happy told me you didn't look good and he's right. You look stressed. You lost a bit of weight too. Your clothes are all—big."

Pepper's hand went to her belly. "Oh, well, life has been a bit hectic."

"No kidding," Tony said, still fiddling with his device. "Not only do we have to deal with Secretary Ross, but now Oscorp too? When does this madness end?"
Little did Tony know that more madness was coming his way. But, Pepper didn’t say that to him. “Soon, I hope.” And she did hope.

"Me too," Tony powered down his device. He finished whatever it was he needed to do. He moved to his side of the bed. Pepper felt the mattress give as he got under the covers. "I've been thinking."

"As always."

"About May."

"What about her?"

"I don't know how she does it."

"Does what?"

"Be... her, I guess," Tony said. "How she can stay sane through all this. I am barely functioning as it is and Peter isn't even my kid! I don't know how she managed to be so collective in front of those agents."

"She's a strong woman," Pepper said. "After everything she's gone through, she has enough hope to keep her going. That's strength only mothers have."

Tony heaved a long sigh. "I guess. I wouldn't know. Not a parent."

Pepper's hand move to her belly. "You kind of are."

"How so?"

"You're a father figure to Peter," Pepper answered quickly to cover her slip.

Tony groaned. "Yeah, maybe, but I shouldn't. Look what I've done to him?" he said, gesturing with his hand. "All I have done is brought more problems at his feet. Put him in far more dangerous situations than he would have if I didn't get involved in his life. Parker—sometimes, I wish I never met him. If only to spare him from all this."

Pepper took Tony's shoulder. "Stop being hard on yourself," she ordered. "You gave Peter a chance to reach his potential. Sure, there was some oversight issues you could have avoided if you thought things through, but in the end, you were there for him. You helped him and kept him safe. If you didn't intervene, he may have been killed wearing that homemade suit of his or Ross capturing him. You don't know what would have happened if you and Peter never met. If only to spare him from all this."

"And I doubt Peter would ever blame you for his problems," Pepper added. "He looks up to you, Tony. He wants to make you proud. So, despite your belief, you are a father figure to Peter. Welcome to parenthood."

Tony moaned again, wiping his face with his hands. "God—he deserves better."

"Maybe, but he chose you."

Tony turned to his side to look at Pepper. "He shouldn't have," he claimed. "I'm not a role-model. That was more Roger's department. If anything, I'm the worst person to look up to. All I do is destroy. Hell—I can't even lead a team. No, Peter... he's better off without me in his life. I'm not cut
out to be a father or a father figure. That's not in my DNA."

Pepper's heart deflated. "So, you're just going to give up on him?"

"No, I didn't say that," Tony defended himself. "I will fix my mistakes. I will correct my error of judgment and bring everyone back home, but after that... I can't, Pepper. Parker deserves better than me. And if I truly want to do right by him, then I need to cut ties with him."

"Tony—"

"I want him to be a better person than me, Pep," Tony said. "And he won't become that with me as his mentor. He needs... he needs someone better."

Pepper wanted to cry, but not in front of Tony. He already had enough emotional baggage to handle than hold hers. She flipped around, facing the wall. She took a long, steady breath. "That's not your choice to make, Tony," she argued. "Sometimes, we have responsibilities thrust upon us whether we want it or not."

"Perhaps," she heard Tony murmur. "But, I can't be the person he needs. I'm not cut out for it." He stretched his legs and adjusted his sleeping position so that he slept close to her. "Let's get some sleep. We both could use it."

"Yeah..." Pepper swallowed and glanced to her belly, remembering May’s words of encouragement. Now or never. "But, before we go to sleep, I-I need to tell you something."

"Okay," Tony said and he waited.

Pepper said nothing. Her fingers wrapped around the extra cloth, debating on whether to tell him the truth. The prolonged silence urged Tony to speak again, "What is it Pepper?"

"Nothing," Pepper said quickly. "Never mind."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Okay," he said, situating himself in the bed. "FRIDAY? Lights."

The lights turned off. Darkness fell. Pepper closed her eyes, hoping to sleep instantly to free herself from the belittling voices for backing out of her promise. Aunt May’s voice was the loudest. You should tell him. He deserves the chance to decide his actions.

Pepper squeezed her eyes tighter to banish all the thoughts away, but to no avail. Deep down, she knew she had to confess. And it was better she told him than him finding out from someone else.

She opened her eyes. "Tony?"

She heard him grumble a response.

Pepper took a deep breath, steadying her rapid heart. "I'm pregnant."

Instantly, the lights came on.
Laura Barton

Laura Barton stood next to her truck as the plane approached. She received the restricted text message to meet at the small, unoccupied airport near mid-afternoon to pick up her new charge. Laura leaned against her door, thinking about the decision she made a few days ago.

She should have consulted with Clint before agreeing, but she knew he would have reservations. After all, her husband did not hold back on his bitterness towards Tony Stark. He refused to acknowledge him by name for a long time. He only addressed Tony as Futurist or Asshole.

It broke Laura’s heart to see the team broken and scattered. When Clint first returned home and he relayed everything that happened, she held him close, knowing how the dismantling of the team—his second family—brought distraught. So, she didn’t scold or get mad over all the craftsmanship projects he started to undergo for their house. It kept his mind occupied and held off the nostalgia, which Clint needed for the time.

So, when she received a call, asking her to take in a teenage boy, Laura hesitated. Her family may not have a lot of electronics in their home, but she wasn’t cut off from the world. She knew who the teenager was. Everyone around the world heard of him and his flight. Sympathy and compassion overrode her concerns for her husband. She accepted and immediately went to prepare for his arrival.

She honestly meant to tell Clint of her decision and yet, every time she spoke with him, she couldn’t bring herself to tell him. Would he be angry? Call it off? Be despondent over it? She had no idea. All she knew was that a young, innocent boy needed shelter.

Laura straightened when the plane’s door opened and stairs came down. A minute later, a boy not too much older than her own son, stepped out of the shadows. His brown hair was a bit longer than in the photographs, but Laura recognized him.

Peter Parker.

The teenager finished his descent, studying Laura from a safe distance as if wondering if he needed to go to her. His steps were careful and cautious, wary of her. That didn’t surprise her at all. For him, the whole situation was bizarre and frightening and new for him. He couldn’t trust anyone. Not anymore.

Laura, however, wanted to make him feel welcomed. She walked over to him, slow and steady to not frighten him. “Peter Parker, right?” she said, smiling as she brushed a few wild strands of hair from her face. “Hi! I’m Laura.”

She stuck out her hand to shake his. Peter tentatively stared at it before accepting. He had a strong handshake. “Hello,” he responded, quiet and still unsure. “Nice to meet you.”

He was a polite boy. Raised right. Laura kept her smile as to keep the peace between them. “I hope your flight was okay. No problems?”

Peter shook his head. “No, ma’am.”

“Laura,” she insisted. “Laura is fine.” She looked over him, noticing only a small duffle in his hand. “Is this all your stuff or do you have more?”

Again, Peter shook his head. “No… this is it,” he said, cheeks tingling a bit red. “I don’t have very much.”
Laura understood. Life on the run meant little possessions. He was lucky to have what he had. “Okay—great,” she said. “Then we can get going if that’s all you have. Unless the pilot has more instructions—”

She looked back to the plane, expecting someone else to be walking down the plane’s stairs. Instead, the stairs disappeared and the plane’s door sealed shut. The roaring of an engine alerted Laura and Peter that they needed to move. Laura stepped aside, taking Peter with her as the plane turned around to depart.

There goes that, Laura thought. Now, it was only him and her.

“Okay, well, I guess not,” Laura said and then gestured to her truck. “We better get going. I don’t particularly like driving at night and I don’t want my husband to get overly concerned.”

Laura led Peter to the truck and he hopped into the passenger seat while she took the driver’s seat. She revved up the engine and steered the truck around down the dirt road that took her to the abandoned airport.

The first few minutes were uneasily silent. Peter gazed out his window, not saying a word. Laura imagined he had a lot on his mind and a lot of fears. She was nervous as well. A teenage boy with super powers. She’s met the Avengers once before and they lived under her roof, but she never had to care for a super-powered person before. Ever.

Not only that, she worried over Clint’s reaction. She still didn’t tell him and feared he may not take the news very well.

But, as Clint always reminded her, she should not focus on her fears. Focus on the goal. Focus on the present. And right now, that included getting the teenager to feel more comfortable. “So, did anyone tell you what’s happening or—no? Okay. That’s a bit surprising, I thought someone would tell you,” she said when Peter shook his head to her question. “Okay, then I guess I’ll tell you what I know. You will be staying with us until further notice.”

Peter’s brows furrowed to the center. “Us?”

“Me, my husband and my three kids.”

Peter blinked. It appeared he knew very little about his new home. “A family?”

Laura nodded. “Yeah, but don’t worry. They’re easy-going,” she assured him, although she may have been stretching the truth on that depending how Clint reacted. “My oldest, he’s eleven. And the second is eight. Then our baby just turned two.”

Peter nodded in acknowledgment. “Sounds like you have a good family,” he said and then paused. “I… I don’t want to intrude or bring any trouble—”

Laura waved him down. “Stop! Stop—don’t worry. I once had to house the entire Avengers team while they were hiding from the world,” she said. “So, trust me—you’re fine. Besides, I wouldn’t have picked you up if I didn’t want to.”

Peter seemed relieved by her response, but the tension still lingered in his muscles. “Is that how you know Agent Ross? From the Avengers?” he asked.

“I don’t who that is,” Laura said. “Who is he?”

Peter’s face twitched in warning. “Oh, um, no one,” he quickly mumbled. “What about King
T’Challa? You know him?”

Laura knew of the King of Wakanda was, but not personally. She shook her head. “I’m afraid I
don’t know him either,” she told him as she turned onto a country road that led them further into
nowhere. “I received a call from another friend asking for a big favor.”

“Who was that?”

“Someone you’ve probably never met,” Laura said, not wanting to expose her friend’s secret. “I
know this must be scary for you—”

“It’s not,” Peter stated. “I’m quite used to it now.”

Laura believed him. Peter has already been away for three months. He’s probably used to the
uncertainty of his future and the fear that goes alongside it. “I’m sorry,” she said. “It’s not fair.”

Peter shrugged. “It’s the Parker luck.”

Laura didn’t know what that meant, but she decided they needed a better subject to converse. “Well,
I have faith that things will get better,” she said. “Gotta believe it will or it won’t. My husband says
to me the moment you start to think negatively, then everything will go wrong.”

“You have a smart husband.”

“More like a smart ass,” she commented. “Sometimes I wish he took his own wisdom from time to
time.”

That got a small grin to crack on Peter’s somber face. Laura was pleased. They continued driving as
the sun set behind them, talking a bit here and there. Laura learned a little more about Peter such as
he’s an avid Star Wars fan, a member of the decathlon team at his old school and that he worried for
his aunt. Pity burned Laura’s heart as she listened to Peter tell her that his aunt was the last of his
family and he was afraid of losing her. Probably as much as his aunt was afraid of losing him—
Laura assumed.

Finally, Laura turned off the asphalt road and onto a dirt and gravel driveway that weaved between
the woods and over the rolling hills. Laura saw her home in the short distance. The lights were on,
meaning her family was inside and waiting for her return.

She pulled the truck right outside the barn and turned the engine off. “Welcome to your new home,”
she said to Peter, who was studying his new surroundings with a mixture of curiosity and
strangeness. After all, Peter grew up in the city, not in the country.

“Come on,” Laura said, nudging her head in the direction to the front door. “Let me introduce you to
the family.”

Laura led Peter to the front door, pulling the screen door open first before unlocking the front door.
They always locked the front door, even when they were home. No need to invite unwelcomed
strangers into their home with such ease.

She held the door for Peter, who stretched his legs over the threshold, eyes shifting left to right as he
took in everything. Their small home was cozy. A good size for their family, but to Peter, he looked
at it like it was some kind of mansion. Lips parted as his eyes roamed all over the foyer and living
room.

Laura closed and locked the door. “Kids? Hey kids! I’m home!”
She heard them before she saw them. Two pairs of feet came trotting from different directions until she saw her two oldest children appear.

Her daughter, Lila, squealed. “Mommy!”

Peter stood awkwardly as Cooper and Lila ran to their mother. Lila rattled off everything she’ve done for the day and waving up a drawing for her too see. It was of Clint, in his Hawkeye gear, firing arrows at aliens to save their family. She thanked her for the drawing and suggested she showed her dad. Cooper was begging to go to some basketball game in town on Friday. His friends were going and he wanted to go too. Laura consented to his requests.

After all that did her children realize that a stranger stood in their living room. Lila’s eyes went wide as saucers upon seeing him. Cooper coldly regarded Peter, distrustful of him. Just like his father.

Speaking of which. “Kids—where’s your father?”

Cooper jerked his head toward the backyard. “He’s playing with Nathaniel out in the sandbox.”

That meant Clint would come into the house soon enough once he brushed the sand pebbles off Nathaniel, who always managed to get sand everywhere on him. It was an annoying skill their youngest had.

Better make introductions before the storm. Laura waved Peter over. “Kids, I want you to meet someone who will be living with us for a while,” she said as Peter strolled over, his duffle slung over his shoulder. “This is Peter Parker. Peter? These are my kids—Cooper and Lila.”

Cooper and Lila respectfully greeted him in return as did Peter.

Laura moved from the foyer to the living room and gestured to the couch. “Peter—I haven’t exactly set up a bedroom for you quite yet. It was all last minute,” she said to him, “but our couch is a pull out and you can sleep there until we get you a room.”

“Mommy! He can stay in my room,” Lila eagerly offered. “He can stay in my room and I can sleep with you and Daddy.”

Laura was proud of her daughter. Always willing to sacrifice her things for others. Another trait from their father bestowed upon their child. She imagined Nathaniel would get his recklessness based off the baby’s wild attempts to escape his playpen.

“That’s very sweet of you to offer, Lila dear,” Laura said to her daughter, “but I don’t think he will fit in your bed.”

Lila had a small, handcrafted bed that Clint made a long time ago for her. It fit perfectly for her size, but she doubted it would fit Peter. Lila appeared dountrodden at the rejection, so Laura playfully squeezed her daughter’s cheek. “You are a very sweet girl,” she said. “You know—I do need help in getting sheets, blankets and a pillow for him. Do you think you can get those for me?”

Lila enthusiastically nodded and dashed past them. Cooper stayed behind, arms folded in front of him as he continued to regard Peter. “So—you’re the fugitive super-hero on the news?”

“Cooper!” Laura admonished, hotly embarrassed by her son’s brazen attitude.

Peter only knitted his eyebrows in confusion. “Um… yeah, I guess.”

Cooper nodded. “Cool,” he said. “What can you do?”
“Cooper!” Laura snapped, abashed by her son. “You don’t ask those questions. You know better.”

Cooper innocently shrugged. “I was only curious, Mom.”

“No, it’s all right,” Peter interjected to quell them. “I don’t mind. I, um, I can do lots of things,” he said to Cooper, which got her son interested. “I have heightened senses. I can climb on walls. I’m faster than I used to be. I also have some super strength too.”

Cooper’s cold demeanor defrosted at once. “Is it true that you caught a speeding car with your bare hands?” he asked, excited. “My friends showed me a video of you catching a car about to crash into a bus. Is it true? Or was that fake?”

Peter didn’t say anything. He looked around the room, spying all the objects and furniture in the house. He must have seen something for he dropped his duffel and walked over to their couch. Laura and Cooper followed him, watching with both wonder and trepidation.

Peter examined the couch for a few more seconds before, with one arm, he lifted the couch straight over his head. No pauses and strains. He lifted the couch straight over his head as if it weighed like a slip of paper. Then, carefully, he put it back down in its original place and turned back to them.

“Yeah,” Peter mumbled. “I’m kind of strong.”

Laura and Cooper just stared. Too amazed at how easy it was for him to pick up that furniture. Even Clint had some difficulty moving the couch. It was old and heavy. Far heavier than other furniture they own. She was amazed.

And Cooper… he was beyond amazed. He was star-struck. “Wow!” he gasped. “What else can you lift? Can you hold up a car that easy? What about a tractor? Or a trailer? Or—”

“Oh, that’s enough Coop,” Laura said, “He’s not a circus clown. He’s a kid just like you.”

“No really,” Cooper said, eyeing the couch.

Laura glared at her son. “Don’t you have homework you need to finish?” she questioned. “And what about your chores? I know your dad left something for you to do.”

Cooper groaned, but he did not talk back. He knew better. He thanked Peter for the show before running up the stairs to his own bedroom. As Cooper made his way up, Lila made her way down the stairs, arms full with blankets, pillows and sheets.

“Mommy! I got you the stuff,” Lila said, holding up the items to her. “Are these okay?”

Laura took them into her own arms. “They’re perfect! Thank you, sweetie,” she said as she moved back to the couch that Peter easily picked up seconds ago. She laid the items down and looked back to Peter. “I’ll set it up later tonight, but I figured I can give you a tour? Or maybe you want something to eat? I have a crockpot cooking, so dinner will be ready soon. But if you are hungry now or thirsty—”

Her words were drowned out by the sound of the backdoor opening. The screen creaked and groaned as someone pushed it back. Feet pitter-pattered on the tile before Laura heard the shoes come off. The footsteps moved from the back room and around the kitchen. And then her husband appeared, with baby Nathaniel in his arms.

“Hawkeye?” Peter said, flabbergasted with his mouth hanging open in awe. “You’re Hawkeye.”
Clint stared at Peter, his stance positioned into defense. There was distrust behind those eyes as he
looked at Peter, unsure as to who the strange boy was. But then recognition kicked in and Clint
turned his gaze sharply from Peter to Laura.

“Hi honey,” he said to her as he moved to stand next to her. “You didn’t tell me we were having
guests over.”

“Not guests,” Laura corrected him as she took Nathaniel from his arms. Nathaniel gurgled in delight
at being in his mother’s arms. “Just him. This is Peter—”

“Oh, I know,” Clint responded, voice somewhat clipped. He disguised his anger enough to hide
from his kids. “Peter Parker.”

Peter numbly nodded, still in shock at seeing her husband. His brown orbs kept bouncing from Clint
to her, almost as if trying to figure out if he’s hallucinating or not. Laura guessed Peter was unaware
of Clint being her husband. No one told him anything it seemed.

Lila, however, didn’t notice the tension at all. “He’s going to be staying with us Daddy,” she beamed
at her father. “Mommy said that he’s going to be with us for some time. Isn’t that great?”

Clint’s face showed nothing, but kindness and happiness. “Sure is,” he said to Lila, hiding the fact
that he was in a sour mood. “That’s great. That’s really great.”

It was time to have the talk. Laura went over to Peter. “If you don’t mind,” she said, passing
Nathaniel over to him. Nathaniel’s face immediately began to crinkle in displeasure. “Could you take
him and Lila upstairs to her room? Just play or something? Keep them busy as we get dinner ready
down here.”

Peter took Nathaniel as the baby began to cry. He looked helpless and uneasy with Nathaniel in his
arms, but Laura had confidence. Lila was excited and took Peter’s other hand to lead him straight to
her room as she rattled off games they could play.

Once Peter and the kids were gone, Laura and Clint moved to the kitchen for extra privacy.

Clint started first. “What the hell is he doing here?” he demanded. “Don’t you know who that is?”

“Of course I do.”

“Really? That’s Tony Stark’s protégé,” Clint said pointing upstairs. “Do you know what that
means?”

“Means that he’s a kid who needs help now?” Laura countered in a ridiculous tone. She was not
pleased by Clint’s reactions, but it wasn’t unexpected. “I know you are still hurt by what Stark did,
but that doesn’t mean Peter is the same. He’s a kid, Clint. He needs our help.”

Clint started to pace. “How? How can we help him?”

“Provide him with some normalcy,” Laura answered. “A kid has no place living on the run. With us,
Peter at least has some stability and comfort. He’s safe here.”

Clint snorted. “Yeah, that is until Tony Stark gives us up to cover his own ass.”

“You said he wouldn’t.”

“That’s what I was told,” Clint corrected her, arms crossed as he stopped his pacing. “I don’t trust
Stark to keep his word. He does whatever he thinks is best, damn those who say otherwise."

"It's not his word I'm trusting."

"Then whose?" Clint asked, grabbing the back of a kitchen chair for support. "Who asked us to take in the kid?"

"Fury."


"I knew you would object."

"Of course I would have object!" Clint steadfast agreed, and he let out a huff of air as he dropped his chin to his chest, "but… I wouldn't have said no."

"What?" Laura was surprised. She predicted begrudgingly surrender, not… not agreement.

Clint nodded along. "I saw what Ross and his men did to that kid," he said, tired as if the memory itself brought a sudden burden on him. "I know the trouble he's facing. You're right, Laura. He needs ours help. Maybe in a lot of different ways." He sighs loudly, releasing all the tension he held onto. "In the end, I would have said yes."

Then Clint pointedly added, "Doesn't mean I forgive Stark. He's still an asshole."

Laura hugged her husband and whispered a thank you.

Clint returned her hug. "It's the right thing to do."

Laura and Clint hiked up the stairs to their daughter’s bedroom. They found all three on the floor as Lila introduced Peter to her small collection of dolls. Nathaniel was on Peter’s lap, eyes raw from crying. When they entered, everyone turned to them.

"Thanks Peter," Laura said as she scooped Nathaniel from his arms. "If you want, I can show you where everything is and all that."

Peter nodded, rising to his feet as he followed Laura out the door. Clint opted to stay with his daughter and get her to clean up the mess in her bedroom. They descended the stairs, the wood creaking under their combined weight. Once they got to the landing, Laura began the tour.

"So, as you know this is our living room—"

"Hawkeye doesn’t trust me."

It scared Laura for a second by Peter’s interruption, considering the teenager stayed relatively quiet since she met him. "What? No, of course not," she soothed. "He’s not mad at you."

"He’s mad at Mr. Stark," Peter corrected. "Blames him and doesn’t trust me because of my association with him."

Laura readjusted Nathaniel on her hips. "Why do you think that?"

"Because it’s what he said. Just a moment ago," Peter tapped on his ear. "Super hearing."

Laura’s shoulders sagged completely. She forgotten that she’s dealing with a super-powered
individual. He did tell her and Cooper that his senses have all been heightened. “I’m sorry for that Peter,” she said. “Clint… ever since the incident in Berlin, he’s having a hard time adjusting. The Avengers were like a family and… to him—”

“—Mr. Stark destroyed that family,” Peter finished for her. “Yeah, I know the story. And… I’m sorry things couldn’t work out for everyone. I still wish that things did.”

“That’s very nice of you,” she said. “The Avengers meant a lot to Clint and it hurts him to know that the group is broken. Yes, he doesn’t like Mr. Stark, but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t like you. Remember that. It has nothing to do with you. Just…”

“Just Stark,” Peter finished again, feet shifting as he dug his hands into his pockets. “Yeah, my aunt doesn’t like him much either.”

“Then Clint and your aunt would get along well,” Laura smiled and gestured for Peter to keep following her. “Now, this way is to the kitchens…”

Peter only had to sleep on the couch for the first three nights. They cleaned out the only spare room available, the attic that stored a few boxes of memorabilia and tokens. Once it was cleared and the objects stashed away in the cellar, Laura purchased bedroom furniture at a local store and hauled it back to the house in the truck. Clint and Peter unloaded the furniture and carried it up the two flights of stairs to Peter’s new bedroom. Laura and Lila made lemonade for them as Clint, Peter and Cooper assembled the furniture together. It took only a day to convert the empty attic into a genuine bedroom, complete with bed, desk, bookcase and dresser. Laura threw a duvet cover and a quilt on the bed, and it began to look homely. She also installed a space heater as the attic often got cold at nights.

The first week was awkward. Laura did her best to make Peter feel at home, but the boy always acted as if he didn’t belong there at all. Perhaps he didn’t. After all, he’s not their actual child. But, Laura didn’t want him to feel like an outsider. She wanted him to join in the family fun and daily life. So, she used her children as the first step of getting Peter to open up.

Laura was surprised how well her kids took to Peter. Lila adored him, looked at him with star-struck wonder. Anytime Peter complimented or even talked to her, Lila's face blushed true red and a silly smile lifted her cheeks. Cooper admired Peter. Laura noticed the subtle changes Cooper made to his appearance. Her son began to dress similar to Peter's attire and even attempted to change his accent to the way Peter talk (it failed though, but nonetheless, he tried). Little Nathaniel also enjoyed Peter's company. At first, their youngest wailed whenever he was transferred from his parents' arms to Peter's. But eventually, the toddler warmed up to Peter once the teenager started playing with him and making silly faces at the table to get him to relax in his high chair. Soon enough, Nathaniel screamed whenever his parents took him away from Peter.

Laura found it all amusing. Peter was a sweet boy, always helping around the house whenever he could. Clint took advantage of that. He needed a helping hand with his projects and soon, whenever she and the kids left for work and school, Clint and Peter would be hard at work on either Clint's craftsmanship projects or the farm. To both her and her husband's surprise, Peter had a real knack in engineering. He fixed all the mechanical issues in the house that included the busted coffee pot, lawn mower and replacing the engine in the truck.

Clint also taught him something about farming. Peter grew up in the city. His knowledge on country life was limited, but Clint got him up to speed. By the second day, Clint had Peter on the tractor, working the fields. Peter struggled to get everything done correctly, but Clint was patient. He promised Peter that he would get better at it after some practice. Next, Clint taught him how to chop
wood. Peter found the task easier than plowing. Clint went on to tell Peter how Captain America used his bare hands to split wood rather than an axe. Peter was in awe and promptly tried to do it too.

“Let me try!” Peter said, reaching for a new log.

Clint tried to warn him against it. “Hey, kid,” he said, “Don’t hurt yourself—” He immediately shut up when Peter split the long with his hands just as easily as Steve Rogers did.

“You know?” Clint said one day to Laura, “I think Pete here may be stronger than good old, Cap.”

Clint came around to Peter far quicker than they both expected. Laura believed Clint enjoyed having another "older son" around the house who could help him with all the maintenance. It was lonely for Clint when she and the kids headed into town for work and school. With Peter around, he had another person to hang with around the house. Being grounded to the property brought them closer. Clint enjoyed Peter’s company, finding the boy gifted and funny. The two often engaged in banter, jesting one another that it almost felt Peter was truly their own son.

But then of course she remembered that he wasn't. Going into town, she would see newspaper articles about him, his abilities and the problems that followed him. Tabloids mentioned his Aunt May, writing scary news titles about her that Laura was certain would cause Peter to freak out. She never bought any. She only read them at work and then reported it all back to Clint. Her husband told her to never bring home those tabloids. She agreed.

Peter seemed fine overall. Occasionally, Laura thought she caught a flicker of sadness in those brown eyes as he watched their little family interact. She knew some of Peter’s history. Only child, orphaned at a young age, lived with relatives and one of them died in front of him. It must be difficult to see a whole family, happy and loving one another when he’s all alone.

But, those moments disappeared quick enough. Her kids hardly let him have any peace and quiet. Peter assisted Cooper and Lila with their homework. He even helped Cooper on a science project with such enthusiasm that he basically did the whole project for Cooper (Clint made Cooper start over again so that he didn’t take Peter’s work). He also helped Lila with her equations and would read bedtime stories to her. He also participated in helping Nathaniel learn to use the bathroom. It wasn’t the most exciting job, but he helped Laura and Clint when it came to Nathaniel, either potty training, feeding or simply rocking him back to sleep. When he was with the kids, he showed no signs of depression or frustration. He radiated excitement and happiness.

It was only when the kids were tucked away in their beds that Clint and Laura noticed the change. Peter deflated, sat somewhere off to the side and kept quiet. When either Clint or Laura asked if he was all right, he answered quickly that he was before running upstairs to his room to sleep.

“T’m worried about him,” Laura confided to Clint one night before bed. "He acts lonely when he thinks no one is watching him.”

"The curse of being separated from everything you have ever known,” commented Clint.

Laura turned on her side. "Maybe we could help him? You know... maybe let him get in contact with that aunt of his?”

Clint immediately shook his head. "No. Bad idea. Not that I don't like your idea, but it's too dangerous,” he explained. "For him and the kids. All it takes is one trail."

Laura sighed, hands gripping her pillow. She knew Clint was right. All it took one was slip and then the government could be storming through the front door. She always known that. Even their kids.
It's why their kids don't have many electronic devices. No mobile phones or iPads or even the Internet. Not that they weren't allowed, but they couldn't have it in their home. They often went to the public library to use those computers for anything they needed. No, if Peter managed to get into contact with his aunt, too many incidents could happen that would lead to catastrophe. It's not fair or kind, but it was necessary for everyone's safety.

"I wish it didn't," Laura whispered, but Hawkeye heard her and nodded.

"Me too."

Their wish was granted soon enough. By the beginning of Peter's second month staying with them, Laura and Clint were finishing putting breakfast on the table. Lila and Cooper were getting ready for school and Nathaniel was already seated in his high chair, chopping on small cheerios.

Once the eggs, fruit and sausages were on the table, Laura yelled for the kids to come down. She heard their stomping feet running down the stairs as they slid into the kitchen. Lila frowned.

“Where’s Peter?” she asked, noticing his absence.

“Wait for it,” Clint said as he took his seat.

A couple minutes later, the teenager lethargically crossed into the kitchen. He yawned, arms stretched high over his head and hair tousled in a mess. “Morning,” Peter mumbled as he pulled out a chair to sit down.

Lila took the chair next to him as she always did. “Your hair looks funny.”

Peter stopped pouring the orange juice and started to furiously comb his hair down. Clint stopped him. “You’re only making it worse, kid.”

Laura took her seat and the family all scrambled for the food they wanted. Peter helped dump some eggs on Lila’s plate before helping himself. Clint told Cooper that he cannot take four sausage links and Laura helped mashed some banana for Nathaniel to eat. It was a normal day for them. Nothing new or out of the ordinary.

Until Lila spoke up. “Mommy? Did you sign my permission slip? It’s due today.”

Laura paused to think. “I thought it wasn’t due until March 1?”

“Today is March 1.”

“Today is March 1?”

They all turned their heads to Peter. He looked stunned as his switched his gaze between Clint and Laura. “Is it really March 1?”

Clint nodded. “Yeah. Why do you ask?”

Peter lowered his fork. “It’s… it’s my birthday today.”

All at once, the whole table went silent. And then, it burst into a loud song of sweet birthday messages. “Happy Birthday, Peter!” Laura said after her daughter squealed her own birthday wish to him. “Why didn’t you tell us earlier?”

Laura shared a quick look with Clint. Her husband consented as he knew exactly what was on her mind. “Well, then we are definitely going to be celebrating your birthday tonight,” she announced. “What is your favorite meal? Do you like Chinese? Pizza?”

Peter waved his hands dismissingly. “Oh, no, you don’t have to do anything,” he said. “It’s just a birthday.”

“Don’t worry about it kid,” Clint said. “Birthdays are a big deal in this household. How old are you now?”

“Sixteen,” Peter mumbled.

“Sixteen?” Clint repeated in a surprised undertone. “Oh, then we definitely need to celebrate.”

“Sweet sixteen,” Laura said. “That’s a good birthday. You have to celebrate. Gotta be big. So, tell me what you want for dinner and I’ll pick it up from the store to make. Oh—and cake. What cake do you want?”

“It’s really not a big deal—”

“Peter, here’s some birthday wisdom for you,” Clint said as he leaned in to speak directly to Peter. “If a girl says it’s a big deal, then it is. No matter what you may think. Laura is going to make you your favorite dinner one way or another. And she will get you a cake, one way or another. Best you tell her what you want so you can enjoy it.”

Peter resigned to the fact he wasn’t going to win. He told Laura he enjoyed Asian foods and she promptly began thinking of different foods to either make or order depending on the time. He also told her to go with vanilla cake, since most people enjoy that cake. Peter begged nothing fancy though.

Laura, however, already had an idea.

She took Lila and Cooper to school and headed into work. At work, she called in a local Chinese restaurant and ordered an array of entrees, hoping Peter liked something in one of those boxes. During her lunch break, she made a quick trip to the mall, searching for something Peter may like. It was hard to pick something out for the kid. She couldn’t get him anything electronic. Fury was strict about what Peter could have. She knew he would like something to play around with once Clint ran out of things for him to do. Something along mechanical engineering perhaps. She searched and searched, eventually purchasing two items she thought would be good.

At the end of the day, she picked up Cooper and Lila from after school, got the food, and went home. Peter and Clint (and Nathaniel, riding along on his big wheel) were outside when they arrived. Clint was instructing Peter on how to spray pesticides on the small batch of crops they plant on their land.

Clint waved to them. “Hey,” he said, walking over to his wife to help with the groceries. “What did you get?”

“Dinner and presents,” Laura responded, taking the bags away. “Finish up out here and then shower. I don’t want to smell bug repellent on you at the table.”

“Or else you would be repelled by me?”

Laura gave him a look as he ushered her children inside the house. “Exactly and I would hate to have you sleeping in the barn,” she said to which earned a laugh from Clint before he kissed her.
“We’ll finish up now,” he promised.

Laura placed the food on the table, setting the Chinese groceries to the side as she quickly whipped up a batch of cake mix. She’s trained in the art of cake cooking, knowing the ingredients, measurements and temperature by heart. Finished, she poured the mix into two rounds tins and threw them in the oven. She grabbed the bag with all the gifts and raced to the storage closet to grab leftover wrapping paper.

In her room, she wrapped her two gifts up, marking the gifts from the Barton family. She hoped he liked them.

Clint came into the bedroom after she finished writing the card. “Oh? You got gifts?”

“Small things,” Laura answered. “I wasn’t sure what to get him.”

“I’m sure he’ll appreciate whatever it is,” Clint assured her. “I’m going to take a shower. Oh—your cakes smell good.”

“Don’t they always?”

“I always said you should open a bake shop.”

Clint hopped into the shower and Laura proceeded down the stairs with gifts in hand. She dropped them off on the living room table before hurrying to the kitchen. She could easily smell the waft of vanilla that sweetened the kitchen. She checked on the cakes. Another ten minutes.

Best to get dinner started or else the food would get cold. She hurried and set the plates around the table. She went to her china cabinet and pulled out a large, red plate that read Your Special Plate. The plate they used for birthdays or honorable moments in one’s life. She placed it at the head of the table. The one Clint usually occupied, but she was sure Clint would gladly abdicate his throne for one day.

She put the Chinese cartons on the table and a pitcher of water and milk. Once done, she called for everyone. Peter appeared first, hair wet and sticking to his forehead. He carried Nathaniel in his arms, muttering to her son, asking if he was ticklish here or there, and then proceeded to tickle her son. Nathaniel giggled and wretched away in protest, which got Peter to laugh. He put Nathaniel in his high chair and nearly sat in a random seat until Laura stopped him.

“Nope,” Laura pointed to the head of the table. “You sit there tonight.”

Peter glanced at the chair with the red plate. “But, Hawkeye sits there.”


Peter sat in Clint’s normal seat, feeling somewhat uneasy as he kept glancing to the doorway. Almost like expected Clint to come and yell at him. Lila and Cooper came next, followed by Clint. Her husband didn’t even take notice of his seat being taken. He acted as if it was a normal occurrence for him to not sit in his seat. He took the chair next to Cooper, teasing his son long hair style. Laura checked the cakes. A nice gold coloring. She took them out to cool.

She joined her family at the table. “All right, so I ordered Chinese in honor of the birthday boy,” she gestured across the table to Peter. “As you know the rules, he gets first dibs on everything. So, pass each carton to him first.”
They did as instructed and Peter chuckled at the bizarreness. But, he smiled all the way through it as he loaded his plate with different Chinese foods. They all dug into their meal, swapping stories and laughing at jokes. After they had their fill, Peter took the kids to the living room to play another round of Uno. It’s an ongoing game the kids have. So far, Lila was the ultimate champion, winning ten games overall. Peter was second with six games and Cooper with five.

Clint finished the dishes while Laura decorated the cake. She took a baking and decorating class when she was much younger, but those skills never faded in time. As she neared finishing her decoration, Clint came over and examined the cake.

“Wow… you think he’ll like it?” Clint asked.

Laura hesitated with the black icing. “Why? Do you think he won’t?”

“No, I think he’ll be very impressed with your decoration skills,” Clint said with a grin. “But, I must ask… why don’t you ever make me a Hawkeye cake? You’ve only ever made me a carmel cake.”

“Well, when you de-age to fifteen, I will,” Laura promised and she put the last finishing touches on the cake. “All right… send in the kids. It’s cake time.”

Clint called for the kids. They came marching back in with Peter giving Lila a piggyback ride and Cooper rolling Nathaniel into the kitchen on his baby walker. Clint swung Nathaniel up in the air, making funny faces at him before settling the boy in his high chair. Peter was redirected back to the head of the table.

Laura arranged sixteen candles on the cake and began to light them up. “Okay. Turn off the lights.”

The light went off and only the soft, warm glow of the candles lit up the kitchen. As if on cue, Laura heard the off-pitched “Happy Birthday” chorus as she carried the cake to the birthday boy. She placed the cake in front of Peter. She heard a stunned gasp from Peter as he saw the cake in its entirety.

The song ended, with the exception of Cooper and Lila carrying the tune to include the funny lines of many more. “All right, kids,” Clint said to silence the two. He turned to Peter. “Make a wish kid.”

Peter didn’t even hesitate. He blew out a puff of air and the flames vanished. Everyone clapped and whooped in happiness. Clint turned the light on and everyone got a better view of the cake. It was decorated as Spider-man, swinging through a city.

Clint handed Peter a knife. “Birthday boy cuts the cake.”

“Do I have to?” Peter questioned. “It looks amazing!” He turned to Laura. “You did all this?”

Laura nodded. “I figured you would enjoy a taste of home after being so far away,” she said and then smiled at Peter. “Happy Sweet Sixteen, Peter.”

There was a shine to Peter’s eyes as he swallowed with a bit of difficulty. He turned away, taking one more look at the Spider-man cake. A quiver of a smile pulled his lips up. “Thank you.”

Before Peter carved into the cake, Laura stopped him. “Wait! Wait, hold on,” she hurried to one of the cabinet drawers in the kitchen and pulled out an old camera. “I think this still has a timer.” Laura worked the camera, fiddling it up to get it to the exact frame she wanted. “Okay, everyone gather around Peter.”

Laura picked up Nathaniel as Clint, Cooper and Lila gathered around Peter. The red light beeped
rapidly, warning them the camera was about to go off. “Smile everyone!” Laura said.

The camera flashed a few times, capturing their beaming faces. Laura was happy with it. Peter cut the cake, the kids each requesting a part of the design. Lila wanted Spider-man and Cooper wanted the tallest tower. Nathaniel was the only one not picky with what slice he got.

They ate the cake eagerly and when they licked their lips and plate, they paid their compliments to the baker. Laura wrapped the cake up and Peter, still being the kind boy he was, picked up all the dishes and put them in the sink.

“Everyone to the living room,” Laura told her small horde. “Got presents to open.”

Peter looked up from rinsing the dishes. “Oh—no, please tell me…”

“That we got you gifts?” Clint finished for him as he slugged an arm over his shoulder. “We sure did.” And Clint dragged Peter off from the sink to the living room.

Everyone seated on the couch and chairs. Peter was in the middle, right between Clint and Cooper. Lila sat in one chair and Laura in another with Nathaniel on her lap. Laura passed the two, Christmas wrapped gifts to Peter.

“Happy Birthday,” she said. “From all of us.”

Peter thanked her and tentatively unwrapped the first gift. It was a shirt. He lifted up the navy T-shirt and put it against his chest. It had a silly graphic design that read Never trust an Atom. They make up everything.

Peter laughed. “I love it,” he said, moving it around to look at it more closely. “This is great! You know because atoms are responsible for—”

“We get it, kid,” Clint said, not wishing to endure another science lecture. “Open your next gift.”

Peter unwrapped the next gift. It was robotic arm. He had to build it from the pieces inside the box, but Peter was enthusiastic over it and already started opening the package to get started.

“Whoa! Easy kid,” Clint said. “You still have one more gift.”

Laura shot a look to Clint. She didn’t get a third gift. What was he talking about? Clint reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a small envelope. He passed it onto Peter. “Here you go.”

Peter took the envelope and tore it open. He pulled the letter out and read it. His eyes went wide and he jerked his head to Clint. “Are you serious?”

Clint nodded. “Yeah… unless you goof around and not take it seriously, then I will stop.”

“No—I promise I won’t goof off. I’ll take it seriously,” Peter swore.

Laura leaned over in her chair to get a look at the letter. “What did you get him Clint?”

Peter turned to Laura. “Archery lessons,” he said. “He’s going to train me to shoot a bow and arrow.”

Cooper shot up in his seat. “Hey! That’s not fair! I always asked for archery lessons.”

“And I said you will once you turned sixteen,” Clint said. “Are you sixteen?”
Cooper slouched and pouted. “No.”

Clint patted his son’s knee in comfort. “In a few more years, kiddo.”

Peter gathered up all his gifts, still wearing his stupid smile. “Thank you! Seriously!” he said to both Clint and Laura. “I… I know having another kid is tough financially, so I appreciate everything you did for me today. It… it made the birthday bearable.”

That melted Laura’s heart. “We’re glad you had a good birthday,” she said, rising up and ruffled Peter’s hair. “And, of course, we are happy to have you join our family.”

Peter gathered his gifts and carried them upstairs to his bedroom. Clint put Lila and Nathaniel to bed. Cooper asked if he could watch some television before his bedtime. Laura consented as she tidied up the kitchen, finishing cleaning the dishes that Peter started.

When she finished, she found Peter, Clint and Cooper in the living room, watching one of repeats of The Simpsons. The show ended and the credits rolled. Laura tapped on her son’s shoulder.

“Bedtime,” she pointed up the stairs.

Cooper moaned. “Can’t I stay up a little later?”

“Do you have school tomorrow?”

Cooper said nothing. All he did was get up his seat and begrudgingly stomped up the stairs to demonstrate his protests. Laura rolled his eyes. “I’m heading to bed,” she told Clint. “Don’t you two stay up too late.”

“I’ll be up there soon enough,” Clint said to her. “I’m going to ask Peter when he wants to start—”

A commanding voice cut Clint off. Both he and Laura turned to the voice, their eyes redirected to the television screen. A lady dressed well and sitting behind a desk stared directly into the camera as she announced breaking news.

*Breaking News—we have confirmed reports that May Parker, the aunt of fugitive Peter Parker, has died tonight after suffering another heart attack earlier this afternoon. Inside sources are saying the May Parker has been unwell since the disappearance of her nephew and has been in and out of the medical wards. Let’s go live—*

Clint launched to the television and slammed the powered button down. The screen zapped to black, but the damage was done. Laura and Clint snapped their attention from the screen to Peter.

Peter stood erect. Eyes glued to the black screen and lips drooped from that easy smile to a grave frown. The muscles in his face went rigid, tensing the longer he stood there.

“Peter?” Laura called to him, worried. “Hey—Peter?”

A choked sob slipped from Peter’s mouth. “Aunt May…”
Nick Fury

“He'll like it there. Clint is good with kids.”

Steve Rogers’ comment was true. Nick Fury believed he made the right call in arranging Peter Parker to stay with the Bartons. After all, Clint was the only Avenger who had a family. One of the main reasons Fury decided to send Peter to the Bartons. That and they lived in the middle of nowhere. The perfect spot for someone like Peter Parker to live out his fugitive days until the whole catastrophe of the Sokovia Accords were fixed.

When Fury heard the news about the Accords and the fallout of the Avengers, it made him bitter for a long time. He worked hard in establishing the Avengers and then one, power-hungry megalomaniac destroyed that perfect team. All of his efforts to protect the world from unknown and dangerous threats were sabotaged by a man Fury despised. He never trusted Thaddeus Ross. Never shared any secrets with the man despite his high-level security access within the government. A man who strives for power is not a man to trust.

Steve Rogers understood this, which was why he refused the Accords and lived his life in the shadows. Like Fury.

Steve and the other outlaws had been living on the fringe of existence when Fury tracked them down. He rallied them to continue fighting, to still work as a team despite the Sokovia Accords. He recruited them into his world once more, saving the world and the people from one threat after another. Which was how they discovered Ross's movements against Parker. Steve made the call and now, the world turned upside down once more.

After dropping the kid off with T'Challa, Steve hid with Fury, somewhere deep in Eastern Europe, to keep up with work in stopping worldwide threats. It had only been a few months since the incident in Queens when Steve received a message from King T'Challa in regards to sending Peter out of Wakanda. Fury got busy again. In a few weeks, he planned out the transition. He received Laura Barton's compliance to accept Peter into their home and got in touch with his old friend Phil to escort the boy to the Bartons' homestead.

That was nearly a month ago. A new crisis emerged in the form of Tony Stark. The billionaire made contact, seeking a presence with Fury. Something important was all Stark relayed.

Steve, who had been looking out the window, looked to Fury. "Are you going to go?"

"Why not?" Fury said. He needed to speak to Stark anyway.

“No reason," Steve replied, moving away from the window. He stepped closer to where he left his jacket. "Want me to come?"

Fury looked over at Steve with his one, remaining eye, reading the man's posture as if he could read the man's mind. "I think it's best you don't," he advised, "but I will send him your regards."

Steve did a grateful nod. "Thank you," he said, taking a seat in one of the few chairs they had in their hideout. "What do you think it's about?"

“Probably Parker," Fury responded. It was all Stark currently worked on at the moment. Every news outlet in the world focused on Stark's ambition to spare Peter Parker from the US government's wrath. "Maybe need assistance in the matter."

“Of course,” Fury always had information on anything. If he didn’t, he would have been dead a long time ago. "I am curious as to why he is reaching out now.”

"You think it might be a trap?” Steve worried.

Fury shook his head. "No, and I wouldn't betray you or the others," he assured Captain America. "Something else. Something not yet reported."

Steve's brows furrowed in confusion. "Like what?"

Fury kept his lips sealed on the matter. "I'll find out, won't I?" he said and he headed to the door, leaving good, old Captain America apprehensive on the situation.

Fury hadn’t waited very long.

Funny thing was, Tony Stark didn’t even notice him right away. The billionaire, playboy, philanthropist walked straight into the office without a single glance around the room. He snatched a stress ball, squeezing it periodically as he rummaged through his cabinets. Most likely searching for the last bottle of scotch Fury took the honor of finishing for him.

“"You looking for this?” Fury announced his presence to Tony. He lifted the empty scotch bottle for Tony to see. "Tasted refreshing.”

Tony grumbled as he marched over to Fury. "Christ—what is with you spies? Ever heard of knocking?" he grunted, swiping the bottle. Not a single drop left. "Or even showing up to a scheduled date? You're two days late. I waited over five hours for you to show. I nearly got frostbite."

Fury was indifferent. He knew Stark exaggerated. The temperatures weren't even below forty at the time of their original meeting outside of New York City. "I never follow through with appointments like that," he said. "Too many variables that could go wrong."

"But spontaneous arrivals don't have any?" Tony remarked and he raked his dark hair back from his forehead. It was longer now. Around the same length of when he first became Iron Man. Although, he didn't look ten years younger. He looked exactly the opposite. Deep bags under his unfocused eyes and crows feet drew up in the corner of his eyes. He was a man of age and burden.

Fury clasped his hands together. "Let's get to the point. You know how much I hate wasting my valuable time," he said and gestured a continuation wave to Tony. "Why did you summon me from beyond the grave?"

Tony scoffed at the humor, tossing away the empty bottle. "I'm sure you are aware of the situation we are currently in?"

"That you are currently in," Fury corrected. He had no dealings with Ross. "I'm dead, remember?"

Again, Tony didn't find it amusing. "Doesn't mean you don't have a hand or an eye in this whole debacle."

Fury let him have it. He did know a thing or two. Possibly more. Definitely more. "So—what is the problem this time? Other than the obvious endangerment of a child."
Tony pulled out his Starkphone, typing away as he ignored Fury's jab. "I want you to tell me everything you know about...," He popped up a screen between them, "... them."

Fury rolled his one good eye over the information before him. Except, it wasn't information. It was a folder. A single folder titled Parker, Richard and Mary.

He concealed his stress, showing no physical signs of the regret that struck him upon seeing those names again. "What about them?" he inquired.

Tony stared, admonished at Fury's carefully toned indifference. "What do you mean 'what about them'? How about the fact that SHIELD had these files to begin with? Why don't we start there?" he snapped. "How long have you been spying on the Parkers? Did you know—"

"I'm going to stop you right there," Fury said as he did not want to spiral into ridiculousness as Tony seemed to head. "I am aware of Richard and Mary Parker. However, we were not spying on them."

"So—they worked for SHIELD?"

"Not really."

Tony's eyebrows drew closer and deeper. "Not really?" he repeated, incredulously. "What the hell does that mean?"

"It means that they were informants. Not agents."

"Informers on Norman Osborn," Tony expounded. "Like whistle-blowers?"

Fury confirmed with a nod. "The Parkers came to us after they had concerns about their employer. We were, of course, already aware of Osborn's secret projects, although, not to the extent the Parkers offered."

Tony nodded his head along, comprehending the new information to fit with the old. "So... they came to you with evidence of unethical experimentation—"

"No," Fury shook his head. Tony was missing the bigger picture. "Richard Parker came to us about his genetic coding theory."

"Genetic coding theory?"

"Originally, Parker used his theory as a way to help diabetic patients. At least, that was what his job title stated."

"What was is being used for?"

Fury took a moment to remember. "Parker discovered that his research was being used in developing a new super soldier serum," he revealed. "Realizing the danger, Richard and Mary contacted us. We met briefly and Richard passed on documents that proved his concerns to be valid."

Tony pulled up a chair and sat down, spinning it a little as he went deeper into his mind. "What was this theory of Richard Parker? I mean, how is it being used to recreate Captain America, because I think it could use some tweaks."

Fury glowered at the brash jab against Steve Rogers. "I think a few people could say the same thing," he returned and Tony rolled his eyes in response. But, Fury continued on. "Richard Parker’s theory involved altering DNA to improve an individual’s bodily system. Such as someone who is
diabetic could reprogram their kidneys and pancreas to reproduce glucose. Or someone with heart
disease or lung disease.”

“So, like stem-cell research?” Tony offered.

Fury shook his head. “No, nothing like that. Richard’s research was about improving what one
already had. Not growing a new one,” he explained. “Again, making diabetics kidneys work
properly again without the need for a kidney transplant or cardiac patient having a better heart
without needing surgery. Those type of things.” Fury straightened in his seat, a hand on the table.
“From what I gathered, Richard believed it was possible to specifically target the corrupted DNA
and fix it.”

Tony now understood. “And Osborn wanted to use it to recreate the serum. Improve healthy
individuals into making them far better than what they are. Take a strong man and make him
invincible.”

Fury nodded. "Richard wanted to use his research to save lives. Not create living weapons."

Tony let it all sink in for a moment. "What happened after that?"

"We started the extraction process," Fury said. He remembered discussing the plan over with
Richard and Mary. They were both holding hands as if it gave the other strength to move forward
with their decision. "They were afraid of possible retaliation. After all, Osborn is not known to be
a sane man."

“Call him what he is,” Tony drawled in a disgusted tone. "A psychopath.”

“I know,” Fury heard all the rumors of Osborn. "So, we had Mary put in her two weeks’ notice by
stating she wanted the time to take care of her child. Shortly after, we had Richard put in his notice as
well, claiming he didn't enjoy his work anymore.”

Tony tapped his fingers along the table. "And let me guess... Osborn didn't believe it?"

“No, their notices were accepted. They received well-wishes and promises to keep in touch," Fury
said. Richard called and updated him on how their last days went. All seemed normal. Nothing
suspicious. "It all went well until the plane crashed and killed them.”

Tony stopped his tapping. "Then it was sabotaged?"

“Not according to the records,” Fury stated. "Plane had a faulty engine. Was ruled as engine failure.
No foul play."

“Yes, but I'm sure SHIELD looked into it. Came up with their own analysis.”

“We did and came to the same conclusion.”

Tony gaped, dumbfounded by the revelation. "How is that possible!” he exclaimed. "Your two
informants on Osborn's secret project just died like that and you accepted it as an accident?"

Fury's dark brows trailed up his forehead. "Are you asking me or the agency? If you ask me, I know
it was foul play," he said, firm ed in every word. "But everything came up as accidental. I can't argue
against the evidence, but my gut told me it was assassination.”

Tony visibly sagged and he massaged his temples roughly. "Assassination to keep them quiet, I
presume?"
“Both Parkers were returning to New York to meet with me and another,” Fury informed Stark. 
"They gathered up their last bit of evidence to help us in our investigation. The crash burned 
everything up. Nothing left.”

“Convenient,” Tony muttered. He stood up from his chair and paced. "And what? Was that it? You just dropped it? Didn't think to investigate it further?"

“My hands were tied. I had my orders.”

“So, that was it? You just forgot about them? Didn't look further into Osborn's company?”

“Don't mistake me as a blind soldier,” Fury snapped, not liking Tony's accusation. "I didn't brush it off. Not entirely, but I had more pressing matters to attend to when that all occurred.”

“Like what?”

“Like the creation of Iron Man.”

Tony halted. "What?"

“Don't act damn surprise,” Fury reprimanded. "We had a lot on our plate the moment you became Iron Man. You were the main focal point of danger. Especially considering you destroyed a village.”

“Freed a village, you mean,” Tony corrected, frowning. "So, I am the reason you brushed the Parkers' deaths aside?”

“Again, no,” Fury curtly stated. "Unlike my fellow colleagues, I took the time to follow-up and do some digging. I was also concerned about the Parkers' extended family.”

“You mean May Parker.”

"And Ben Parker," Fury said to Tony. "Richard Parker was close to his brother. Even spoke to him about Oscorp. I thought there was a chance that, if it was an assassination, then they would also target the brother’s family.

“I had a few men watch the Parkers, including the child, but after a month of no retaliation or attack," Fury continued with a shrug, "I figured they were safe and had no further information in regards to what Richard and Mary Parker knew.”

Tony sucked in a strained breath. A hardened look overcame him. All seriousness. No jokes. "You knew about Peter then?"

Fury nodded. "Never met the kid," he amended. "But Mary spoke of him. As did Richard. Showed me a picture of him. Said Peter was the reason he wanted out of Oscorp. Too afraid that something might happen to his son if he continued working for Osborn.”

Tony sighed and leaned up against a nearby wall. "Well, he wasn't wrong.”

“No, he wasn't," Fury agreed, thinking of the odds in regards to Peter obtaining his superpowers. "Is this why you called me? Are you investigating into Osborn?"

Tony fell back in his chair and nodded, tiredly. "Agent Everett Ross discovered a link between Peter and Oscorp, but you already knew that," he said, looking back to Fury. “When we investigated, there was no record of them in Oscorp's system, which got us curious. Then of course, I found your mysterious folder which won't open. Keeps doing a disappearing act on me every time I try to open
Fury forgot he did that. "I designed it to be that way," he said. "Security measure."

“What's inside?”

“Documents on projects Richard worked on, his research, his and Mary's personal information and the plane crash report," he shrugged, trying to remember all that was on the file. "Oh, and a file on Peter Parker.”

Tony's face froze into a tight rigidness mask. "You have a file on Peter?"

“I kept tabs on the kid," Fury half-shrugged, as if his silent observance over Peter was normal. Even for him. Nonetheless, Fury didn’t like the skeptical doubt Tony fully displayed. "While I may seem cold and harsh to you, Stark, doesn't mean I'm an asshole. I felt an obligation to keep an eye on Richard's son. I didn't stalk him. Just popped in every year to check-up on him.”

“So you knew he was Spider-Man before the rest of the world," Tony indicted, animatedly pointing his finger back and forth between them. "Even before me?”

Fury crossed his arms, nodding his head to Tony's question. "Just because I'm dead, doesn't mean I'm gone," he said. "Of course I was aware who was behind the mask. And, hell yes, I'm pissed that you brought him to Berlin to fight. He's a kid, Tony. Kids don't belong in war.”

Tony wrangled the ends of his bangs. "It wasn't war!" he snipped, aggressively dismissing with a hand gesture. "There wasn't even supposed to be a battle. Rogers—"

“You're both idiots," Fury interrupted, tired of hearing the bickering between them. "My god, I leave the kids alone for a split second and they go on and set the damn house on fire.”

“Not my fault!” Tony argued. "I didn’t bring Peter to Berlin to fight. Steve—"

“Stop pointing fingers at everyone," Fury snapped at him. Always the childish bickering. "Again... children! Do I have to hold all of your hands every single day? Now, be a man, Stark. Take responsibility and move on.”

Tony lunged to his feet. "I do take responsibility!” he yelled. "I have taken too much damn responsibility! Everyone blames me for Sokovia. For the Accords. For breaking up the team. "And when I try to fix things, I’m still the bad guy!” Tony paced again, his shoes giving out soft squeaks as he marched. His procession came to a halt. He wiped his hands over his face in one great sigh. “You have no idea how much shit I have been dealing with lately. I’m the only person who tries to do the right thing and I just get shit after shit after shit.”

“Spare me your condescending bullshit,” Tony growled directly to Fury. “I have enough on my plate already.”

Fury wrangled his brows, a deep hum pressed on his lips. Tony was more on edge than the last update he received on the man. Something else happened. Nothing in regards to Peter Parker. Fury understood that was heading in a nice direction. So, what demon was Tony Stark wrestling now?

“Are you done with your tantrum?” Fury asked. “Or is there a follow-up?”

Tony meandered back to the chair, plopping down in his seat across from Fury. He snatched his phone, twiddling anxiously between his fingers. He didn’t look at Fury. He kept his head down and
shoulders hunched, as if the whole world pressed down on him.

“Pepper is pregnant.”

A lull of silence followed. Tony glanced up to Fury. "What? No congratulations?"

"You don't seem too happy about it," replied Fury.

Tony dropped his head in his hands and let out a steam of hot air. He then shot back up, slouching against his chair. "I've always told Pepper that I'm not cut out to be a parent,” He pinched the bridge of his nose, a deep breath released. "Hell—I never even considered kids before. Like ever. Kids scare the crap out of me. They're like these fragile valuables and one little dent, they're ruined. Broken.

“I keep telling Pepper that I don't want to know the gender of the baby. Wanna know why? Not because I want to be surprised, but because I don't want it to be real," Tony continued to explain and his arms came in front of him protectively. "The minute I know the gender, it's the moment I start coming up with names. Picture what it may look like. Even give it a personality or look at those small, cutesy shirts that only work because they're babies. And... I can't do it. I can't do any of that."

Fury raised a single brow for him to continue. Tony obliged.

"Look—I'm a complete mess," Tony carried on, hand on his chest to direct his point. "I fuck up every single day. I can't even take care of myself and I'm an adult. Almost a senior citizen if they manage to pressure me into signing up for AARP. Now, imagine a child growing up in in that mess, alongside that mess? That kid is screwed! I would literally fucking ruin that kid's life. Just like my old man did to me."

Fury listened. He always listened. He just didn't always give a fuck. In this case, he couldn't brush off the nonsense. Tony Stark, in all his obnoxious, self-righteous attitude that could irk a man to want to commit murder, was in desperate need of guidance. Some sort of comfort that only a parent could provide. Fury was no parent. He never had children. But he did consider the Avengers as his own. And Tony sought him for his wisdom and comfort, even if he wasn't fully aware he did.

Fury got up from his chair and walked over to where Tony sat. He propped himself up against the desk and didn't look at Tony when he spoke. "You're not Howard Stark," he reminded the man. "No matter if you have his looks, smarts or vices, you're not Howard Stark."

Tony indigently snorted. "I'm aware of who I am."

"Then you also know that you're not going to fucking ruin a child's life for being who you are," Fury thundered back. “Yeah, I agree, you probably don’t deserve a child, but that ain’t up to me. That’s between you, Pepper and whatever you believe in. But since you asked for my opinion, I’ll give it.”

Fury drew closer, towering over Tony’s form. He weighed his heavy gaze on the emotionally desolated man. “That baby of yours will be the luckiest child in the world.”

A bewildered crease formed between Tony’s eyebrows. “Come again?”


Tony was taken aback by that declaration. Typical. He never gave himself any good credit. “Uh... did you not hear a single word I just told you?” Tony said. “I'm not meant to be a parent. I don't
even know how to act like a father. Never had a good role model to look up to. If anything, I’m just going to be like my old man was to me. Cold, distance and disappointed.”

“Stop giving me that shit,” Fury reproached. “You may be a Stark, but you’re not Howard Stark. You’re better. Which means you’re going to be a better father than your old man.”

Tony tilted back in his chair. “If I remember correctly, your records state I’m arrogant, apathetic, callous and a hedonist who can’t work well with others,” he pointed out. “Sounds awfully close to Dad, and not exactly good parenting traits to have—”

“Did I say I was finished?” Fury interrupted, which silenced Tony’s loud mouth. “No. I wasn’t. Now, shut up and listen. You can do that, can’t you?” Tony glowered at the demeaning scolding, but at least Fury got him to pay attention. “Good.”

Fury crossed his arms over his chest. “You’re a man determined to do whatever it takes for the people he loves,” he said. “You may have that mask well placed over your face, Stark, but I know the man behind it. You’d go to great lengths to help your friends. It’s why you created Ultron, isn’t it? To protect your friends from danger that may be beyond their capabilities? Didn’t you even create that entire fleet of Iron Man suits as back up in case of another alien attack?”

Tony said nothing. His lips pressed down.

Fury nailed Tony right on the head. Hell, he wasn’t the best goddamn spy in the world by playing stupid. He knows everything about everyone. Including the things people don’t want others to see. Fury always knew Tony Stark cared. That he had vulnerable emotions despite the media persona he displayed for the world.

“Despite your wild, apathetic playboy demeanor,” Fury went on, moving away from Tony, “you’re one of the most emotional people I know. You care about your friends and do whatever it takes to keep them safe and happy. No matter what they have done.” Their quiet exchange meant Tony knew who Fury was referring to. “This is why that kid is gonna be goddamn lucky to have you as a father, because no matter what, you will do whatever it takes to make that kid safe and happy.”

“And what if I fuck up?” Tony posed, nervously popping his fingers. “What if I fuck up like I did with the Avengers or with Peter?”

“Hell—we all fuck up,” Fury answered, brushing aside Tony’s fears as inconsequential. “That’s what parenting is all about. Fucking up and trying your damn best to not do it again.” Fury gestured to the outside world. “Isn’t that what you’re doing with Peter? Fucking up and trying to not let it happen again? You took away his suit when he didn’t listen. You guided him to do the right things. You protected him from danger. That’s a parent, Stark. It’s not easy. It’s not all cheesy, smiling moments. It’s messy, complicated, hard work and… rewarding.”

Tony looked at him funny, questionably. Fury clarified. “Supposedly, I don’t know. I don’t have a kid, but people say they having kids is rewarding,” he said. “Up to your point of view. You’ll do fine, Stark. If anything, you’re not going to the worst parent.”

Tony snorted, but Fury saw a flicker of a smile. “Yeah, maybe.”

Fury checked his watch. He only had a few more minutes before he needed to leave. He couldn’t stay any longer. “Is there anything else I can do for you? Any more nonsense I have to knock out of you?”

Tony grumbled under his breath, but nodded. He switched his phone back on. “I need you to open
the file for me,” he said. “I have to solve this. If Peter is to return home, I need to know if Osborn will be a threat to him.”

Fury eyed him. “You already know that he is.”

“Yes, but I need evidence so that I can eliminate the threat,” Tony elucidated. “If I’m going to get this parenting stuff right, better start by removing those who threaten them.”

And there was the confidence boost. Fury obliged, taking Stark’s phone from him. He pressed against his thumb against the screen, right on top of the folder. It didn’t disappear. He held it and dragged it to the top of the screen. Fury let go and the folder burst open, revealing subfiles and information that Tony sought to bring Norman Osborn to justice.

Tony snatched his phone and studied the contents, bewildered. “Is that it? Just swipe it up?”

Fury shook his head. “No,” he said. “It needs my thumbprint. I have it designed that it can be accessed through my thumbprint and by sliding it up. If I slide it down, it gets deleted. To the right, it corrupts the whole system by inputting a virus.”

Tony looked impressed. “Thanks for not swiping right,” he said, scrolling through the files. “Not very much information here. Oh… you actually do have a file on Peter.” He started encrypting the folder into his security system, obtaining a copy of the documents to avoid having to dig Fury out every single time he wanted access.

“So, um, thanks,” Tony said, once the download and encryption was completed. “For this. I won’t take up anymore of your time.”

“That’s all you want?”

“Is there anything else I should know about?” Tony inquired.

Fury halfshrugged. “I guess not, no,” he answered. “Figured you would like to know about Peter. Where he is and how he’s doing.”

Tony inhaled deeply, shoulders drooping again as he thought. “I… I would like to know,” he confessed, “but it’s better that I don’t. For his own safety I mean.” Tony paused for a moment. “Is he okay? I mean, is he all right? Like he’s not hurt or anything like that is he?”

Fury shook his head. “Not to my knowledge.”

“Happy? Safe?”

Fury nodded. “To my knowledge, yes,” he said, adding, “although I was told he had an episode after the whole incident with May Parker’s ‘suppose’ death.”

Tony swore. Loud. “He’s not the only one,” he grunted. “Ross is a piece of shit. Trying to smoke Peter out like that. I even panicked thinking Peter was going to come sprinting into the trap.” Tony brushed his bangs from his forehead. “Whoever has him knew better. Or at least, kept him from running.”

Indeed, they did. Fury remembered the call from Clint about wanting clarification on May Parker’s health. Fury reported she was alive and well, staying with Tony Stark. Clint figured it was a lie and said he was going to take care of it. Fury assumed he meant Peter.

“The kid is good,” Fury said to Tony. “You can tell that aunt of his that he’s being well taken care of
in her absence.”

“She already knows,” Tony replied. “But, I’ll pass it along. If she lets me. She always enjoys slamming the door in my face.”

That’s not a big surprise at all. “Anything else?”

Tony shook his head. “No. That’s all I need to know about Mr. Parker,” he decided. “Nothing else. Just that he’s happy and safe. That’s all.”

“All right,” Fury said, noting that Stark made a smart decision. “My time is up. I need to go.”

Fury turned on the heel of his boots and headed to the exit. “Good luck, Stark,” he called over his shoulder. “Rogers has a lot of faith in you. As do I and others.”

He never heard Tony’s response for he slammed the door behind him closed. Time to move on. He returned to his aircraft, climbing aboard. The small airplane was comfortable and non-conspicuous. No one would think anything of important other than a small delivery vessel.

“Let’s get going,” Fury said as he joined up in the cockpit.

Sitting in the pilot seat was his good friend, Phil Coulson. Phil started up the engine. “How did it go?”


“What’s that?”

“Tony Stark is to become a father.”

Phil’s a good agent. He schooled his face well to hide every emotion. Fury had a hard time deciphering his friend, but he imagined that Phil was shocked by the announcement.

“Congratulations,” Phil offered anyway. “I’m sure he’s terrified.”

“That’s a polite way of saying it.”

“How would you say it?” Phil asked.

“Batshit crazy terrified,” Fury said with a smile and they both shared a laugh.

Phil pulled the handle down and steady the steering. “Well, he won’t be the worst father out there in the world,” he said, turning down the runway. “Where to Director?”

Fury stared over at window shield and far out front. In the northern direction. “Back to headquarters,” he said, “but first, need to make a pit stop in Canada. Need to say hello again to an old agent.”

Phil understood and put the coordinated into the system. “Shall I call ahead?”

Fury shook his head. “No, I’ll do it. Remember? They can’t know you’re alive.”

“Yes, that’s right,” Phil said as he powered up the engine and pulled the steering to him. The plane was getting faster. “I’ll go into town and pick up some snacks and light reading material for the trip back.”
Fury nodded as he rubbed his jawline in thought. “Good, good,” he muttered. “You know… I am beginning to believe we are coming upon a new age.”

“A new age?”
Fury nodded. “Yes… a new era of sorts.”

Phil stared quizzically at his old friend, but didn’t question him further. He focused on the plane and got it up in the air. Meanwhile, Fury planned over the next following weeks and his visit to the Barton homestead. He always wondered about Peter. He only ever heard good things about him. Smart, compassionate and resilient are all characteristics of a good hero.

Perhaps, Peter Parker may be the first hero of this upcoming new generation. For this new era they were about to enter. He’s not a bad choice, Fury mused. Parker was already well-known and well-liked by the general public.

Yes, perhaps he will become the hero the world needs.

The corners of Fury’s mouth twitched up for a brief moment as he thought about how proud Richard and Mary Parker would be of their boy. Very proud indeed.
Clint Barton

Clint tapped against the steering wheel, relaxing and simply thinking about things he needed to finish that day. Unclutter the drainpipes, fix the leaking faucet in the kids’ bathroom and reattach the barn door. He considered redoing the entire barn, making it more open, but Laura put a stop to it. She said they had enough on their plate. Of course, his wife was right.

When he first returned home and told her what happened in Berlin, Laura wasn’t furious. She was sad. She hugged him and held him in her arms for a long time. Then came the harder part. He had to leave them. For their own safety, he needed to go off with Captain America until things died down. He couldn't trust Stark not to say a word about his family life. Stark would send men to his house and... Clint didn't want to bring that type of violence to his home. Not where his children lived.

So, he joined Captain on the run, helping him and the others prevent Secretary Ross's corruption from spreading.

In fact, he still remembered the day that made his blood boil. They received intelligence that Ross put out a target on a kid in Queens. They assembled quickly, arrived in the nick of time to rescue the kid from being the newest member of the Raft. Clint never forgot the kid's face. He was so young. Barely any older than his own son.

After the incident at Queens, Clint returned home when he received the all-clear from Captain America that Stark promised to never tell his new friends about Clint's family. It was relief, but at the same time, he distrusted Stark's word. The man had no honor. He always did whatever he thought was best, without considering anyone else’s opinion.

Clint was happy to be home and living the simple, quiet life. He enjoyed his freedom to raise his children and love his wife. He worked on multiple projects around the house to occupy his time and thoughts. He hadn't even thought about his former teammates and friends.

He kept busy, distracting himself from nostalgia, and kept working on improving the house. But in order to do so, he needed to fix the problem ahead. And that problem came in the form and size of a super-powered teenager.

Clint stared ahead, watching Peter Parker sit at a bus stop alone. It was early in the morning. The sun hadn't risen fully nor really even peeked over the horizon. Peter planned it well, sneaking out in the dead of night when everyone would be sound asleep to dash into the nearest town and hop on the next bus that took him to America.

One problem with the plan: he was running away from Hawkeye.

Clint knew even before Peter decided to make a run. He was awake when he listened to Peter tiptoe out of the house, closing the screen door carefully to not disturb the occupants. Clint even followed him all the way to town in his truck and now, he watched him from across the road.

Clint wasn't going to let Peter hop on a bus. That would be dangerous for not only Peter, but for his family too. Don't need Peter to leave a trail of breadcrumbs to his family. After a good thirty minutes of no traffic happening and getting the kid's hopes up, Clint called it time. He had to bring Peter back before Laura and the kids woke up.

Clint got out of the car and strolled over to where Peter sat. The kid had his hood over his head, hands stuffed in his jacket’s pockets as he slouched on the bench. Clint approached. "Can I sit here?"
Peter didn't even lift his head. He shrugged his shoulder. "You're going to anyway."

Peter didn't sound surprised by Clint's appearance. Maybe Clint wasn't as secretive as he believed. He sat down, staring straight ahead at the parking lot where he left his truck. "You know a bus won't come for another hour."

"I know," Peter answered, nudging his head to the panel next to him. "I saw the time table."

"And that it won't get you any closer than to the outskirts of town."

"I noticed that too."

Clint nodded, leaning forward so that his elbows rested on his knees. "So—what's your game plan? Try to hitch a ride from here all the way back to New York? Without getting caught?"

Peter helplessly shrugged, head down to avoid eye contact.

Clint let out a heavy sigh. "I know how you feel kid."

"I doubt it."

The kid refused to give any leeway. That's fine with Clint. He's worked with much worse. "Maybe not at the same level, but I understand the uncertainty of not ever seeing your family again," he gauged Peter for a response. The boy gave none. "I had to abandon my family for a brief stint because of Secretary Ross. He gunned for all of us. Either we are with him or against him."

Peter stared at his shoes, kicking away the nearby pebbles. "But I'm not an Avenger!" he objected. "I'm not like you guys. I just help people with directions and stop bike thieves. I'm nobody."

"You're powerful," Clint countered. "Secretary Ross can't have powerful people running loose. Even if they are kids."

"But I didn't do anything wrong!" Peter passionately emphasized, now looking directly at Clint. "I fought for Tony in Berlin! Doesn't that mean I'm not—"

"There's one thing you gotta learn about this business, kid," Clint interrupted and Peter went quiet, "and it's that there are always backstabbers. Always hidden agendas. Once you can recognize those, then you can play your cards right and not be screwed."

Peter's face fell, lips pressed into a deep frown. "It's not fair," he mumbled, shoulders slouched in defeat. "I only helped people. I never harmed them."

Clint knew that. He's seen Spider-man’s records. But that didn’t matter to someone like Ross. It’s all about the power and whoever had the most wins. "I know," he assured the kid. "A lot of people know that. It’s nothing against you. Ross… he’s a madman who wants power. He’s always been after the super serum that created Captain America. And, in my honest opinion, I think he believes you might be even better."

Peter shot his head up. "What?" he said, muddled. "H-How?"

"Fast healing, super senses, agility," Clint listed off in a ramble, "and, of course, super strength. You're like... what? Five times stronger than Cap? Of course Ross would want to get his grubby hands on you. You're like an ideal soldier for him."

And Clint watched Peter's somber face switch to blind panic. "What?!" he launched to his feet. He
stood in front of Clint with wobbly knees and a racing heartbeat that even Clint heard without focus. "A soldier? That's what he's after?"

Clint cocked a single brow up at him. "What? You think he actually cares about the good of the world?" he snorted at the mere idea of Ross being that compassionate to mankind. "Ross cares only about creating the greatest army in the world. He's been after Captain's serum forever, but then along came a spider..."

“I'm surprised he didn't nab you right after Berlin,” Clint carried on, reclining back on the wooden bench. It was uncomfortable. One of the screw dug into his back, but he dealt with the pain. "But that might be due to Stark. He probably sheltered you as long as he could, but Ross has the whole government on his side. He needs you to find a way to make more and so he did what he wanted. To hell with morals and decency, you know?"

He turned back to the kid. Peter looked like someone struck him hard in the chest. He was breathing. Louder and faster than normal. Hyperventilating. Eyes twitching. Mouth quivering. Clint recognized those signs—panic attack. "Oh, hey, Pete," he said, his tone less agitated. "Peter? Hey, I'm sorry man. It's going to be fine. You're safe."

"But for how long?" Peter questioned, breaths coming quick. "And... and what about Aunt May?"

“She’s alive,” Clint assured him again. “Remember? She’s fine. She’s alive. Still with Stark.”

“But... But what if they actually do go after her?” Peter paced in front of him. “What if they hurt her? Or... Or threaten her?”

“That's not going to happen,” Clint asserted. "I'm sure she's safe. Nothing bad will happen.”

Peter's whole body shook. His hands wrangled together as his focus became unclear. His breaths caught in his throat. “This is all my fault,” he said, voice pitched close to hysterical. “I-I did this to her. I put her through this. I'm going to get her killed.”

“What? No! No—Peter,” Clint insisted as he tried to grab Peter's attention. “That’s not true.”

Peter shook his head, eyes pressed tight. His fingers curled into balls of fists. His breathing didn’t slow down. “No, it is. It's my fault,” he said again. “I... I've always... it's my fault her life got ruined. Ever since I became... him.”

"I highly doubt—"

"I killed my uncle."

Clint reeled. He must have misheard the kid. "What?"

Peter was shaking all over. "I... I got him killed. I didn't save him. I-I could of, but... it happened so fast. He was... he thought he was saving me and it got him killed. I got him killed. When I could have saved him, I didn't. I took him away from May and now... what if May dies too? Because of me? What if she gets killed because I-I wasn't...I wasn't there? I can't. I can't. I can't lose her! I can't..."

Clint jumped up from the bench and enveloped him in an embrace, pressing Peter to his chest. Peter’s head fell against him, heavy breaths shuttering. “Hey... hey..., " he cooed as he smoothed the back of Peter's head. "Hey, stop—stop. it’s okay,” Clint whispered to him, knowing Peter could hear him crystal clear. "Kid—you didn't kill him. Okay? You didn't. Hey... it's not your fault. It's not your fault.”
Peter’s hand clutched to Clint’s back, gripping for some stability. Clint adjusted him, ensuring that Peter’s ears were covered to ease the boy’s heightening senses. He rocked Peter a bit, still whispering that it was not his fault. That he didn’t get his uncle killed. That his Aunt May was safe. That he too was safe.

Eventually, the heavy breathing got lighter. The grip to his back lessen and Clint couldn’t hear any more sobbing. He continued to keep Peter in a protective hug until he too felt certain the boy wouldn’t breakdown again.

He let Peter go, taking the boy by the shoulder to get a before view of him. Tear tracks stained Peter’s red cheeks and he had a bit of a running nose, but he was breathing normal and his eyes were calm. Clint took Peter’s head in his hand, thumbs right at the boy’s temple to ensure Peter looked directly at him.

He squatted to get eye level with his young charge. “Never blame the actions of others on yourself,” he said to the boy. “I mean it, kid. It’s not your fault that some adults are petty and cruel. That’s on them. Not you. Don’t ever take their blame. You’re not worth their faults.”

Clint saw a lingered doubt in Peter's gaze. The pain of loss buried deep within him. Clint wished a way to remove it all, but only time had that power. "Your uncle loved you. Your aunt loves you,” he reassured the kid. "They would never blame you for what happened to them. Trust me on this, okay? They love you."

Peter nodded, blubbering a bit. "I-I know," he said, quiet. "I just... feel guilty."

"I get it," Clint empathized. He read about Peter's background. All the series of unfortunate events that befell on the boy, it's a testament to Peter's character that he had yet to turn into a bitter, resentful man. A testament to the love of his family and friends as well. It didn't mean the feeling of guilt would evaporate. It lingered alongside loss, but Clint had to reassure Peter that the guilt he carried wasn't necessary. "But, your relatives would never blame you for the woes that others cause. You didn't kill your uncle. You didn't force Ross to attack you. Again, do not take others' sins as your own. We all have choices. Your uncle made his choice to protect you because he loved you. Even if he knew you were super-powered, he would have still made the same decision."

Peter snuffled and nodded again. "I know," he said. "I just miss him. A lot."

Clint hugged him again, gently patting his back as Peter finished off his last batch of tears.

Calmed, Peter stepped back and wiped away the last traces of the sorrow. Clint turned to give the kid some privacy as he surveyed the area. Not many people around. Hardly any at all. Too busy with their own lives to contemplate theirs. Still, better hit the road before anyone did recognize them.

“We better head home," Clint said to Peter. "Can't have people staring at us long enough for recognition."

Peter grabbed his bag and they headed to the truck, driving out of town and deep into the country, away from any prying eyes. Peter rested his head against the window, eyes glossy, but viewing the farmlands surrounding them. They didn't speak, Clint opting to give Peter the time to quietly reflect and calm down. He to sneak peeks at the kid, making sure he wasn't crying or anything. Peter didn't cry, but it might because he ran out of tears. Nonetheless, Peter started to look better as they turned off onto their driveway. They arrived back to the farm. Already, Laura was up and getting breakfast ready as little Nathaniel squirmed in his high chair.

Clint entered the kitchen and Laura, relieved, walked up to him. "There you are," she greeted, giving
him a soft peck on the cheek. "Where did you go?"

“Into town,” he said. "Needed to pick something up."

Laura stared, quizzically as her eyes glanced between him and Peter. "Is everything all right?" she said, worried. "You know I don't like it when you go into town."

Ever since the breakdown of the Avengers and Clint a wanted man, Laura grew afraid of losing him. She didn't like the idea of him going into town with the chance of being recognized and reported. Clint didn't like that picture either and hardly ever showed his face outside their property.

He gave her a charming smile to ease her worries. "Yeah, everything's good."

Laura took the keys from Clint's hand, pocketing them. "All right," she said, heading back to the stove, although she secretly knew what occurred. His wife might not be a spy, but she was clever. She knew things even without anyone saying them. “Breakfast is ready if you want to get the kids to come down.”

“I got it,” Peter called, skipping up the steps to the second floor.

Clint shrugged his coat off and hooked it up. He reentered the kitchen, his stomach grumbling over the smell of cooked food. “I didn’t realize how hungry I was until now,” he commented. He walked over to Nathaniel and planted a kiss on his little head. “Smells good.”

Laura only responded by pointing to the cupboards. Clint got the message. He set the table with plates and silverware just in time as his two older children staggered into the kitchen.

“Morning,” they said to their father. Cooper said his through a yawn as he flopped in his chair.

Clint ruffled his head to get him to wake. “Hey! What’s wrong with you? Didn’t sleep well last night?”

Cooper shook his head. “I guess not,” he replied, helping himself to the eggs his mother put down on the table. He passed the plate and glanced around. “Where’s Peter?”

“Right here,” came Peter’s voice as he took his normal seat, scooting closer to the table. “Had to throw something back in my room,” he said to the family. Not that he needed an excuse, but he gave one anyway. "I smell eggs. Are those the eggs? Pass them over.”

The family ate breakfast as if it was a normal day. Ever since the night of Peter’s birthday and the following meltdown that had Clint spend at least two hours coaxing Peter from ceiling, the atmosphere changed from happy to distress. Everyone was on edge, worried about Peter, afraid to bring anything up. Peter even avoided the family, disengaged himself and stayed mostly in his bedroom. They kept the television off and Laura didn’t bring any newspapers home. Best to keep the bad news away from the house for resting period.

But, now, it seemed the old rhythm was returning. Peter entertained Nathaniel with silly faces again and tricked him with his small splatter of Cheerios. Lila tried to get Peter’s attention, tugging on his shirt to get him to look at her as she rambled on about what she was learning in school. Only Cooper remained quiet. He didn’t say anything.

Clint knew why. Cooper heard the commotion when Peter broke down over the news of his aunt’s "death". He ran down the stairs and witnessed Peter shouting and backing straight up the wall to the ceiling to get away from Clint and Laura. Clint immediately had Laura take Cooper back upstairs, but it was already too late. Laura informed him that Cooper asked many questions in regards to Peter.
Suddenly, Peter no longer became the older brother figure to Cooper. He was a stranger. A hostage. A traumatized kid.

Clint spoke to his son the next day after the incident. He explained what happened. His son tried to act tough, claiming he understood what he witnessed, but Clint saw right through him. Cooper was sad. In the month Peter stayed with them, Cooper had forgotten that Peter was not really his older brother. Or that Peter was staying with the family willingly. He got a glimpse of Peter Parker who wanted to leave them, who was yelling at them and crying over the loss of his own family. Cooper saw the incident as Peter not wanting them at all. Never did. Clint tried again to explain that Peter was going through a lot of things at the moment, but it didn't mean he didn't enjoy their family or living with them. Cooper nodded, but Clint wondered if he ever did get Cooper to understand the true depth of Peter's trauma.

At the moment though, they simply enjoyed the happy rhythm as the kids got ready for school and Laura for work. Clint said good-bye to his kids and gave a peck on his wife's lips. He waved them off, watching them back down the dirt path and out of sight. He turned back into the house where he found Peter standing in the foyer with Nathaniel in his arms.

"Get your shoes on, kid," Clint said.

"Working on the farm?" Peter asked as he slipped Nathaniel into his playpen.

Clint shook his head. "No, I'm giving you your first archery lesson," he said and Peter's eyes widened in remembrance of his gift. "Shoes. Come on, we don't have all day. Just until five."

"Keep arm steady," Clint advised and Peter tightened his arm muscles. "Okay, now... don't squint! Why are you squinting?"

"Habit."

"Break it," Clint ordered. He didn't an arrow sticking in a place it shouldn't. Like in his toddler son. Clint checked over his shoulder to see Nathaniel happily playing with his dinosaurs behind the bulletproof case he built. His son was safe as long as he was inside and behind the case. "You only need to squint if the sun is in your eyes and in that case, bring sunglasses."

Clint clapped his hands, rubbing them before dropping his hands to knees, looking straight at the haystack. Peter's target. "Alright... are your feet at ninety degrees to the target?"

Peter checked. "Yeah, I think so," he said. "It's almost like holding a gun."

Clint scowled. "No, not like a gun. Not at all," he said, offended on behalf of his bow. "Archery is far more complex than a simple aim and fire."

"Of course," Peter said, but there was a hint of smile when he spoke.

"Keep your back straight," Clint reprimand and Peter straightened. "Good, now. Don't squeeze the handle. Keep it relaxed. There you go." Clint reviewed his grip again. "Now, turn the bow so that is horizontal and the arrow rest is facing upwards. No... like this," Clint adjusted the arrow on Peter's bow. "Good. Better. Now, place it on the shelf of the arrow rest. It's that thing right here." Clint tapped the arrow rest. Peter placed the arrow on it. "Put the nock of the arrow—this thing here—onto the string between... yep. You got it."

Peter brought the bow back to a vertical. He positioned himself, eyeing the haystack. "How do I release—"
"Index finger above arrow... yep, and then two fingers below that. Good. Good," Clint hummed in approval. "Now, the string. You see it? It's in the last crease of your fingers. See it?"

Peter nodded.

"That's how you want it all the time," Clint said. "Now, don't grip the arrow or it won't go anywhere. Pull the string back."

Peter pulled the string.

"Use your back muscles," Clint instructed. "Not your arms."

Clint watched Peter switch muscles and drew the string back that the string nearly touched his nose and mouth. "Perfect," Clint said. "Now—fire when ready."

Peter took a deep breath and cautiously, released the string. The arrow sprung off the bow, but feathered only a few yards from where they stood. Peter dropped his arm and groaned. Clint abruptly turned, snorting to cover up his rumbustious laughter.

"Why are you laughing?" Peter demanded, peeved at being laughed at. "It's not funny." He walked over to where the arrow laid and snatched it up. "I'm only as good as my instructor."

Clint, face still split from laughter, managed to shake his head. "Give it to me."

Peter passed the bow and arrow to Clint, switching places with the famed archer. Clint took his stance. "Watch me," he said. "Don't watch the arrow. Watch how I shoot. Got it?"

Peter nodded and focused on Clint.

Clint put the arrow on and pulled the bow back. He released it and the arrow went straight through the haystack. "Now... tell me what you did wrong."

Peter pressed his lips in a hard, concentrating line. "I, um, didn't pull it back far enough."

"Yes, go on."

"Erm... I-I didn't release it well. I was, um, too slow."

Clint nodded. "Nailed it on the head," he said. "In archery, you have to be confident. No hesitation. You can do that with a gun, but if you do it with an arrow, it won't go anywhere as you saw."

Peter understood and promised to be firm. Clint returned the equipment to Peter and handed him a new arrow. Peter lined himself up correctly, got the string right in the crease, light in his grip, but his back muscles braced as he brought the bow far back. No hesitation, Peter released the arrow.

The arrow shot off, but not straight. Went a bit diagonal, but it at least made the haystack range. Clint approved.

"Much better," Clint said, clapping Peter on the back. "See? You can't be afraid."

"It didn't go straight though," Peter complained.

"That's because your feet were slightly turned," Clint nudged his boots against Peter's old sneakers. "See? Look where your feet are. Gotta make sure your feet are always ninety degrees from target." Clint pulled out another arrow and passed it to Peter.
Peter tried again. This time, the arrow shot right into the haystack. Peter grinned from ear to ear. "Looks like you might have some competition."

Clint snorted. Peter may be a quick learner, but the young superhero had a long ways to go before he become nearly as good as him. "String up another arrow, kid," he said and Peter reached for another one. "Let's see if you can do it again."

They spent the next couple of hours practicing. Clint increased the difficulty. He pushed the target further across the field, instructing Peter to hit each target. They switched to moving targets, but Peter proved to be apt. His spidey senses made it easy for him to focus on the flying target. Clint upped the difficulty and wrapped a cloth around Peter's eyes, telling him to rely on his other senses to get the target. That's when it became a bit more difficult for the kid. Peter's arrows were scattered all over the field, some in trees, the haystacks, a few in the barn's doors and one that could be unaccounted for.

"Here," Clint took the bow away from Peter again. "First and foremost—"

"Remain calm," Peter recited, remembering Clint's advice. "I am calm!"

"No, you're not," Clint claimed. "You think you are, but you're not. You're still to reliant on sight only. You have other senses to help you. What's the point of upping your senses if you're not going to use them?"

Peter shrugged. "I use them, I just... I don't know how it will help me shoot at a target if I can't use my eyes."

"If Daredevil can take out an army of ninjas, I'm certain you can too," Clint quipped, but Peter scrunched his eyes in confusion.

"Daredevil? What does he have anything to do with this?"

Clint sighed, remembering again that Peter isn't an Avenger or an agent of SHIELD. He's only a boy with no knowledge of all the other super-powered heroes in his own city. He heard of Daredevil, but he wouldn't be aware of Matt Murdoch's loss of sight. "Nothing," Clint covered up his slip. "The point I am making is that you may one day not be able to rely on your sight alone. You have to learn to tune into your other senses. Help them guide you. Now, watch me."

Peter stood back as Clint set up the flying clay pigeon. The clay pigeon was released and Clint, looking only at Peter, shot up his arrow. The clay pigeon burst into jagged pieces. "You see? Wanna know how I did it?"

"Yes, but I also used my other senses. I took in the sound, the feel of the breeze," he explained. "I knew where it was heading without even looking and I hit my target."

Peter skeptically raised his brows to Clint. "The feel of the breeze?"

"Yeah, well, wind is a factor in this situation," Clint pointed out. "Gotta know the direction of the window to find where your target is being pushed." Clint drew another arrow. "Load up another pigeon."

Peter did and a few seconds later, released the clay pigeon to the sky. Clint heard the vortex of the pigeon splitting the air and drew his arm back to fire. Another drift of wind came over them, but it was odd. Out of place. Clint stilled for a second, arm pulled back and arrow in place. Something was different. The wind. The way it whistled. He heard Nathaniel blabbering in the background, the
crunching of the dried grass underneath Peter's feet, but there was something else. Another noise. Coming from behind...

Clint spun on his feet and took his shot. The arrow cut through the air and embedded into the ground right between two black boots. The invader froze. Clint smirked. "You move to loud," Clint commented to the stranger.

Nick Fury, who looked from the arrow at his feet to Clint, only scoffed. "If I didn't, then you would have shot me in the heart."

"True, but when have you ever been able to sneak up behind me?" Clint jested. He rested the bow against his stand. "What brings you here?"

Fury pulled the arrow right up from the ground and headed over, admiring the craftsmanship. "I was on this side of the Pond," he said. "Figured I would stop by and visit."

Clint understood the underlying meaning. Check on Peter. See if he didn't do any dumb shit that may require clean-up. "It's good to see you again," he said, "Let me introduce you to someone."

Clint turned and saw Peter positioned right in front of Nathaniel, blocking his young son from sight. "Hey Peter!" Clint called, waving him over. "Come here. You can bring Nathaniel. It's all right."

Peter glanced nervously to the kid and then to Clint. Clint urged him to come forward. Peter scooped Nathaniel out of his protection shell and cautiously made his way to the adults. Clint made the introductions quick. "Peter, this is my old boss and mentor, Director Nick Fury," he introduced. "Fury, this is Peter Parker."

Fury, with his one good eye, examined Peter from head to toe. "I've heard a lot about you, Mr. Parker," he intoned, holding his hand out in greeting. Peter politely accepted although Clint noticed how tense the boy was. "Gotta strong grip there, son."

Peter embarrassingly let go. "Sorry," he mumbled, eyes casted down as if trying to hide his face as he shifted Nathaniel on his hips.

Clint gave a little pat on Peter's back. "It's okay, Pete," he said. "Fury's one of the good guys. Founded the Avengers."

"I know," Peter said. "You and Laura talked about him the first night I came here."

He forgot about that. Super-hearing was what Laura told him. "That's right," he muttered. "I forgot. Anyway, Fury... I'm sure you don't want to be out here in the open. Why don't we head inside?"

They all went into the house, Clint carrying his equipment with him and securing it in the locked cabinet. "You want water or anything drink?" Clint offered to Fury as Peter went to the next room to put Nathaniel in his playpen. "Or did you come for information?"

Fury cocked his dark eyebrow in Clint's direction. "I came because I received a call from an old agent of mine about a kid in distress," he said, taking a seat. "Needed to come by and see if everything is okay or if we need to add more precautions."

Clint turned away from his locker. "Peter is better."

"Really?"

Clint rubbed the lower half of his face, taking a seat across from Fury. "There's been moments, but
it's under control."

"Like what?"

Clint sighed. "He ran away this morning. Got all the way to the bus hub."

Fury closed his eyes. A low grumbled thundered in his breath. "Did anyone see?"

"No. There weren't that many people out and about at the time," Clint said. "And those that were didn't even look in our direction. Too busy with their phones."

"The only upside in the age of technology," Fury said, sarcasm laced in his tone. "So... do you think he's going to try to run again?"

Clint shook his head. "No, Peter... he's going to be fine. We'll be here for him if it isn't."

"Good," Fury said, leaning so that his elbows were on his knees. "Now—I have a proposition for you."

Clint sighed. Fury never came over for house call visits. Always another job or target. "You do know I'm retired right?"

"Do you?" Fury poised in return with a jesting smirk. "Since retirement, you've joined Rogers in the fight against Stark and took in a fugitive known as Spider-man."

"Point taken," Clint conceded, "But I can't drop my family and go off to some eastern Europe country or the Middle East for a job. Get Natasha to do it. I heard she's in Romania anyway."

"She's busying doing her own mission," Fury said, rejecting Clint's suggestion. "And, besides, you are the only person who can do the job."

"I highly doubt it."

"It's true."

"Then what is it?"

Fury's hard stare zeroed in on Clint. "Train Spider-man."

Clint said nothing. He waited, staring back at Fury like it was a horrible joke. When Fury didn't respond, Clint cursed. "No, absolutely not."

"He needs to be trained."

"He's a kid!"

"He's no more a kid than you when you decided to be a SHIELD agent."

"That was different," Clint argued, remembering his own past. "I did what I had to do."

"So will Mr. Parker," Fury asserted, gesturing with urgency. "Kid or not, he's become the center of attention. People will come for him. Monsters will attack him. He cannot be an amateur any longer. He needs to be ready."

Clint shook his head. "No, absolutely not. He's a kid. Not an Avenger."
"He will be, Agent Barton," Fury claimed, his voice not rising at all. "Maybe not now, but in the next few years, he will be and we can't have him fighting with his pants down. I don't see the problem considering you were teaching him archery a few minutes ago."

"That's for fun. Not to kill," Clint scrubbed his hands over his face. "I'm sorry, Fury. I am, but... no. I'm not going to turn Peter into some kind of agent."

Fury respectively nodded his head. "That's unfortunate," he said. "I was hoping to count on you. You were, after all, one of the best. He would have learned a great deal from you."

"Sucking up to me won't woo me over," Clint told Fury. "Ask my kids."

Fury cracked a smile. "I bet," he said and then paused, thinking. "But, maybe we should."

Clint wrangled a brow up over his eye. "Huh?"

"Peter," Fury clarified. "Why don't we ask him what he wants to do?"

Clint eyes narrowed into tight slits. "I don't think—"

"Peter?" Fury said, his voice not even raising. "Can you come in here?"

A figure came around the corner. They both were well aware Peter was eavesdropping on them, but Clint answered honestly anyway. Doesn't matter where Peter was in the house, he would hear everything anyway. Fury urged Peter to join them and Peter, awkwardly glancing at Clint for direction, took a seat in between the two of them.

"Um... I'm sorry for the whole," Peter began, but Fury interrupted him.

"What do you think Mr. Parker?" Fury jumped right into the questioning. He was not one to beat around the bush. "How do you feel about being trained to become an Avenger?"

Peter's lips nervously twitched, his eyes sliding from Fury to Clint. "I-I mean I already know how to fight," he said, fingers fidgeting. "I had some training, but I don't think I'm ready for the Avengers yet."

"I'm not asking you to join the team," Fury said. "I'm asking you if you want to be trained, so whenever you are ready, you won't get yourself killed."

Again, Peter looked to Clint for guidance. Clint offered none. This was Peter's choice. Despite Clint's objections to the idea, he knew Fury had a good point in his argument. Peter's life wasn't going to be the same. Evil would come for him and his loved ones. Learning to fight would keep everyone safe. But, Clint didn't want to force Peter into that hardship yet. He was still a child. A boy with so much life and experiences that he has yet to have. Clint wanted that for Peter. Not the secretive life he led when Peter was his age.

Peter was unsure. His lips pressed into a thin line of concentration, deciding on his future. "I... I don't know," he said to Fury.

Fury never liked indecision. "The future is getting darker and darker," he told both Peter and Clint. "We have become the first line of defense whether the people like it or not. Now, I know you are too young to join the Avengers. I'm not asking you that. I'm not Stark. I know you're a kid, but I believe it is important that you be trained. To learn how to stand on your own two feet in times of great danger."
"The world knows who you are now. Monsters will hunt to kill you or your loved ones," Fury continued, pressuring Peter into a gloomier reality. "Do you want their blood on your hands because you didn't have the skills to save them?"

"That's enough Fury," Clint interjected as Peter skin took a sullen turn. The memory of his uncle probably replaying in the kid's head. "Don't pressure him on something he doesn't want to do."

Fury looked from Peter to Clint. "You know I'm right, Agent Barton," he said. "Doesn't matter what we want, because in the end, Peter needs to learn to protect himself and others. Ross isn't the only threat out there. There will be others. Some of them far worse than Ross."

Clint knew that too. Ross was just a petty man. He was nothing compared to others Clint and the Avengers team faced. Like Loki. How would Peter fare up against Loki if he attacked them? Clint didn't want to mull over it, but he knew that Peter wouldn't be a match against Loki or even Hulk if he went a little too mad.

Damn you, Fury! Clint internally screamed. He never liked it when Fury proved right. And he usually was always right.

Peter must have come to the same conclusion as Clint because he spoke up. "Okay," he said, drawing his fingers up to his lengthening hair. "I wouldn't mind learning to fight to, um, better protect people from bad things. Or bad people."

Fury didn't smile or act smug. He gave a simple nod. "Good," he said to Peter. "Good decision. It's always better to know how to fight and not use it rather than having to fight and not knowing."

Clint reached over to Peter. "Are you sure? It's not going to be easy," he warned the kid. Clint's training wasn't a walk in the park. Many have dropped out in the first week. "And you're still a kid. You don't need to have this responsibility yet."

"I already do," Peter claimed, closing his eyes and taking a breath. He recited, "With great power, comes great responsibility." Peter reopened his eyes back to Clint. "Director Fury is right. I can't hide out here for the rest of my life. Someone has to help protect the little guys. The ones who don't think they matter, but do. I have to be there for them."

Clint didn't know if he should feel sorry for Peter or be proud. The boy was far more mature than he looked. Wise beyond years too. A boy who aged faster than others. Yeah, he didn't know if he felt pity or pride for Peter.

Clint was out voted, his objections overruled. "All right," he agreed. "I'll train you. It'll be hard work and painful, but I have faith you'll make it through."

A tentative smile raised on Peter's face. "I'll try not to disappoint."

"Good," came Fury's booming voice as he leaned over to Peter. "I know this isn't easy for you, Mr. Parker. Hell—I don't want you thrust into this warfare anymore than Agent Barton. But some things are out of our control. We must do what's best even if it is the hardest thing to do."

"I understand," Peter responded and Clint knew the kid did.

Fury's eye lingered on Peter for a little longer. "You remind me of someone."

"Who?" Peter asked.

"Someone long dead," Fury remained elusive on the subject, "but he too believed in helping the little
guys. Like yourself."

Strange, Clint thought. Fury never got sentimental in such a manner to anyone. With the exception Agent Coulson, but they were friends for a long time. Perhaps that was who Fury was referring to.

Fury abruptly stood up. "I extended your hospitality long enough," he said to Clint and Peter. He adjusted his black coat. "I best get on my way. Peter—I hope to see you again some day," Fury shook Peter's hand. He turned to Clint. "Take care of that family of yours, Clint. Keep me posted."

Clint nodded and escorted Fury out of the house and down their long driveway. Fury asked again for Clint to keep him updated on Parker's training and stability. Clint promised he would do so and asked for updates on the other Avengers. Fury passed him along their regards such as Steve, Wanda, Sam and even Scott.

When the reached the final point, Fury turned to Clint, face serious and grave. "This thing with Secretary Ross," he said. "It won't be the end for Peter."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I said what I meant inside, Agent Barton," Fury said. "There are others like Ross out there that want to get their hands on Peter."

"To kill him? Like Toomes?" Clint read about Peter's heroics in stopping Adrian Toomes and his crew of criminals. "Does his gang want him dead?"

"Probably, but that wasn't who I was referring to."

"Then who?" Clint inquired. He needed to know who would come after Peter. "Who are you talking about?"

Fury sighed. "Someone who already targeted him once before. Keep an eye on him," he said, putting on his large sunglasses as he continued on his path. He then called over his shoulder. "And cut that damn hair of his. He's not from Asgard!"

And Fury was gone like that. In and out. Elusive. He left Clint standing at the edge, worried over the last statement. Who was after Peter besides Ross? The question chilled his blood as he returned to the house.

Later that night when the whole family slept in their respective beds, Clint told Laura of Fury's visit.

"He wants you to train Peter?"

Clint nodded.

"Are you going to do it?"

"Peter wants me to," Clint said, flipping over on his back to look up at the ceiling. "Wants to be ready for whatever comes for him."

"Who would come for him?" Laura asked, but then quickly amended, "besides Secretary Ross?"

Again, the elusive response from Fury caused great concern for Clint. "I don't know, but Fury made it sound like there was someone else who was after Peter."

"Did you ask him?"
"Couldn't," Clint said. "Fury left before I could even ask. Anyway, I don't think he was going to tell me anyway."

Laura hummed. "Well, sounds suspicious to me," she commented. "He came all the way here to ask a question that could have been done over the phone."

"Said he was in the neighborhood."

"When it Fury ever known to visit because he was 'in the neighborhood'?"

"I know," Clint said, looking back to his wife. "Something else is up. Something we're not aware."

"Should we be?"

"With Peter living with us," Clint said, shoulder shrugged, "probably, but I think Fury has it under control for now. If he didn't think he did, then he would have told us something."

"So, we shouldn't be concerned?"

"Not yet," Clint said. "But let's not discuss it around Peter. He's got a lot on his mind already."

Laura nodded and she wrapped her arms around Clint, head nestling in the crook of his neck. "That poor boy," she murmured. "He never gets a break."

"No, he doesn't," Clint agreed. "Hopefully he will one day. He deserves it."

"He does," Laura seconded it. She went quiet for a moment. "When are you going to start the training?"

"Tomorrow. Four AM."

Laura released a short breath. "So soon," she said, hand stroking Clint's chest. "Am I allowed to make a single amendment to your rigorous schedule?"

Clint looked down at her. "What is it?"

Laura craned her neck back to stare up at her husband. "I want Peter to do some schooling," she said, but then added before Clint could argue. "Not through a institution, but like homeschooling. He's still a kid. He needs to graduate from high school at least. He's already missed so much of school. I think having some kind of academic courses might help balance out his life. Make him feel somewhat normal in a time of chaos."

Clint mulled over the idea. It wasn't a bad suggestion. "Yeah, I think that's a good idea," he said to Laura. "He still has a life to live after all this. Getting some schooling in would be good."

Laura smiled. "I'll set it up," she said. "What grade do you think he's in?"

"He's sixteen, so, um... junior year?" Clint guessed. "Maybe senior. He's a smart kid. Might have skipped a few grades."

"I'll ask tomorrow when I see him," Laura decided. "I'll pick up some textbooks after work for him."

They fell asleep, comfortable in each other's arms until Clint's alarm went off. Time to start the training program. He rose from his bed and got dressed quickly. His wife didn't even budge. Sound asleep. She was always a very sound sleeper. He kissed her again on the forehead before he went up
to the attic to awake Peter.

Peter grumbled and tried to pull his covers over his head. "What are you doing?" he moaned.

"Get up," Clint said, tugging the blankets away. "You said wanted to be trained like an Avenger. This is it. Up and up. Let's go."

Peter groaned again and Clint thought he would have to haul the boy right off his bed, but Peter pulled himself up. Eyes hooded and hair standing in different directions, he got up, rubbing his face awake. "What do I need?"

"Shoes and clothes," Clint responded. "You have five minutes to be downstairs and ready."

Clint waited for Peter at the door and in five minutes, Peter appeared. He still looked tired, but he was ready to start his training.

"Let's go," Clint said, exiting the front door and Peter followed, taking his first step in becoming a fully-fledged Avenger.
Natasha didn’t like her platinum hair color. She always preferred her natural red beauty, but as an agent, hair was trivial. Besides, one day, she could color it red again.

Since her betrayal to Stark and the others, she fled across the ocean, hiding in different Eastern Europe countries with different names and dialect. She blended with society well. No one recognized her. After all, Black Widow had red hair.

But at the moment, she was not Black Widow. She was Natasha, searching for her lost love. Bruce Banner went missing almost a year and a half ago. He took their jet and flew it right out of the sky. She never knew what happened to him and wondered what she did wrong that send him away.

“Nothing,” she said to herself. “It wasn’t you.”

It wasn’t. Bruce Banner found himself unworthy of her and the others because of his counterpart, Hulk. Bruce, gentle, shy and brilliant Bruce was a man who was afraid of his other half and wished to not terrorize the world any further than he already did. So, he took the jet and flew away from all of them. From her.

It was kind of a blessing in the end. With Thaddeus Ross’ return, she was thankful Bruce wasn’t there to be in the man’s presence. She detested him, especially after Bruce told her of Ross’ involvement in his change into the Hulk. Ross was apathetic, obsessed and dangerous. Words that came out her when she was first introduced to him. The clean cut military uniform and impeccably groomed hair did nothing to hide the sinister lurk in the man’s eye. It did not escape Natasha’s observation. After all, she was raised by many similar men who tried to control her. Ross was just another one and she remembered what happened to the others very well.

She had Clint to thank for that. If it wasn’t for his compassion, she may have still been a weapon for the KGB, treated like dirt and second-class. With his help, she escaped and got her vengeance against them. She got her life back, except for one thing—children. She would never have a family of her own. They took that away from her. Forever.

It was a heartache she constantly bore. Any time she walked past a mother and child, her heart bled at the reminder that she would never have a little boy or girl, trailing after her and calling her mama. It hurt to know that her life is her own. She had no one.

She had the Avengers at one point. People she considered her new family and even Bruce, but they all scattered in the wind and she was once again just Natasha.

But not today. Every Mother’s Day for the past several years, Natasha always made a quick trip to Clint’s home to see the kids. She would take them out to town so that their parents could have time alone together. It was a way for her to be a “mother” for just one day. She looked forward to it every year. Playing mother to baby Cooper and Lila and now that traitorous Nathaniel.

The farmhouse was in sight now. It looked the same, minus the new paint job on both the house and barn. And the barn door looked new too, come to think of it. Clint really put in a lot of time in his craftsmanship. Poor Laura, probably sick of all the construction going on around the house.

She pulled her rented vehicle right next to the truck. The air was sweet and fresh, very much different than the polluted smells from where she hid. She locked her car and headed up the porch to the front door. Normally, she didn’t have to knock, but with the whole criminal controversy among
the rogue Avengers, she thought better.

She knocked and waited. She heard footsteps pattering around on the other side and an adult voice ordering about. The front door clicked and it swung open. Natasha stared, brows scrunched in a quizzical manner. “You’re not Clint or Laura.”

A teenager stood in the doorway. He had brown hair, brown eyes and a smooth face with few pimples. He looked nothing like Clint or Laura. Did she get the right house?

When the kid shook his head, she followed up. “Who are you?”

The teenager’s eyes narrowed in offense. “Who are you?” he threw back.

Natasha peered at him, quietly judging the boy unfavorably. She crossed her arms, fingers tapping against her arm. The kid was a punk. Reminded her of Stark to be honest.

“Peter!” came a shrilled voice. “What did we say about opening the door?”

Natasha recognized that voice. Another figure rushed to the door, hair soaked from the morning shower. She gently shoved the teenager behind her, shielding him with her body. Fear etched into her face, but instantly relaxed when she saw who she Natasha.

“Nat!” Laura Barton said, smiling as she moves for a hug.

Natasha returned the embrace. “Thought I got the wrong house.”

Laura laughed. “I know… Clint went a little overboard,” she said, stepping aside for Natasha to enter their abode. “Come in! Come in!”

Natasha walked in, taking in the new refurbishing that Clint must have done in his retirement. “Looks nice,” she complimented. “I see Clint got rid of the dining room.”

Laura followed in after closing and locking the front door. “Turned it into an office space for me,” she said. “Seems kind of pointless now. I hardly use it.”

“Maybe one day,” Natasha said, encouragingly. She glanced around, spying the teenager off to the side. “So… wanna tell me who you are now, kid?”

Laura hurried to join them. “Nat, this is Peter. Peter Parker,” she introduced. “Peter, this is our friend, Natasha Romanoff.”

Suddenly, those brown eyes went as big and round as saucers. Recognition flared and instantly, the teenager lost his defiance and became a blushing prepubescent boy. He struggled to form any words, speechless that Natasha almost found it amusing.

“Oh my god,” the boy called Peter stuttered. “Oh my god! You’re... you’re Black Widow! _The Black Widow_!”

Natasha arched a single brow at the response. “A fan, I see. You sound familiar. Have we met before?”

Laura came up beside Peter, hand on his shoulder. “Nat, how long have you been under the radar?” she teased. “This is Peter Parker. AKA Spider-man.”

Ah! Now it was her turn to be hit with recognition. Spider-Man. Underoos. No wonder he reminded her of Tony Stark. “Well, it’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Parker,” Natasha shook his hand.
It only made the teenager blush harder, his face nearing a maroon color. Laura offered anything to
drink or eat, to which Natasha requested only water. “They are going to be thrilled to see you,”
Laura said. “As will Clint, I’m sure.”

“Where are they?” Natasha asked, taking a seat at the table as Laura handed her the water. Peter
joined too, taking a seat somewhere else at the table. “A bit early to be out around town?”

“Kids are upstairs and Clint is taking a shower,” Laura responded as she moved to the chairs. “Just
hold on a second? Hey, um, Pete?” Peter looked to Laura. “Would you mind getting the kids?
Nathaniel too?”

Peter nodded and bounded his way up the stairs. Almost like a cat by how silent and agile he was.
Natasha quietly chuckled. “Got two spiders under your roof now,” she said to Laura. “Almost need
pest control.”

“Spiders I can handle,” Laura said. “Mice on the other hand…”

A thunderous rampaged dominated, streaming from the stairs. It was followed by a high pitch squeal
of delight when a little girl in ponytails emerged followed by a much taller boy behind her. The little
girl’s face burst into a bright smile.

“Auntie Nat!”

She ran and leapt at Natasha, who caught her with ease and held her close. “Oh my little Lila,” Nat
whispered. “You’ve grown so much since I last saw you.”

Lila craned her head back. “You too!” she said. “Are you old now?”

“Old?” Natasha repeated, baffled by her comment.

Lila touched her silver hair. “You have white hair.”

Natasha laughed. “Oh, no, this isn’t real. I just dyed it for a mission,” she said. “Not old yet.”

Cooper came up and gave Nat a quick hug over his sister. “Hey Auntie Nat,” he said. “I like your
new hair.”

“That makes one person,” Nat said as she ruffled Cooper’s head of hair. “Oh my gosh! You are
getting more handsome by the day! It’s a good thing you take after your mother more than your
father.”

Laura laughed. “Careful, Nat,” she warned. “Or Clint might ask you to take it outside.”

“I’m not afraid of him,” Nat said and she tickled Lila a little. “How are my favorite kids doing?”

They both answered happily, each explaining what has happened in their lives. The biggest was the
addition of Peter Parker. Lila talked enthusiastically about him.

“He’s a super genius too!” Lila said about Peter. “He can do all my math problems in his head! He
doesn’t need his fingers!”

Nat did her best not to laugh out loud. Children say the cutest and most ridiculous things. “Wow, that
is impressive,” she said to Lila. “I can’t even do that. I need my fingers. Without them, math is a no-
go.”

The floor creaked and Peter walked back into the kitchen, carrying a toddler-sized child in his arms.
Natasha stood up, coming over to meet the newest addition to the Barton family. Laura stepped beside her.

“This is Nathaniel,” Laura said, taking her child from Peter’s arms. The baby was quiet. Its eyes solely on Natasha as it moved from one hand to the other. “He’s two now. And he acts more like Clint than me, I’m afraid.”

Natasha couldn’t stop the smile spreading on her face. Despite that the baby betrayed her for switching genders, this little one bears her namesake. Granted, the male version, but nonetheless, the baby was named after her.

“May I?” Natasha asked, gesturing to hold the toddler.

Laura nodded and carefully passed the toddler into Natasha’s arms. As the same with all of Clint’s children, Natasha immediately fell in love. The baby didn’t cry. He stayed snuggled in her arms, eyes following her face with interest.

Laura watched, amazed. “You have a knack, Nat,” she said. “Not once have any of my children ever cried in your arms.”

“That’s because I’m a baby whisperer,” Natasha joked. “Kids love me.”

Laura smiled and turned to her kids. “All right, let’s get you guys some breakfast,” she said. “Peter? Can you check—”

“I’m on it,” Peter said and he disappeared out of the room again.

Laura had Cooper get the table set and Lila stayed with Natasha, blabbering away excitedly about her school, friends and dolls. Peter returned later, dusting off his hands. “It’s fine,” he announced. “Do you want me to start it?”

Laura shook her head. “Nah, wait until Clint can do it with you,” she said. “Then you guys can get to work on it.”

“Okay,” he said. “Do you need me to help make breakfast?”

Laura shook her head, pulling down the boxes of cereal. “I need to do a grocery run. We don’t have much, but cereal. Hope that’s okay with everyone.”

Natasha thought it was fine. She didn’t care too much. After all, the past few days she was lucky to even get to have breakfast. “Sounds good.”

“What’s good?”

Natasha looked to the doorway. Clint entered, dressed in his usual, casual attire, and grinned at Natasha. “Nat! Good to see ya,” Clint went over and they shared an embrace. Not a tight one for little Nathaniel was still in her arms. “You dyed your hair white.”

“Like it?”

“No,” Clint answered. He always championed natural beauty. “Desperate times we live in, huh?”

Natasha nodded along. Darker than it once was that was for certain. Clint headed toward his wife, helping her with the boxes of cereal. “It’s a nice to see you here, Nat,” he said. “Did Fury send you?”
Natasha cocked her eyebrow. “What does Fury have to do with me being here?”

Clint shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s why I am asking,” he said. “I’m a bit surprised that you’re here. You decided to drop by for a visit?”

Natasha glanced between Clint to Laura. Did they not remember? “You do know what today is, right?”

Clint and Laura looked to each other, both with blanked faces. Complete unaware. Natasha didn’t keep them in suspense. “It’s Mother’s Day,” she revealed and she watched both their faces rise in shock.

“It’s Mother’s Day already?” Laura gasped, looking at Clint for confirmation.

Clint nodded, taking Nat’s word for it. “I can’t believe we forgot,” he said, embarrassed for their relapse of time. “Been busy for us over here.”

“If you guys aren’t—”

“No!” Clint interjected, looking from Natasha to Laura. “No, we could um, use a day. I mean, I’m sure the kids would like to spend the day with you. Right, kids?”

Lila and Cooper ardently agreed with their father. Lila grabbed onto Natasha’s sleeve. “We can go to the movies! Or go to the toy store! Oh, Auntie Nat! Can we go to Build-A-Bear?”

Natasha smiled and ruffled her little pigtails. “All those things sound amazing.”

Lila beamed, her feet wiggling in delight at the prospect of spending her Sunday with her aunt. Clint went to the coffee pot and poured a mug. The steam rolled off the surface as he inhaled the smell. Laura took the mug right out of his hands and took a sip.

“Well, I think Clint and I will have to say you are off the hook this year,” Laura said to Natasha. “We have nothing plan and, it’s probably be best we all stay here.”

Natasha understood the reasoning for wanting to keep Clint off the radar, but his family’s identities were concealed. No one knew about it except for Fury and the other Avengers. The children will be safe.

“I can take the kids. It’s not a problem at all,” Natasha played down Laura’s fear. “Would love to spend time with them.”

Laura tapped along the mug’s side. “It’s not that,” she sounded hesitant, sadden. “It’s… you know… I don’t want Peter to feel left out and everything.”

Natasha flickered a questionable glance to Peter Parker. “He can come too,” she said. She didn’t have a problem with Spider-man tagging along. “I don’t mind.”

Clint retrieved his mug from his wife. “That’s not what she means,” he clarified on the behalf of his wife. “Peter can’t…” He paused when he noticed his children were listening, “…he’s um, got things he needs to do here.”

Natasha again glanced between Laura and Clint, reading their thoughts through their facial expressions. But it wasn't them that revealed the reasoning behind Peter's imprisonment.

“He’s a fugitive from the US government,” Cooper filled in for her, to which he received a sharp
scolding from his parents.

“Cooper!” Laura admonished.

Cooper acted innocent. “What? That’s what he is.”

Natasha looked to Peter. The teenager got smaller, caving in on himself in mortified embarrassment at the discussion. Ashamed to be the problem that ruined any and all plans.

But he wasn’t a problem at all. “That’s the only reason he can’t leave?” Natasha inquired.

Clint placed his mug down on the counter behind him. “It’s complicated,” he said. “Fury prefers if he stayed on the property.”

“Fury? He's involved in all of this too?” Natasha was surprised. She had thought Fury wouldn't concern himself over a teenager. Then again, the teenager was Spider-man, so maybe it wasn't so inconceivable. "Well, then, kid, you definitely need a day out in the town. Get some city air into your lungs again.”

"Nat—"

Peter sheepishly shrugged, uncomfortable with the attention. “Look, I don’t… I don’t want to bring any trouble here,” he said. “I’m more than happy to stay behind. Let everyone else have their day and everything. You don’t have to worry about me. I-I never really celebrated Mother’s Day anyway.”

Never celebrated Mother’s Day. Natasha could relate. She too hardly had a mother. Never got to know her at all. “You won’t be a problem,” Natasha insisted. “I’m a fugitive too and I go on with my life.”

Peter acknowledge it with a bob of his head. “Yeah, but I don’t… if someone recognizes me—”

“They won’t,” Natasha cut him off. She called over her should to Clint. “Clint—do you still have your old disguises?”

Natasha pulled out of the driveway as Cooper and Lila waved goodbye to their parents from the backseats of her rental. Nathaniel's car seat was squeezed in the middle of his siblings as the toddler flapped his chubby arms and babbled nonsense. In the passenger seat was Peter, dressed in one of Clint's old disguises he retired long ago. The bleach, blonde wig hid any traces of his original chestnut colored hair and his eyes were covered by crooked rim glasses which snugged his nose, making him a bit nerdier than normal. His clothes were the same, but Natasha added a few decorative memorabilia like a class ring and a jean jacket. Peter looked different enough to hide from the public.

“I look ridiculous,” Peter checked over his appearance in the car's mirror. He kept playing with the wig, trying to style it. "I look like a fake Malibu doll.”

“We all make sacrifices,” Natasha commented, swatting his hands away from his wig. "You have to stop messing with it. Don't want to accidentally have it fall off.”

Peter groaned. "It itches. A lot.”

“Again, sacrifices," Natasha responded. "You think I like my silver hair?”
Peter looked her over. "At least you can pull it off," he commented. "I don't."

He wasn't wrong. Peter didn't look good with blonde hair. "Well, it's just for one night. I'm sure you can handle one night, right Spidey?"

The corners of Peter's mouth drooped, but he somberly nodded that he could pretend to be another person for a day.

They first went to the outlet mall much to Lila's delight. Natasha let Lila drag her through the mall, ducking into very girly places Natasha would never enter even as a child. Lila came out with new tops, cheap jewelry or, in the last shop, a new stuff animal she named Petey. Natasha rolled her lips in to smother her laugh.

As promised to Laura, Natasha had them all stop at a Footlocker for Peter. He needed a new pair of shoes. When Peter told Natasha that he only owned the one pair, she made him get two. After that, she took the boys to Old Navy to pick out clothes of their own. Peter got the basics and a cheesy graphic tee that played a pun on electricity. Peter requested a stop at the bookstore because he wanted to read Carlo Rovelli's latest book on physics.

"Are you some kind of nerd?" Natasha asked after finding him in the physics aisle, a stack of books by his feet. "And I said only one. Laura already got you plenty to read."

"Not a nerd," Peter claimed, flipping through pages in a book he held. "Just... interested in science."

"Nerd," she said. "Like Stark."

"No, not like Mr. Stark! He's... he's way, way smarter," Peter rejected the somewhat praise. "Scary smart type of thing."

"I'm sure you are just as smart as he is," Natasha maintained, picking up the books to check the covers. "Especially if you find all these things fascinating." She stood back up, holding Nathaniel close to her chest. "Only one," she reminded the teenager as she went in search of Cooper and Lila.

They checked out of the bookstore. Each person came out with something. Lila got an Arthur picture book, Cooper a Batman comic and Peter a thick book on how physics shaped the world or something another. And Natasha bought Nathaniel a little stuff dinosaur they sold at the counter.

They stopped at the food court for lunch, drafting up another idea on what to do next. Cooper wanted to see a movie. The latest Star Wars film about Han Solo. "Please?" he begged Natasha. "Can't we see it? I wanna see it!"

Natasha didn't mind. She would have to buy a pair of headphones for Nathaniel to cover up his precious little, elfin ears. "Sure, we can go see it."

Lila groaned. "I don't want to see Star Wars! I don't want to."

"Your brother wants to see it, Lila," Natasha said, passing a small cheerio over to Nathaniel to eat. "I'm sure you can sit through two hours of it."

"I want to see Duck, Duck, Goose!"

"Well, no one else wants to see it," Cooper fired back. "I doubt Peter would want to sit through a silly cartoon show."

"Yes he would!" Lila shouted back at her brother, neither letting Peter speak on his behalf. "He
would rather see it than your movie.”

Natasha took a deep breath. She knew there was going to be an outburst some time during their outing. "Lila, we already did a lot of things you wanted to do today. Let's let your brother pick."

Lila scrunched up her face, eyes getting glossy. "But... I don't wanna see Star Wars!" she whined. "Star Wars is stupid!"

“Oh! Hey, now,” Peter came to Cooper's defense (and possibly the defense of the film as well. He looked truly offended by the comment). "Star Wars isn't stupid. It's a lot of fun. But, if you don't want to see it, then maybe Cooper and I can just go and you guys... I don't know. Go see Duck, Duck, Goose? Or whatever.”

Natasha cocked her head. That... that wasn't a bad idea. "That may work," she said, debating whether they should split up. Clint warned Natasha to keep an eye on Peter, but she doubt Peter would abandon Cooper alone. "Let's check the times."

They discarded their lunch and went to the opposite end of the man where the multiplex cinema was located. They checked the times on both films. To their luck, their times were close to one another.

“Great,” Natasha said and she turned to the two older boys. "All right, so you two will go see Star Wars at the 2:15 showing and we'll see the duck film at 2:40. Should end around the same time. We'll meet," Natasha pointed over where two benches leaned up against the wall underneath upcoming films, "over there when our respective films end. Got it?"

“Yeah,” Cooper said, nodding his head. Peter nodded too. "Can we get popcorn and soda too?"

Natasha shrugged. "Why not?"

They purchased their tickets and ordered popcorn and drinks. Natasha pulled out a pair of headphones she purchased next door and strapped them over Nathaniel's ears. The baby was already exhausted, eyes drifting in and out to fade into slumber. Natasha said goodbye to the boys, but she pulled Peter aside for a talk.

“Look, keep a low profile,” she said to him. "Don't cause attention to yourself. If anyone asks, what are you supposed to say?"

“That my name is Pete Holland and I am with my cousin, Cooper," he recited the fake identification. "If my identity is revealed, I get Cooper to safety first."

“Good," Natasha approved. "We'll be in the next theater. Best behavior."

Peter and Cooper went into their theater and was out of sight. Natasha, Nathaniel and Lila headed to their own, picking out their seats in a slow process. They had the whole theater to themselves at the moment, so they could spend some time finding the perfect seats. When they found them, they took their seat and Natasha thought it would be a good time for some girl talk.

“So,” Natasha started off as she took a small handful of popcorn. "How is it living in a house filled with boys?"

“Um... interesting, I guess. They're always doing something stupid. That's what Mommy says.”

Natasha chuckled. Yes, a group of boys together always caused disastrous results. Natasha only had to look as far as the Avengers to know the truth in that. "What about Peter? He seems like a smart boy."
Lila's eyes brightened at the mention of Peter's name. "Oh, he's nice and a lot of fun. He plays dolls with me. Cooper doesn't do that."

“That's very nice of Peter,” Natasha said. "So, you don't mind him staying at your house?"

Lila shook her head. "No! I like him. More so than Cooper."

That didn't surprise Natasha at all. "Really?"

Lila nodded with a silly grin on her face. "I'm going to marry him."

That gave a little jolt to Natasha. "What?" she said, not even attempting to hide her bemused expression. “Marry him? Sweetie—I don't think you can marry him."

Lila, however, was serious. "Why? He's not married! I checked. I asked him because of the ring on his finger. He said he wasn't, so I asked him if he could be my husband."

Natasha didn't know whether to laugh or act happy for her. She decided laughter might upset Lila. "Isn't he a bit... old for you?"

"Daddy is older than Mommy,” Lila pointed out, taking another fistful of popcorn to her mouth.

She got her there. Clint was a couple years older than Laura. The old man in the group as Tony liked to refer Clint (although, Clint was younger than Tony, so, it didn't technically make sense). "True," Natasha said after a moment. "What does Peter think about you being his wife?"

Lila shrugged. "He told me that he was, um, happy to be my husband, but that we might need to wait a few more years."

Of course Peter brushed the innocent youth crush in a manner that didn't break Lila's heart. A kind, considerate boy. Something that didn't Natasha didn't picture when introduced to Stark's protégé. Then again, Stark was a man full of surprises. Peter happened to be one of the better ones.

The two gossiped about other things from ponies to TV shows to old, fond memories of earlier years. Moviegoers infiltrated their space, taking seats here and there in the theater room. Natasha had to end their personal discussion and talk about general topics to cover up their identities in case someone overheard.

The theater darken and the screen changed to trailers. Natasha double-checked on Nathaniel. He was sound asleep. Lila wiggled her feet in excitement, watching the latest trailers and telling Natasha which one she wanted to see and ones she considered 'stupid'.

They were only twenty minutes into the film when an usher tapped on Natasha's shoulder.

“I'm sorry to bother you, mam,” whispered the young usher. "Are you Natalie Holland?"

Code word. Something was up. "Is there a problem?"

The usher looked uncomfortable. "My boss would like to see you immediately."

Natasha's thoughts instantly went to Cooper and Peter. She kept a relatively calmed demeanor, only showing a little timidity that a normal person showed in such a tensed situation. She got up from her seat and had Lila take her hand. Lila looked mad at being escorted out of the theater, but she knew not to say a word. Her parents always told her to do exactly what Natasha instructed with no complaints or questions.
The usher led them out of the theater and toward the back end of the theater where the maintenance and offices were located. The usher knocked on the door and cracked it open. "Sir? I found Ms. Holland."

He opened the door wider and Natasha instantly saw Cooper and Peter seated off to one side and a burly man with a poor mustache sitting behind a small desk. Peter had an ice pack on his face and when he lowered it upon Nat’s entry, she saw a minor bruise underneath. Shit.

The man waved them in. "You can go now, Jethro. Ms. Holland," he said, getting up from his chair to shake Natasha's hand as the usher closed the door behind him. "I'm Sam. So sorry for pulling you out of the movie just now."

Natasha instructed Lila to take a seat in one of the empty chairs near Peter and Cooper as she took the one directly in front of the man. "What seems to be the problem, Sam?"

Sam took his seat again. His cheeks turned a bit red as he fumbled with his pen. He kept nervously glancing up to her and then away. "We were reported to a disturbance in theater five and found your nephew and son in a fight with two other attendees."

Natasha snapped her eyes from Sam to Peter and Cooper. "Oh, really?" she said, her glare zeroed in on the two boys. Both Cooper and Peter stiffened. "Did they? Well, I am thoroughly embarrassed. I thought they were mature enough to go in alone."

Sam bobbed his head. "Yes, well, apparently, they got into an altercation with the other two men and disrupted everyone else."

Shit, Natasha thought. Great. "Did anyone get hurt?"

"No…, but, um, Peter has a bit of a bruise," Sam answered in one giant breath of relief. "Everyone else is fine. No major injuries. Just disruptions and a few hits."

"Hits? As in plural?"

"Your son hit one of the other attendees."

Natasha jerked her head to Peter. He didn't back down from her glower, but he was apologetic in his stare. Natasha sighed, rubbing her forehead in distress. "I'm so sorry this happened on your establishment. This is really embarrassing."

"Yes, well, we want to create a safe space for our customers and do not tolerate such disturbances," Sam said to Natasha, almost sounding penitent. "I'm afraid I will have to kick them off the premise. They are not banned, but they cannot re-enter the theater or finish their movie today."

A better outcome than she suspected. "That's fine. I understand," Natasha replied, swiftly getting back on her feet. "Thank you and I apologize for their behavior. We will most certainly have a long discussion on it when we leave."

She snapped at the kids to follow out the door. Before leaving the office, Peter stopped at Sam's desk and apologized for his behavior. Sam accepted with a nod and said to Peter he seemed like a good kid, but he had to follow the company's rules. Peter understood and thanked the man again.

Natasha directed them all out of the theater. Lila was silently crying, but she didn't wail. Peter had his head bowed and Cooper kept his pace slower than the others. Natasha didn't even look at them. She directed them straight to the car, told them to hop in and buckle their seat belts.
Once they buckled and drove out of the mall's parking lot did Natasha finally snapped at them. "What the hell happened?" she hissed, mostly to Peter since he was the older one. "I told you guys to not draw attention!"

Peter didn't lift his head, ice pack in hand. "Sorry, Nat."

“I didn't ask for an apology," Natasha snapped. "I asked what happened. Cooper?"

Cooper scooted at the edge of his seat. "It wasn't our fault! Those guys were being real jerks."

“The guys you fought?"

“We didn't hit them,” Peter disputed. "I just... smacked the popcorn out of his hands."

“Smacked popcorn?” Natasha repeated, confused. "Okay, what do you mean it wasn't your fault? Because from my viewpoint, it sure sounds like it is to me."

“The guys behind us were being loud and obnoxious," Cooper began the tale. "Peter asked them to be quiet twice, but they didn't listen. They kept making dumb comments and throwing popcorn towards the screen."

A picture came together for Natasha. Peter and Cooper, sitting side-by-side, trying their best to ignore two unruly moviegoers. Peter, being who he was, attempted a peaceful manner of asking them to be quiet twice. It didn't work and then...

"What happened next?" Natasha inquired. Clearly more happened or they wouldn't have been in the main office.

“I may have, um... I may have told them to shut up." Cooper forfeited his admission, "in a less nicer way than Peter."

Now the picture was complete. Cooper's backtalk didn't sit well with the unruly crew. "And that started the fight?"

“Not at first, no,” Peter took over the story for Cooper. "The guys began to mock Cooper and then one of them tried to dump his popcorn on him. I... I smacked the popcorn out of the guy's hand to stop it. The other guy's friend punched me in the face. I got Cooper out of the way and defended myself against them. That's when the ushers came and removed all of us. We didn't mean to get into trouble. Those guys were being jerks to not only us, but everyone else. Someone had to stand up to them. We just didn't expect them to get violent, that's all."

Natasha loosened her grip on the wheel. No wonder Sam sounded apologetic for kicking them out. Peter and Cooper did nothing wrong, but defend themselves. Still, rules were rules and they broke them. Natasha pulled into a parking lot and parked. It was an ice cream shop. "All right, get out."

Peter checked out the Dairy Queen logo. "Here?"

“Yeah,” Natasha answered. "Figured we could get ice cream since we lost our popcorn. Come on."

They all headed inside and ordered their Blizzard treats. They took a booth far away from the others, in a corner that granted them some privacy. No one spoke, licking up their ice cream in silence. Lila stopped crying, eyes dried and red. Nathaniel was asleep and missing out. Cooper sat next to Peter, mindlessly playing with his toppings rather than eating them. And Peter, he barely touched his ice cream. Probably because his jaw still hurt.
Natasha ate a good portion of her ice cream before deciding to address the situation. "Let me start by saying what you two did was inexcusable," she said. "Cooper—what did your dad always tell you? Don't pick fights with people twice your size. And you, Peter, should have known to alert a worker and tell them about those jerks."

"I know," Peter uttered, remorseful, leaving his spoon stuck in his ice cream.

"I'm sorry," Cooper followed. "Really, Auntie Nat. I'm sorry."

"I know. I know. Now, onto the second thing," Natasha said, gentler than before. She leaned a bit over the table. "I'm proud of you."

Both Cooper and Peter shot their heads up. "What?"

"There are too many bullies in this world as it is," Natasha said. "Too many in power as well that they are getting away with abuse. Courage is a rare trait these days. Don't have a lot of people willing to stand up for what's right anymore."

"So, it heartens me to know that there are at least two people who are willing to do just that," Natasha said, dipping her chin knowingly to them. "Gives me some hope for the world."

Peter and Cooper stayed quiet for a minute. "You're not mad, Auntie Nat?" Cooper tentatively asked.

"Oh, I am," Natasha stressed. She did not want them to get the wrong idea. "But, not as much as I was at the beginning."

"We're really sorry," Peter said. "We didn't mean to cause any trouble—"

"I know," Natasha cut him off as she took a bite of her ice cream again. "Now, finish up your ice cream. Maybe we can try bowling or something like that. You like bowling Peter?"

"Never really, um, played it a few times," Peter rambled on as he took a spoonful of his ice cream to his mouth. "But I haven't done it recently."

"Great!" Natasha looked around at her other two charges. "Why don't we show Peter how skilled we are at bowling?"

And the day went back to being the normal outing that Natasha was used to. They went bowling where Peter did remarkably well. A bit too well. Natasha grew curious when he got his six strike in a row and mentally noted to talk to Clint when they returned home.

After bowling, they stopped at the grocery story to pick up everything on the list Laura handed to her. Lila begged to buy teddy grahams, and she told her to put it in the cart. Natasha was free of carrying Nathaniel, handing him off to Peter to give her shoulders some rest. So, Peter walked beside her, bruised healed, as he bounced Nathaniel in his baby carrier. Nathaniel sounded like he was having the time of his life based off all the squeals and garbled words squawking out from the baby’s mouth.

They had dinner at a diner, playing hang-man to pass the time for the food. Natasha teamed up with Cooper and Lila with Peter, and they rotated on the points of the game. With their stomachs full and feet tired from all the activities, Natasha drove them back to the farmhouse.

Peter carried Lila and Natasha took Nathaniel. Lila yawned loudly, wrapping her small arms around
Peter’s neck as he carried her into the house. Natasha smiled a little, betting that Lila was thrilled that her ‘future husband’ was carrying her like a princess.

Clint and Laura were in the living room, and were ecstatic to see their kids again. Laura took Nathaniel out of Natasha’s arms. “You all look so tired,” she observed. “Fun day?”

Cooper wearily nodded. “Very fun,” he said, words somewhat slurred and his eyelids half-hooded. “Look what I got!”

“Why don’t you show us in the morning, kiddo,” Clint said to his son. “You look worn out and you have school in the morning.”

Both Cooper and Lila groaned in retaliation on the reminder. Clint took Lila from Peter, climbing the stairs to get her ready for bed. Cooper followed his father and Laura told Natasha to make herself comfortable as she put Nathaniel to bed as well.

Natasha watched the family trot up the stairs, leaving her alone with Peter.

Peter already pulled the wig off his head, threading his fingers through his hair to give it some life again after being smashed to his scalp. There was a small rash near his hairline, but it would go away with some antibiotic cream. The glasses were off his face as well and neatly set aside on the table, along with the class ring and wig. Peter Holland disappeared and Peter Parker reemerged in his place.

Natasha walked over to him. “Happy to be you again?”

“Very,” Peter nodded with a little grin peeping in the corner. “Hey, um, thanks for the taking us out and everything. It’s been a while since I had that much fun.”

“It’s not very fun being stuck in one place is it?”

Peter shook his head. “No, but the Bartons have been kind. If I had to be trapped anywhere, I’m glad it’s with them.”

Always so polite and nice. His parents raised a good kid. “Tell me about yourself,” she said, taking a seat on the couch. “The real you. Who is Peter Parker?”

Peter nervously wrangled his hands together. “Who is Natasha Romanoff is the far better question,” he said, moving to sit opposite of her. “I’m nothing special. Just me.”

“I don’t believe that at all,” Natasha dismissed. “Not only did you win over the Barton family, but you also somehow won over Tony Stark.”

“I wouldn’t say won,” Peter brushed her words off. “More like an obligation—”

“Don’t contradict me,” Natasha softly reproached. “If Stark didn’t like you, he wouldn’t have bothered to keep in contact. Even if it is limited. Tony hates obligations. I know this because I went undercover as his secretary in Stark Industries. He’s not one to be forced into anything. He made his choice and he chose you.

“So, I will ask again,” Natasha moved to stand directly in front of the teenager. “Who is Peter Parker?”

The teenager swallowed. His Adam’s apple bobbing as he floundered his words in his attempt to speak to her. “Oh, um, I guess… I’m Peter. Also Spider-man. I lived in New York City all my life.”
“Where?”

“Queens.”

Natasha respected that. Not the same neighborhood as Steve Rogers, but a true breed New Yorker. “Do you have family there? Siblings?”

Peter shook his head. “No, no siblings. Only child.”

She remembered his comment about not celebrating Mother’s Day. “Parents?”

Peter gravely shook his head, eyes cast down to his shoes. “They died when I was young,” he said. “I don’t have any memories of them.”

Natasha’s heart wilted for the poor boy. Orphan and alone. Sort of like herself. “No family then?”

“I have an aunt,” he clarified for her. “But, I don’t know where she is. I mean, Clint told me she’s with Mr. Stark, but I’m not certain. Maybe she is or isn’t. I don’t know.”

“You miss her,” Natasha noted the apprehension in his eyes upon the mention of his aunt, “but you also miss someone else.”

That got Peter to stand erect, scared for a second by her observation. “Yeah… I-I miss my uncle. Sometimes, seeing Clint and Laura with their kids, makes me miss my own family. With my uncle and aunt.”

Natasha related more and more to the kid. “If you don’t mind me asking, how did you lose your uncle?”

“He was shot by a mugger.”

First his parents and then his uncle. The poor kid experienced a traumatized youth. “I’m sorry for your loss,” she said, gentle and kind. “It’s never easy to lose a person we love and respect.”

“No it does not,” Peter agreed, still not looking at her in the eye. “So, um… what about you? Got any family?”

Natasha shook her head. “My family died long ago.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine,” Natasha waved his sympathies away. “We have what we have when we have it. There’s nothing else we can do.”

“I guess,” Peter muttered. "Live in the moment type of thing, huh?"

Natasha nodded. "Never take anything for granted," she said, reminiscing her last moments with Bruce. How she thought she finally found someone who would be with her forever. Him and the other Avengers. "It's the hardest lesson we all learn."

They fell silent. Their conversation turning into a deep, philosophical discussion that they were not expecting. Natasha reflected her happier moments with her makeshift family. She remembered Bruce’s kind, timid behavior and his gentleness to all those around him. She recalled Tony throwing references so fast over Steve's head, that the great Captain America looked stumped at whatever Tony was telling him. She remembered Thor teasing everyone with his hammer, tempting them with a promise to rule Asgard if they could lift his hammer.
The good, old days, she remembered. How she missed those slower moments in their busy lives.

"You said you're a fugitive too," came Peter's voice that drew her out of her thoughts. "How?"

Natasha squinted at him. "What do you mean?"

"How are you a fugitive?" Peter expanded. "You fought on Stark's side in Berlin. I don't understand why you are on the run if you didn't break the Accords."

Tony never told him. "I switched sides in the battle," she answered. "I stopped King T'Challa from capturing Steve and Bucky. I helped them escape."

Peter froze, mouth gaped open as he digested the news. "And so... you had to run."


"You're not alone."

Natasha sadly smiled at the kid. If only he knew how lonely she truly was. "We are alone. The Avengers are no more," she said. "Our little band had a good run, but it's broken."

"Maybe not," Peter countered, scooting to the edge of his seat. "If you guys can find a way to come back together—"

"You are an optimistic kid."

"I'm optimistic because I believe in you guys. I believe in the Avengers," he attested wholeheartedly. A man with pure heart and belief in good things to come. "I believe you will save the world. Save everyone from all sorts of dangers. This is just... a minor setback."

"Peter—"

The teenager shook his head. "No, it's not over yet. You guys are heroes," he maintained. "Our heroes. We need you even if we think we don't need the Avengers, we do."

Natasha sighed. Peter had that sparkle of hope in his eyes. A strong belief that the Avengers would come together once again when the world needed them. That the fight in Berlin was nothing more than a spat. It wasn't. It was more. It was over the fact that they couldn't work as a team. They hardly functioned properly, even at the beginning.

She got up from her seat and moved to sit next to Peter. "The world doesn't need us, anymore. They made that clear with the Accords," she said to him. Peter wanted to argue, but she stopped him. "Our time is done. We avenged the earth. We did what was needed when it needed us."

"Now—it needs people like you," Natasha said and Peter inclined in his head in doubt. "It's true. I don't say anything unless it is. I don't know you that well, but I can say you have a good combination of two people I respect the most in the world."

"Who?"

Natasha smiled. "Tony Stark and Steve Rogers."

Peter's face blushed a deep red. Almost the color of her natural hair. "Oh, I'm nothing like—"

"Kid, take the damn compliment," She gently chided and then waited for Peter to look back at her. "I mean it, though. You have the better qualities of Stark and Rogers. You are the hero the world needs
now. Kind, compassionate, willing to stick up to bullies and have the smarts and wits needed to utilize what's at hand. You are the new hero that is making the Avengers obsolete."

Peter looked sad. "But I don't want to make you guys obsolete."


That didn't cheer Peter up, but it wasn't supposed to. Sound of steps coming down the stairs interrupted them and Clint reappeared. "Thanks again, Nat," he said to her. "The kids seemed to enjoy the day."

"Of course, it's me," Natasha said with an artful smile. "I'm a fun person."

Clint chuckled, bemused by Natasha’s statement. "You going to stay the night? I can fix up a bed?"

Natasha checked the time. It was late. "Sure. I'm guessing my bed is this couch here?"

Clint nodded. Peter assisted Clint in getting the bed ready. Once it was done, Peter wished them a goodnight before heading up to his own bedroom up in the attic, leaving the old friends alone.

"How long have you been training Peter?" Natasha bluntly questioned once the boy was out of sight.

Clint involuntarily rubbed the back of his neck. "Oh, about a couple of months now," he said. "Fury wanted him trained, so that's what I've been doing in my spare time."

"And you agreed to it?" It was not like Clint to agree to train a kid how to kill.

"Hell no!" Clint responded. "When Fury asked me to train him, I put my foot down. Which then promptly got stomped. Peter sided with Fury and now, I'm training him."

"Peter Parker—an agent of SHIELD."

"SHIELD’s dead, Nat," Clint reminded her. "I'm training him to become an Avenger. Or whatever he wants to be later in his life." He paused, scratching underneath his rugged chin. "What do you think of Peter?"

"He’s a good kid. Kind, sympathetic, but lacks self-esteem," Natasha noted based off her talk with him and observation. "Overall, he’s a good person."

Clint nodded along to everything she said. "Yeah, he’s a good kid," he said. "I'm surprised that he’s Stark’s protégé, you know? Never figured Stark would go for a kid like him."

Natasha thought for a moment. "I can," she said. "In some ways, he’s like Stark. Only better."

Clint huffed. "He’s nothing like Stark."

"He's better," Natasha emphasized. "A good combination of Stark and Rogers."

Clint mused over the comment. "Yeah… maybe." He looked at her outfit. "Do you have a change of clothes or do you need to borrow Laura’s?"

"I got my own," she said, lifting her own bag.

Always prepared," he said with a fond smile. "So, tell me. What have you been doing?"
Natasha instinctively glanced away, her eyes on her bare fingers. “Oh, been here and there.”

“For what?” Clint pressured.

Natasha inhaled. “Finding answers on where Dr. Banner might have gone to,” she said. She looked up to find Clint’s face forming into sympathy. “Don’t,” she warned. “Okay—just don’t.”

Clint restrained his face muscles. “Sorry—so… did you find him? Or where he might have gone?”

“No. Not even close.” Natasha hugged her sides. “Doesn’t matter. I gave up. He doesn’t want to be found.”

Clint came to her side. “You can’t think like that Nat,” he said. “It was the Hulk who ran off. Not Banner.”

Natasha quietly snorted. “He may have talked as if the Hulk was another person. A stranger, but he wasn’t,” she said. ‘Bruce and Hulk were one of the same. If the Hulk fled it was because, deep down, Bruce wanted to as well.”

Clint sighed. “I’m sorry Nat.”

“Don’t be. It’s not your fault,” she said, feeling the stings in her eyes. She couldn’t let Clint see her sadness. He’s seen her cry once, but she wasn’t in the mood for any pity or sympathy. She accepted the sad rejection. She needed to move on like everyone else.

“What have you been up to since the Raft?” Natasha asked as Clint frowned for her switch in topics. But, Clint knew her well enough to not return to the old one. “Besides taking care of the kid.”

“Nothing much,” Clint said. “Did a few things with Cap before making a return home. Then, Peter joined us a few months back and now, this is what I do.”

“How long are you hosting him?”

“Don’t know,” he answered, rubbing his nose. “He’s staying here until otherwise. Fury will probably let us know if his location has been jeopardize.”

Natasha hesitated, remembering the earlier incident. “About that—”

“About what?” came Clint’s sharp reply, “What happened?”

Natasha relayed what occurred in the theater with Peter and Cooper. Clint listened with an impassioned expression, showing no signs of either anger, distress or disappointment. He only listened for the full story before making a reaction.

He drew in an unsteady breath. “Are you sure no one recognized him?”

Natasha shook her head. “Nah. Nothing. I even kept an eye on reports throughout the rest of the day. Nothing.”

Clint sighed in relieved, but he didn’t look it. “Damn it! I told them to be careful,” he muttered. “I’ll have to report this to Fury. He would want to know.”

Natasha didn’t care what Clint did with the information. She had full confidence in his ability to protect his family and Peter. “Do what you have to do,” she said. “Although, what does Fury have anything to do with Parker? What’s his interest in the kid? Besides him being Spider-man.”
“Honestly? I don’t know. I thought it had to do with Spider-man as well, but I think there is more to it,” Clint said. “He was adamant about Peter being trained and talked about more people being after him.”

“So… someone else besides Ross,” Natasha concluded, wondering who second, mysterious villain was. “Who?”

“Beats me,” Clint shrugged. “I don’t have a clue. We’re doing our best to give Peter a relatively normal life for his situation.”

Natasha could see that. “You’re doing a good job,” she complimented. “Peter doesn’t look too traumatized.”

“Should have been here about a month ago,” Clint wearily quipped. He exhaled. “Do you need anything else, Nat? Water? Another blanket or—”

“I’m good,” Natasha examined her makeshift bed. Far better than other places she had stayed. “I’ll see you in the morning. 4:30?”

Clint shook his head. “Nope—3:00 AM,” he countered. “Consider it his grounding.”

Natasha smile as she shook her head. Clint—already moved on from time-outs to grounding. He was getting old. “See you then,” she said, heading to the bathroom to change. “Goodnight.”

“Night.”
The staples punched through the paper and into the wooden post. He smoothed it down and slammed the stapler again. The paper was pinned tight against the post, screaming outrage. In the cover of night, from post to post, a new flyer decorated the streets of Queens, all demanding justice for Spider-man.

It was nearing midnight when the hooded figure crept back into an affluent brick home. He slipped through the front door, quietly closing it to not make a sound. He locked it. He tiptoed up the stairs, to the third door on the right. He entered and closed the door and turned the light on. The room brightened, revealing a typical, but lavished teenage bedroom.

King-sized bed, Apple desktop and laptop, a large turntable with a huge collection of records, a bookcase filled with rare and first edition books, and a rotating closet that had suits from Brooks Brothers to Marc Jacobs. He pulled off his hoodie and tossed it aside to his bed as he plopped on the desk chair.

Flash Thompson logged onto his computer.

His screen came alive and he immediately went to a web page: www.spider-watch.wordpress.com.

Flash opened a blank entry and began to type:

Tony Stark made a speech addressing all nations at the latest Union Nations gathering. His speech held the government accountable for oppression and punishing those who are scientifically different. Stark calls the government’s treatment toward those with superpowers vile and inhuman, using the situation that occurred at Midtown High as the prime example of the abuse government allows. The violence used against the students at Midtown displayed the archaic and unruly behavior that is unacceptable on all accounts. If a country allows violence against its own citizens and claims it in the name of safety, then are we living in a democratic government or a dictatorship?

The speech leaves the public contemplating how far the government is willing to go to control people. Oppressing superheroes is just the beginning. If no one checks the government and hold the leaders accountable, what stops them from expanding that control onto others? To keep freedom alive, we must constantly ask ourselves, ‘What are we doing for others?’ It is well known that if there are those oppressed, then no one is truly free. It is time to stand up to those who are willing to abuse us and the system for their own gains. It is time for us to rise above and support the heroes who make our lives safer every day. Support the oppressed. Support the unheard. Support freedom.

Fuck the Sokovia Accords.

“Sweetie?”

Flash froze. His mother! He immediately saved his entry and logged out. He spun around in his chair just as the door opened. His mother stood underneath the archway. His mother, petite, kind, and confidant woman looked at him with concern.

“What are you doing up?” Flash’s mother questioned. "It's almost one in the morning."
“Oh, um, just er, checking out universities,” Flash said, grabbing his prop that showed a list of pros and cons for each college he wanted to attend. "Guess I got side-tracked."

His mother came over and brushed his hair back with her hand. She took a quick glance at the pad of paper, shaking her head. "You stress over so many things," she said. "You still have two more years of Midtown before college. Get some sleep. You have your first day of school tomorrow and you need to go back to that normal sleep schedule."

"I will," Flash told her and he forced yawn to show her he was sleepy. "I was too focused and now, I am sleepy."

His mother smiled and kiss the top of his head. "Get to bed. I don't want to come out and catch this light on. Got it?"

Flash nodded and his mother bid her good-nights as she left to return to her bed. Flash brushed his teeth, washed his face (he has good skin for a reason) and put on his silk pajamas. He turned off the light, but he didn't go to his bed. He went back on the computer. He logged back onto the website and pulled up another blank entry.

!!SPIDER-MAN WATCH ALERT!!

A young man from Ontario, Canada claims of being the real Spider-man is false! We investigated, but found no evidence to support the young man's claim. If you have any information on Spider-man, aka Peter Parker, please contact us at spiderwatchnews@gmail.com. We want to find the truth and help Spider-man return back home to his native Queens.

Flash finished and press sent. The two entries appeared on the main wall page. His website has become a popular hit. He's seen news anchors use his information in their segments, but that was not the reason Flash created the website. He created long before the attack on Midtown. He never told anyone in his class. Or any of his friends for that matter. But, he was a big fan of Spider-man. He created the website in hopes to share the amazing feats Spider-man performed around New York City. But, when the attack happened and the revelation of Spider-man's identity, Flash turned his website from web-slinger videos, to activism, rebelling against the government's treatment on Spider-man and other superheroes. He also kept the world updated on Spider-man by revealing frauds and/or updating the public on bills and debates occurring in the Senate. His site became the number one site for those who want to stay tuned on the topic in regards to Spider-man.

However, no one knows his identity. He refused to engage in activists who have reached out to personally meet him in order to set up marches and other activities. Flash turned them all down. He would support their cause, but he could not reveal his identity. So, he stayed hidden behind his screen, letting the world know everything about Spider-man.

Flash went to bed, but his mind shocked him as always. He struggled to sleep at night. Not every night, but most nights. Ever since the attack in his classroom, he woke up covered in sweat and vibrating from head to toe. He searched his room, checking the closet and underneath the bed, half-expecting gunman to be hiding there, ready to shoot him like they did to Mr. Harrington and Parker. His parents sent him to a psychologists to help relieve him of the post-traumatic stress. His doctor said it's a long process and Flash found that it got a little easier to sleep through the night as the months passed.
The next morning, his father was at the breakfast table as their personal chef finished cooking breakfast. His father was dark and stout with firm bone structure. He read the newspaper, reading up on the news that covered the front page. Flash got a peak and saw it was a picture of Tony Stark. As always.

His father grunted. "Stark isn't ever going to give up, isn't he?"

Flash shrugged, acting indifferent on the matter.

His father huffed again. "Don't get me wrong," he said. "What happened last year was uncalled for, but Parker will probably be an adult by the time they get this mess sorted. He wouldn't even need all these protection guidelines that Stark introduced to the panel."

Yes, the underage guidelines to those twenty-one or younger with abilities. Laws that would not only protect their identity, but allow them to actively participate in certain areas and/or incidents around the world. Not full-fledged Avengers, but pre-Avengers.


The chef set a plate of a full, traditional breakfast in front of him and his father. Flash ate right away, while his father let his chill, too drawn by the newspaper. "The President's lack of taking sides is pathetic," he remarked. "Too afraid to get one portion of the population angry at him."

"Well, his Secretary of State is responsible for what happened," Flash reminded his father. "Maybe he's waiting it out? Seeing where it goes."

His father tossed the paper aside. The moment his parents rescued him from the school after the attack, they have done everything impossible to sue those involved, including the school and government. His parents were not the only ones. Others joined in the lawsuits. The school settled quickly enough, but the government took too long. His father despised the White House administration for their lack of action and consequences against Secretary Ross.

"He is a coward," his father commented. "You stand up for what you believe. If he sides with his Secretary, then admit it so that we impeach his ass. Or take the public's side and fix the damn mistake. Yet, he does nothing and everything is at a standstill."

Flash nodded along to his father's rant. Being a top criminal lawyer, his father always got heated in matters like this. He was also very political, but had no desire to get into politics. His mother claims that he only likes to complain about politics, not be the decision maker on them.

Flash's father sighed. "Eat up or you're going to be late for your first day."

Flash finished his breakfast and said goodbye to his father. His mother already left early for work. She had a meeting early in the morning down in Wall Street. After all, bankers don't necessarily work from nine to five as others assumed. Flash got into his new sports' car, the one he received after Spider-man (Peter Parker, damn it!) crashed and ruined his old one.

He drove to school and it looked like any typical school. Kids waited outside, greeting friends, talking amongst themselves and sharing stories of their summer vacation. Flash parked and headed up the stairs to his locker.

It was weird to see his former classmates again. Well, classmates still. They have yet to graduate, but it seemed that long since he last saw them. He saw Betty Byrant. Blond hair still straight as ever, her posture proper and voice too soft that it sounded like she always whispered. She was speaking to Michelle Jones, who held a permanent scowl as she listened to Betty. Flash didn't know what they
were talking about and it was hard to figure out by facial expression alone. Michelle was very hard to read.

He saw his other decathlon team members. All dressed in new fall outfits and reading off their schedule to find their correct classrooms. Flash had his memorized already. He grabbed his mathematics book and headed straight to his first class of the day. Upon entering, he immediately found Ned Leeds sitting at a desk in the back near the window. He sat alone, hunched over and eyes on the empty desk. Flash considered, wondering if he should sit with Leeds or not. After all, they weren't friends. He hadn't seen the guy for three whole months. Maybe they don't have to be friends. They could be civil. That's a possibility.

Flash walked down the aisle of desks and took one near Ned. "Hey, Leeds," he said and Ned flickered a glance in his direction. "How was your summer?"

Short and civil, Flash prided himself on the greeting.

Ned, however, looked unimpressed. "What do you want, Flash?"

Insulted, but expectant. Again, they weren't friends and he terrorized Ned and Peter for years. Why would Ned expect his comment to be anything but belittling? "Nothing, man. Wanted to know how your summer went," he said, pausing. "Did he contact you at all? Peter, I mean."

Ned shook his head. His face graved, turning a bit grey as he turned away from Flash.

It appeared Ned didn’t do any better than last year. He decided to attempt cheering Ned up. "Yeah, well, maybe he can make it up by giving you an awesome souvenir, right?"


A weak smile twerked on Flash's lips as he pulled out his notebook to ready for the class. Other students walked in through the door. Michelle joined the back, taking a seat directly behind Ned. Ned smiled at Michelle as she patted him on the back. No dialogue. That was all they did.

The first school day was both normal and awkward. The attack was still one everyone's minds. Didn't help that Peter Parker's old locker was still decorated in a memorial shrine for him. Even strangers from outside of the school tried to enter to leave notes or pictures or teddy bears at his locker. The school's additional security did their best to keep those people out, but it was hard enough as it was with students trying to get from class to class in a packed hallway. Flash didn't leave anything at the locker. He saw his peers do so. He swore he saw Cindy Moon cry as she left a rose by the locker.

The last bell rang and Flash entered the library where the rest of the decathlon teammates joined him. It was their first practice of the new school year. As reigning champions, they needed to keep the streak going (if you call it that). Michelle Jones was their new president after Liz Toomes left the school. Once Mr. Harrington arrived, Michelle Jones started the practice with a speech.

"All right," she began. "Now... seeing as we have a spot open, we will need to host tryouts this year."

Flash's stomach plummeted, eyes glancing around the table in search for Peter Parker's face. He was not among them. He caught Ned snapping up, horrified at the prospect. Michelle must have seen him because she added. "I know none of us wants this. Peter was a good teammate and a good friend.
But we need a full roster in order to participate. I don't like it either, but we gotta do what we have to do. Peter would want us to keep going with our lives."

She almost made it sound like Peter was dead. Did Michelle know something that Flash didn't know? She was always a mysterious one. Maybe she does know something.

The team agreed on tryouts, but with lack of any enthusiasm.

“I heard that he’s out living in the Amazon jungle,” piped Abe Brown as he bit into his sandwich. “Like a Tarzan figure.”

“Tarzan is not South American,” countered Sally Avril, her frizzy curls overrunning her face. “And, that’s not what I read. I read he’s working underground with the other rogue Avengers.”

“Of course he’s doing that,” said Cindy. “Captain America was the last one who took him. I’m sure he’s with them. Wherever they are.”

They have been debating over the hidden location of Peter Parker. It was a long lunch period and Flash sat alongside his fellow decathlon team members. Minus Ned Leeds, Michelle Jones and, the new guy, Harry Osborn. Those three sat near the end of the cafeteria.

It was a popular discussion among the teens in the high school. Everyone had theories about Peter Parker’s fugitive life. Most were ridiculous like Abe’s, but others were more realistic like Cindy’s. Others more hopeful and some depressing.

Flash listened to as many as he could, so that he may add it to his website. So far, none of them were good enough to be written on the blog. He already investigated in many leads regarding Peter’s whereabouts and none of them were close to what his table predicted.

Charles Murphy sighed, hand sliding underneath his chin. “You think he knows?” he said, jerking in Ned’s direction. “You think he’s been in talking to him this entire time?”

Flash was the first to rebuke. “No. If he didn’t, he wouldn’t be acting like a dead horse.”

They all turned and looked over at Ned. Indeed, he looked happier than he’s been in some time, but he didn’t look any better than the days after the attack.

They all turned back to the table. “Yeah, guess you’re right,” admitted Abe. “You would think Parker would contact him though, right? Or someone.”

Cindy nodded. “Probably Stark or his aunt.”

Most likely, Flash agreed with a short nod. With all that technology, Stark probably had a way to communicate with Peter without the government knowing. So, while Stark and his circle of friends know of Peter’s whereabouts, his friends down below were left in the dark, wondering and worrying.

Charles sucked in the last bit of his water. “Yeah—hey! Did you guys hear about that one theory? The one with Stark as Peter’s biological dad? Would make sense right?”

That started another round of bickered debating on the truth of it all. Already, a woman in North Dakota claimed to be Peter’s birth mother, but as Flash learned after hiring a hacker to get information, the woman simply only wanted attention. Flash typed it up on his blog and soon, everyone decried her as a fraud and horrible person. Another rumor whirled around here and there.
The one involved Stark’s personal interest in Peter Parker. A lot of people found it odd that Stark invested his time and effort in Peter Parker. Yes, the guy was Spider-man, but he never showed that much interest in other vigilante who have popped up in New York City.

Flash had no evidence to disprove or support the allegations that Stark was Peter’s biological father. All of Stark’s files are too tightly secured. No one could break into its system. So, Flash’s website simply wrote support pieces for both theories. But, Flash doubted Tony Stark was Peter’s father.

“It’s all bullshit,” claimed Cindy. “Haven’t you read the latest Spider-man watch?”

“That’s just a gossip blog,” Flash said in his lame attempt to keep his association with the page unknown. If he mocked it, then no one would suspect him. “Besides, the idea of Stark being his father is completely bogus. There is no decent evidence to support it.”

“Nor is there any to prove it otherwise,” Charles argued to back his claim. “The blog showed both sides—that is, if you bother to read it, Flash,” he snubbed Flash. “I’m pretty sure there is some kind of relation. There’s no way that Stark would pick a kid over those older superheroes. Like that guy up in Harlem? Can’t be destroyed or something?”

“Oh Daredevil,” suggested Abe as he bit into his carrot. “Or that guy in a red suit.”

“I don’t think he’s considered a hero,” Cindy said to Abe. “Didn’t he like, kill a bunch of people on the interstate recently?”

“I thought that was a year ago?” said Shelly.

“Doesn’t matter when it happened?” Cindy said, agitated. “It happened. I doubt Stark would want a man like that to join his crusade.”

“He’s that guy crazy, right?” questioned Charles.

Who knows, thought Flash. A man who was willing to cause a major accident to kill a gang, putting other lives’ in danger was an insane individual. Steer clear from him was the best policy.

“Yeah, probably,” Flash answered.

Charles sipped up his last drop of water. ”All-in-all, I still find it weird that Peter Parker was Spider-man. I mean… him? He never looked like Spider-man.”

“Yeah, but come on,” Abe said to Charles. “It makes sense when you think about it. Dropping band, missing decathlon practices and that time Spider-man saved us in DC? Plus, the Stark internship and him personally knowing Spider-man. Honestly, we should have made the connections a lot sooner than we did.”

That was true. Now that Peter’s identity had been publically revealed, it was a slap in the face to everyone that no one connected Spider-man to Peter Parker. Flash never would have expected Peter to be his hero. After all, Peter Parker was… well, Peter Parker. He doesn’t exactly look like Thor or Captain America.

Charles shrugged. “Still hard to see Parker as Spider-man,” he maintained.

Sally finished her last cookie. “What do you think Secretary Ross wanted with Peter?” she questioned. “I heard that he wanted to experiment on him. That’s why he came to the school.”

“That and other things,” Abe added.
“According to the hearings, Secretary Ross did it to protect the general public from unauthorized vigilantism,” Cindy said. “Peter didn’t sign the Accords; therefore, he was considered a criminal.”

Flash snorted. A criminal? Really? They never even asked him to sign. Why didn’t they ask instead of shoot first?

A murmur of agreement ran along the table. Cindy turned to Flash. “I didn’t say I agree with Secretary Ross’s actions. Nor do I agree with his motives,” she said. “Only repeating what was said in the senate hearings.”

“Yeah, well, if any politician believes in that nonsense obviously have no common sense or even empathy,” Abe argued. “How could any decent person believe that attacking an unharmed kid is noble?”

Another round of murmured agreement.

“It’s a question that keeps popping up over and over again,” complained Charles and he sat up a bit more in his seat. “In my experiences, politicians only care about one thing.”

“Power,” they all said in unison. It was a common knowledge.

Cindy scrunched up her face in a sickly expression. “It disgusts me how insincere so many politicians are nowadays. How do we trust them with our lives if they are all right with forfeiting Peter’s life? Or maybe another person? It always starts with one group before it goes onto the next. A lesson the world learned nearly seventy years ago.

The lunch bell rang, warning the students they have five minutes to get to their next class. They all picked up their trays and dumped them in the nearby trash.

“Well, wherever Peter is,” Abe said as he recycled his containers, “I hope he’s doing all right.”

They all nodded and muttered their agreements. Flash was the last one to leave from the group. As he slung his backpack over his shoulder, he spotted Ned and Harry talking softly down the hallway. Flash watched them a little, wondering if Ned truly did know anything about Peter’s life.

No, Flash determined. He didn’t know anything.

The decathlon team had their first upcoming meet and they were all excited to get ready for it. Michelle grilled them nonstop, doing surprise questions while they transferred from one class to the next or even drinking from a water fountain. Flash cursed when Michelle did a surprise attack at the water fountain with him. He got water all down his pants. "Shit! Michelle!” he shouted. Now it looked like his pissed himself.

Michelle wasn't apologetic at all. "What are the three rings of Saturn?"

Flash tried to get the water to dry. "Who gives a fuck? My pants!"

"Fine," Michelle said. "Which ring is at twenty-seven degrees—"

"Look—I'm not Parker, okay?" Flash snapped, still embarrassed by the water spilling on him. "I can't just whip out answers while doing reputation damage control. Okay?"

Michelle acted like he punched her in the gut. Her face tightened, eyes taunt as she glowered over him. "Look, here, Flash," she growled. "None of us are Peter. That's why I am doing this. Peter isn't
here to help us win. We have to do it ourselves."

Michelle marched off to her next target or classroom. Flash didn't know. It's been a month into the school year and he still wasn't quite sure of everyone's schedule yet. He spent the rest of the day with wet pants. Harry saw this. A little twist of his lips meant he wanted to comment, but thought better. Still, Flash saw the bemused smile even if it never appeared.

Flash flopped in his seat and decided to ignore everyone for the rest of the day. He checked his phone, reviewing news articles and his inbox to see if he received any updates or information on Spider-man. He did, but none of them emails seemed legit. Most were vague descriptions or claims of seeing Spider-man, but Flash doubted Peter would be both in France and Peru at the same time.

After decathlon practice, Flash returned home. His parents had yet to return and the cleaning lady was finishing up the last spots in the house. Flash skipped up to his bedroom and flung his backpack aside. He got on the computer and answered to people's questions in regards to Spider-man and reassure the public that the reports on Spider-man's capture were in fact false. It would be a bigger deal if it was true.

He spent another half-hour answering the emails before he began his homework. The work was simple enough. Nothing too hard that it hurt his mind. Once his bedroom window darkened, Flash zipped up his jacket and put up his hood. He switched bags, the one hidden underneath his bed. Inside was a stapler and flyers with Peter Parker's school picture that he got from the yearbook. Underneath Parker's image was bold letters: *Fuck Accords.*

He had been passing and posting these flyers and others for months now. Some organizations already adapted them and expanded them on billboards. Flash left the house as the chef chopped up vegetables for dinner, unaware that the young master of the house was leaving. He took the train into Brooklyn, deciding to spread his message there that night. He stapled the posters to anything he could, taking him just under two hours to finish off his stash. He checked the time. His parents will be home soon enough.

Flash hopped back on the train, planning his next course of action all the way back home. When he arrived at his house, he already mapped out the next territory and coming up with a new poster design. He entered through the front door, the lights on everywhere.

"Hey Mom! Hey Dad!" Flash called out as he moved further into the house.

His mother appeared at the top of the staircase, still dressed in her work attire. "Flash, dear," she said, walking down the stairs. "You were out late."

Flash nodded, acting over-burden to win his mother's sympathies. "Michelle is a tougher leader than Liz," he whined. "She kept us longer to prepare for our first meet."

His mother bought the lie. She smiled. "Well, you do have a title to keep," she said. "You hungry? Want to sit down for dinner?"

"What about Dad?" Not that they ever waited for him and vice-versa. First come, first serve in the house. No need to let good food go cold or to waste.

Just then, the garage door could be heard. It was opening. Then it closed. And then they heard a car door.

"Just arrived," his mother responded as she moved to the garage door to greet his father. The garage door opened and Dad sauntered into the house. He looked disorganized and excited at
the same time. Something great must have happened at work. Possibly he found evidence that supported his client or proved the defendant wrong. His father came up to his mother, stopping her from giving him a kiss. "Turn the television on this instant!"

"What?" his mother was baffled by his explanation.

His father's feet scurried over to the living room, ordering Alexa to turn on the cable. The television came to life and his father flipped through the channels until it arrived on MSNBC.

*Live from Washington D.C., the House of Representatives unanimously voted for the United States to be removed from the Sokovia Accords. The bill has been passed onto the Senate where senators will be currently voting in the upcoming days. Right now, Senator Schumer has the floor—*

The screen switched to a live feed of the C-SPAN of the senate floor. Senator Schumer stood behind a podium, speaking out against the Accords to the entire room packed with all senators.

Flash's mother sunk into a nearby couch. "Is this real?" she asked. "Are they going to cut out of the Accords?"

Flash's father sighed. "We'll find out sometime this week."

Dinner was forgotten as him and his parents watched the news anchors converse on the subject matter. Many were supportive of the House’s decision to leave the Accords, citing that it was against humane values and American values. A few went on to discourage the idea, citing that the government have a responsibility to protect the people from super-charged individuals who are working only in their own best interest.

By the time the segment ended, Flash forgo dinner altogether. “I have to finish my homework,” he claimed as he backed up the stairs when his parents wanted him to come down for dinner. “Got a lot, of um, papers, and a test. Yeah a big test.”

He sprinted upstairs and locked his door. No need for interruption on this. He logged back onto Spider-watch. He pulled up a blank entry and typed.

*DEAL BREAKER*

*House of Representatives just voted to remove the United States from the Sokovia Accords, citing inhuman conditions and civil liberties violations. They proposed and agreed on a bill that has been passed to the Senate. If the Senate follows and passes the bill, then we may be seeing the return of a certain web-slinger a lot sooner than we hope.*

Flash hit sent.

It appeared the tide was finally turning in their good favor.

About damn time!
"I don't give a damn! Go do your fucking job!"

Ross slammed the phone hard. His fingers stab into his scalp as he attempted to regain equilibrium. His whole unit was one entire circus! Their incompetence was the reason they had yet to acquire the asset. He raised his head, looking out his glass office to his subordinates below. They all scurried about on the floor, working their hardest to make any progress. They all looked terrible too. Bags under their eyes, greasy hair and multiple Styrofoam cups of old coffee littered their desks, they looked like a bunch of college students studying for a final. It was unacceptable.

This was the reason they failed to obtain Peter Parker. He had incompetent workers. Only a few he could trust to do their jobs correctly.

Someone rang his phone. "What?" he grunted.

"Sir, you have Everett Ross here," came his secretary's soft voice.

That's right. He called for a meeting with the less apt Ross. "Send him in."

A few seconds later, a short man, with dark, silver hair and grey eyes entered his office. "Morning, sir," Everett saluted. Always with impeccable manners. "You wished to discuss a follow-up?"

Ross gestured to an empty seat. Everett sat down. Ross eyed him, studying the man's stance. Like the others, he bore signs of stress and wear from the long hours. Everett was an honorable man. He did his duty and never let personal interests interfere with his job. He was a man Ross trusted to help him, especially due to his position on the Accords and connections with the elusive Wakanda king.

His partner, however, Ross had zero trust. Sharon Carter was an old member of SHIELD and her loyalties were not as bound to him as to say... Captain America? No, Ross did not trust Carter at all and told Everett to keep a close eye on her.

"Yes, what is the progress in regards to the telecommunications?" Ross asked.

A code word asking if they managed to eavesdrop on Parker's associates like Ned Leeds, Michelle Jones, Flash Thompson and even May Parker's friends. They even stretched the circle further by including neighbors and Peter's teachers. They tried to hack into Stark Industries, but that met with utter failure. As long as Tony Stark had that AI system in place, his technology was unbeatable. But, Ross didn't concern himself with that. He kept his focus on Peter's friends. One of them would slip up and lead them directly to Peter Parker. Ross was absolutely certain the young Spider-man hero was in contact with them. All he needed was a bit more patience.

However, patience wasn't enough. Time dwindled and Tony Stark was making his life difficult. Stark's testimonies and campaign against him have led the public to view him and his work negatively. What the public didn't realize was that he was protecting them from people like Stark and Parker, who had no regards to laws or even consequences.

Everett inhaled deeply. "I'm afraid we have hit a dead end in that area," he reported to Ross. "None of our persons of interests seem to have any knowledge on Mr. Parker's whereabouts. We have listened to multiple phone calls, read text messages, social media... in my personal analysis, I don't think they are in contact with Mr. Parker at all."

Ross's hands tightened into a ball. That's not what he wanted to hear. "I find that impossible! The kid
would have reached out by now," he argued. "No kid likes to be left alone."

"Maybe he isn't?" Everett suggested.

Ross scoffed. Yes, Captain America. Steve Rogers. The traitor. The criminal. He attacked his men and stole Parker from the school that day. "Our team is scouring the continent for the war criminal," he said. "Reports state he's working alone, though. No Parker."

"That may be, but my team's report claims to find no evidence of the associates having knowledge of Parker's location."

"What about Spider watch website? Or blog. Or whatever that nonsense is."

"We already hacked into it, but Mr. Thompson's reports are based on his own investigation and summaries of reports from the media," Everett answered. "He has no access to Peter Parker or anyone who may know Peter Parker's location."

That wasn't what he wanted to hear. By God! Has the world gone mad? It seemed it was only him who was bearing the weight of the world's dilemma. The one person standing out in no-man's land to save the others from reckless "heroes". Can the public not see the danger of unchecked super-powered individuals? They needed to be controlled! To be governed or else they act like they are law rather than law-abiding.

"Then what the hell are you doing in my office, Everett?" Ross hissed. "If you don't have good news for me, then get the fuck out!"

Everett's mouth thinned. Ross didn't mean to get snippy with him. It's been a rough couple of days. But Everett was the good soldier. He rose from his seat, closing the file as he did. "We will keep monitoring, sir," he said. "Sorry we were unable assist."

Ross watched Everett depart from his office, walking back to his desk where his team kept the phone to their ears and diligently scrawling words on paper. Ross eyed Sharon, watching the blonde bimbo talk seriously on the phone before her eyes fidgeted up to Everett. She hung up and went over to speak to him. Probably hoping to gather some intel to pass on to Captain America.

Not that he had any proof. He bugged her phone, desk and even her apartment, but found no evidence of collusion. Still, he didn't trust her and believed she was in contact with good, old Rogers.

"Secretary?"

Ross turned away from Sharon and Everett's huddle to Rose, his timid secretary. "What is it?"

"I am reminding you of your lunch meeting," she said, voice soft and quivering. "It's in twenty minutes."

Right. He nearly forgot about the meeting. "Right. Thanks."

He readied himself and locked the door. As he exited, he took one last look of the ground floor, watching his men scurrying about to find any information to be used to support their work. Pathetic. All of them pathetic.

Ross's only hope was that the person he was dining with had something beneficial for him.
"Secretary Ross," came a clear voice. "Right on time."

Secretary Ross turned and spotted his partner. Norman Osborn was a shorter and thinner man than average, but it didn't mean he didn't look intimidating. The sharpness of the man's face and the cunning in the green eyes was loud enough to scare off grown men. Not Thaddeus Ross, though. He was a much bigger fish than Norman Osborn. Still, he respected the revered scientist. He was a genius (albeit, a bit mad) and a billionaire that rivaled with Stark and Hammer industries. Ross met Osborn at a gala a year ago and found they shared similar beliefs in regards to handling super-powered individuals. What they particularly had in common was their shared abhor of Tony Stark.

Since then, Osborn has been a great source of help in dealing with the aftermath. His financial wealth and business savvy was of great use for Ross in hunting down Parker and the other Avengers.

Osborn already sat at a secluded table, drinking a glass of wine. He urgently gestured for Ross to take a seat. "From the look on your face, I would say you were expelled from your own office."

Ross grunted as he ordered a glass of wine for himself too. "Progress is slow," he said. "But we are in the right."

"Not according to the public," Osborn countered. His eyes looked dead on at him. "I am aware of the difficulties you are running into."

Who wasn't, Ross thought. With Tony Stark parading information around as if those censored documents were nothing but gossip columns irked him. Damn Stark! To think he believed Stark was on his side. "I'm working on it. We know that Parker is somewhere on this side of the world."

"That's great!" Osborn threw up a mocked smile. "That only leaves thirty-five countries to sweep through. Narrows the field considerably."

Ross clenched his teeth. "At least we have a place to look. Hell! If we are lucky, we might get a two for one deal."

"Your luck has been nonexistent," Osborn retorted, easily dismissing Ross's hopes. "You are nowhere closer to capturing Spider-man than you were almost a year ago. The closest you got to him was at the school, which is what caused you to get into this mess."

The waiter returned with the wine, but Ross shooed him away. "What caused this mess was Stark," he said. "He twisted the truth around and got the media all attached to it. What we did was stop a dangerous individual from wrecking any more havoc on the city. My men didn't attack any of the other children. Only Parker. But Stark makes it sound like we terrorized and tortured them. My team did nothing wrong."

"Perhaps," Osborn said, but with no real belief. "Nonetheless, Stark is playing you like a fiddle. He already has the majority of the public on his side. Especially after that idiotic stunt you pulled about the aunt's death. The public's trust in you is at an all-time low."

Ross crossed his arms. He believed the ploy to work in his favor. Once he got FOX news to cooperate with the plan, all he had to do was wait for Parker to make an appearance. Somewhere. Anywhere! Then they would nab him and force Tony and the others to strike a deal. Unfortunately, the trick ended in catastrophe. Stark revealed that May Parker was alive and Parker never even showed his face. At least, the true Peter Parker. The wannabes were all crazy attention-seekers.

"I'm handling it," Ross growled across the table to Osborn. "I didn't become Secretary of State and leading general of the Enhanced Unit based off my good looks."
Osborn wasn't amused. "Then get your shit together," he snarled, fingers curled into a fist. "Your recklessness isn't helping the cause. It's only dismantling it and I will be damn to watch it go away!"

Ross sat erect. "You backing out?"

"No, but I fear that you may lose your seat, Secretary," Osborn answered. "As you know, a President has a reputation to uphold and you are certainly not helping his image."

"The President understands the difficulties of the situation," Ross insisted. President Ellis supported the Accords and Ross to get the job done of keeping the country and world safe from those who may harm it. That included the Avengers and vigilantes like Spider-man. "He knows the importance of my work. Of what our organization can accomplish. He won't betray me."

"All betrayals start with trust," Osborn darkly intoned. "You may consider him a loyalist, but when push comes to shove, he will not hesitate to cut you down. Stark has riled up an entire world against you. What makes you think you will be able to still stand on your two feet?"

"Because what I am doing is right," Ross snapped, loud enough to cause some other customers to glance in their direction. "We all know whoever holds the most power wins. We cannot let those few have it on their own. Look at what they have done to the world in their wake? We need that power! Our country needs it now more than ever."

"I know," Osborn returned, looking away to the large windows. "Power wins, which is why President Ellis may remove you in order to stay in power. Have you considered that?"

Ross wanted to strangle Osborn. "I know what I am doing," he took a big drink of his wine. "I know what needs to be done."

"Then I suggest you do something quick," Osborn remarked. "Because it currently doesn't look good for you, Secretary." Osborn bent over his seat and Ross heard the sound of a briefcase opening. Seconds later, Osborn dropped a pile of newspapers on the table. Every single newspaper's front page covered the House's vote to depart from the Sokovia Accords.

Ross merely glanced from the papers to Osborn. "This means shit," he said. "Congress are a bunch of inbreeding fools. Nothing will get done. No matter how many times the public cries outrage. The Senate will not pass it. And most certainly not the President."

"If you say so," Osborn accepted. He finished his wine and got up, buttoning his suit. "I don't have to remind you about our agreement, though correct? If things do not turn around—"

Yes, their agreement. The only real concern Osborn had in this whole debacle. He wanted to ensure there would be no betrayal on his end. "As far as I am concerned, Mr. Osborn," Ross said. "The agreement is still in tact. I will inform you once the asset is in our possession."

"Good," Osborn said and he laid a crisp fifty dollar bill on the table. "Enjoy your day, Secretary. I look forward to hearing from you soon."

Osborn left the table, calling the host to fetch his coat. Ross stayed seated, too bitter to even drink the rest of his wine. Osborn was a jackass. Just like all other billionaires. But, at least Osborn sided with him.

After a few minutes steaming off his anger, Ross exited the venue to return to his office. He arrived back just where he left his subordinates. They all rushed here and there, jabbering on phones and scribbling notes on pads of paper at their desk. He noticed that Everett and Sharon were not at their desk. In fact, they were nowhere in sight. Ross would have been suspicious if he wasn't called to
attention by a few others wishing to share a word with him. Ross ignored them. He went straight to his office and closed the door behind him. Blind shut. A sign to not disturb.

Only, he heard a soft knock at his door that interrupted his peace. "Oh what the hell?" he growled. "What is it now?"

Rose stuck her head around the door. "Mr. Secretary? The President would like you to join him in the oval office for a meeting."

"I thought that meeting was postponed until Friday?" Ross grumbled as he flipped through document after document of messages between Parker's friends.

"His aide just called and informed me that the President scheduled a meeting," Rose replied. "Meetings starts in ten."

Ross sighed heavily. Today was not his day. "All right," he said, getting up from his seat. "Let them know I am on my way now."

He grabbed his suit jacket and briefcase, packing all the necessary notes he needed to show the President of the progress so far in the retrieval of Peter Parker. He was going to have to stretch the truth a bit, but it would be necessary to keep the search going. He needed Parker and his abilities. If they can learn about what makes Parker special, then imagine a whole army with Parker's abilities. Forget about Rogers and his steroids. Parker was the one they needed.

An army of super-humans, capable of withstanding pain, destruction and the agility and healing powers like no other before him. Peter Parker was key to keeping the United States safe. Once Ross had him, the United States would forever be the ultimate power in the world.

Ross sighed at the dream. Yes, the image was spectacular!

And the dream ended.

“I’m sorry?”

President Ellis, sitting behind his desk throne with American flags flanking him as if he was a patriotic hero, repeated. “Secretary, I understand this is quite sudden for you,” he said. “I have spoken to multiple advisors and aides and, frankly, the decision was unanimous. I have to let you go as Secretary of State.”

Ross inhaled. Then exhaled. Inhaled. Exhaled. “That’s… ridiculous, Mr. President,” he said, still in disbelief. “I have done nothing, but be loyal to this country and to you!”

“I am aware,” President Ellis said, “but your recent actions are hard to convey in a good light. Attacking children. Releasing fake news. Look—Ross—you were a fine good military man, but we aren’t at war anymore.”

“Hell we aren’t!” Ross rose his voice. President Ellis didn’t even flinch. “We will be if we let those super-powered individual run amok without consequences? Do I need to remind you of New York or Sokovia?”

“New York was being attacked by aliens,” President Ellis said. “The Avengers stopped them from further destruction and causalities.”

“What about Sokovia? Lagos?”
“I’m aware of where you are trying to lead me down,” President Ellis waved Secretary Ross back. “But the point of the matter is that you have let this… obsession of yours got your thinking twisted. Attacking a school? In a room full of children? And then throwing out false information about a teenager’s aunt’s death just to draw him out, I mean… that’s borderline insane! And reckless and inconsiderate. Things I don’t want my legacy to be attached to. So, yes. You are fired.”

Secretary Ross got to his feet, hands at his side and heart pulsing madly. *He* was insane? *Him*? That’s bullshit! He was the most realistic and sane person in the country it appears. Why can no one else see the dangers these so-called enhanced humans have on their society? Why can’t anyone see the importance of strengthening the military to combat these terrors that will come if they let the enhanced humans get their way?

“You are making a mistake, Mr. President,” Ross argued, but President Ellis shook his head. “I don’t think so,” the President claimed. “I’m honored for your services and dedication to the country, but I must ask you to leave.”

Ross didn’t budge. “You will ruin this country if you end this! If you don’t let me keep searching for Parker and the others—“

“Enough!” President Ellis yelled over him. “Enough. You see, this is what I mean! You cannot help yourself. This isn’t about protecting the country. It’s about you needing to control these people. They’re humans too, Ross. They aren’t toy soldiers for you.

“Now…” President Ellis gestured to people behind Ross, “Please leave the premise quietly. The Senate is voting tonight on the decision to leave the Sokovia Accords. From my understanding, it looks like they are in agreement with the House. It’s over, Ross. You tried to do a good thing, but it didn’t work out. Retire. Rest. Visit your daughter.”

Ross fumed. “Go to hell!”

He spun and marched past the bodyguards, storming through the doors and out of the oval office. He didn’t stop seeing red. All he saw were traitors around him. Traitors and cowards!

He ignored the guards and hopped back into the car that drove him to the White House. He ordered them to go back to his office. To hell with politicians! What do they know about national security!

The car pulled up to the building and Ross marched to the doors. He walked over to the entry point, whipping out his ID card to scan. He heard a beep and walked onward, only for the bar to punch him in the gut. Access denied came the flashing sign.

What the hell?

Ross tried his ID card again. Access denied.

“Sir?”

Ross turned a tall, buffed African American soldier. “Sorry sir,” the soldier said. “I am afraid you cannot enter this building.”

Ross just stared. “Do you have any fucking idea who I am?” he spat at the soldier.

The soldier nodded. “Yes, sir. You are former Secretary of State, Thaddeus Ross,” he answered. “I have received word that you are not allowed back onto the premises.”
“What the hell nonsense are you talking about?”

“Sir?” came another voice. Another soldier. “Please, step outside. Do not resist.”

Ross whirled onto that man. “I am the Secretary of State of the United States of America!” he snarled. “I demand some respect.”

“Former Secretary,” the second soldier reminded him. “I’m sorry, sir. But we have orders from the President to bar you from entry.”

“The President is nuts! He doesn’t know what he was thinking or saying!”

“Sir!” called the first soldier, moving his gun into combative mode. “Do not make me shoot you for resisting an order.”

“You wouldn’t even dare,” Ross threatened.

“Is there a problem, soldiers?”

All three turned to the quiet voice. Everett Ross stood right by the doors, folders in his hand and his jacket poorly fitted on his shoulders. “What’s going on?”

The soldiers saluted Everett. Everett returned the greeting. “Anyone care to explain?”

The first soldier answered. “We received orders from the President to not grant Thaddeus Ross entry to any and all political buildings that he once had access to, sir.”

Everett looked surprised. “Really?” he turned to Ross for an answer.

The second soldier answered on his behalf. “The President relieved Ross of all duties. He is no longer the Secretary of State, sir.”

Now Everett understood and he didn’t look at all surprised, which baffled Ross. “Sorry to hear that,” he said, but lacked any true emotions behind the words. “Mr. Ross, I think it is best you do not cause a scene and let these good men escort you off the premise.”

Ross balked at Everett. Already, he forgone his title. That traitor! “I will do no such thing!” he decried. “I will do whatever is necessary to protect the American people and our values. If the others cannot see that—if you cannot see it—”

“I know,” Everett interrupted, waving a hand up. “But if you truly believe in the American values, you will not stomp on the Constitution to get your way. Please, Mr. Ross, don’t embarrass yourself any further.”

Ross looked dumbfound at Everett’s plea. How could this man—his loyal, right-handed man—betray him like this? Osborn was right. People would stab others in the back just to stay in power. First the President and now, Everett.

“Fine,” Ross grunted as he adjusted his suit. “Fine. I get it. But, when things go to hell again, don’t come looking for me to rescue your asses.”

Ross walked out with the two soldiers following close behind. Everett, Ross noticed, continued his way into the building, not at all looking back to him.

He got back into his car and commanded the driver to take him home. As they drove out of the DC area, Ross looked back, thinking how everything went wrong. How did his fellow peers betray him?
How they all throw his hard work, his life-dedicated work back in his face?

They’ll pay for it. Ross was certain. Without the necessary means or strong men to control those super-powered humans, the country will be consumed in fire and destruction.

Ross sat forward in his seat. “Burn it all to hell.”
When the Senate voted the same as the House and the President fired Thaddeus Ross as Secretary of State, Tony was happy. Relieved and happy.

The United Nations were drafting up a new version of the Accords, one that would balance responsibilities respectfully. But, that wasn't what got Tony smiling. After leaving DC upon the hearing, he received a call from Nick Fury.

“Congratulations, Stark," he said. "It appears you won.’’

“Finally,” Tony dropping his head against his seat. "Took too damn long.”

“It is how things are," Fury responded. "Took me about four years to assemble the Avengers.”

“Didn’t you do that behind the board's back?”

Tony could hear Fury shrug indifferently on the matter. "Well, congratulations on your victory, Stark," he said. "I have a celebratory gift for you.”

"Do you? Is it a 1926 Macallan?" Tony was still a big jaded by Fury finishing off his last scotch bottle.

"No," Fury answered. "It’s on your plane.” He hung up. Not a man of many words.

Tony boarded his private plane, and as expected, there was an envelope waiting for him (along with a small glass of scotch—not the 1926 Macallan though). Tony opened the envelope. It was a single note-card size stationary paper with a single address.

"An address? For what? Did you buy me a family home?” Tony joked to himself.

Tony mulled over the address. It was located in Canada. What was up in Canada? He contemplating thinking it over until something poked the back of his mind. An old memory. He remembered that location.

Tony got up from his seat and spoke to the pilot. “Change of plans.”

The farmhouse came into view. Tony, alone in the rented sports car, pulled up on the dirt road. He didn’t see any signs of life coming from the house or barn. It was the correct address. He recognized the area well enough. A few things looked different, but not enough to make him completely lost. This was the Barton family homestead.

Tony pulled up next to the truck and placed it in park. He studied the house. Still quiet. “All right,” he said, somewhat unsure. “Fury, you better not be fucking with me.”

Tony got out of the car and was instantly hit with the fresh grassland smell. It was a bit overwhelming. Like an overly disinfected hospital room.

He closed the door and proceeded toward the porch steps when a whirring sound distracted him. Then a loud thud struck the ground next to his right foot. An arrow.

Tony stared at the embedded arrow and then looked up. Clint Barton was on the porch, bow in hand and another arrow lined up to shoot.
“Take another step and I won’t miss.”

Tony lifted his hands up. “Easy Barton,” he said. “It’s me. Tony.”

“I know.”

Right. Their last talk didn’t end very well. Tony recalled mocking Barton with his family. Not a good move on his part. “Look—I come in peace. It’s only me.”

“Then no one will know where I hid the body.”

Tony gulped, unsure if Clint meant it or not. Their last parting did not end on amicable terms.

Clint never lowered his bow position. The former ally monitored Tony, speculating. “Why are you here?”

He didn’t know for sure. He had an idea why Fury directed him to the Bartons, but again, he had no proof to his theory. He only had Fury’s word. “Fury sent me.”

The bow in Clint’s hand didn’t quiver, but Tony observed the mercurial shift in the archer’s hold. “Fury? Why?”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” Tony replied, watching Clint’s face stay impassive. A good spy never falters even after “retirement”.

It was another minute before Clint lowered the bow. “You’re here for him, aren’t you?”

“Him as in Mr. Parker?” Tony said, studying Clint’s face for any signs of being right. “Then yes. I am.”

Clint nodded as he pulled the arrow off the bow. “He’ll be happy to see you.”

Tony eyed the arrow in Clint’s hand. “Does this mean I can move?”

Clint didn’t respond. Only gave him a light irritating frown. Tony took it as he could. He joined Clint on the porch. “Is this what you do in your free time? Shoot off any intruders off your property?”

“Gotta stay sharp even when you retire,” Clint commented. “Especially when others don’t understand the meaning of retirement.”

“If you mean that whole debacle—”

“I read that Ross was fired,” Clint interrupted Tony, “and the whole Accords is being rewritten.”

Tony chose to drop his previous argument and nodded to Clint’s statement. “Yeah, it is. I just came from a meeting with UN leaders on the Accords. We are drafting a new document. One that is more lenient.”

Clint didn’t look impressed. “And now you’re here to take Peter home.”

Tony hesitated. “Well… not exactly. It’s complicated,” he said when Clint glared in disbelief. “Look—I want to make sure this is all sealed and done. No take-backs or betrayals before I bring Peter home.”

Clint was shaking his head. “No… no… Stark. You ass,” he groaned. “What the hell are you doing here then?”
Before Tony could answer, the sound of a laughing child distracted them both. They snapped their heads in the direction of the field near the barn. Coming up around the corner, two figures trudged across the field, engaged in discussion. Tony recognized one of them. Peter Parker.

Peter looked different. Tony honestly expected to arrive at the farm and still see that bright-eyed, excitable kid. Instead, the brightness dimmed. A heavy burden weighed the boy down as he trudged through the open field with one of Clint’s kids. Did Peter grow too? He looked taller than he last remembered. Possibly. Teenagers are different every day.

Peter came to a stop, squinting over at them. Then, suddenly, Peter’s voice carried. "Mr. Stark!"

Peter bolted, leaving the scrawny, younger boy to give chase. Peter moved fast. Faster than Tony remembered him being, but it’s been awhile since he's seen the kid. Peter leapt over the fence and hurried up the step porch, stopping just in front of Tony. "You're here! I-I can't believe you're here!"

The kid practically vibrated from excitement. Now, Tony recognized the kid standing in front of him. "I know. It's been a long time," Tony said, taking in Peter’s appearance. "How you doin' kid?"

“I'm fine,” Peter quickly said, uncorcon of small banter. "W-What are you doing here? I mean, not that I don't want you here or anything, I'm just confused." He looked to Clint for any hints or reasoning as to why Tony was here. "Does this mean… do I get to go home?"

The kid looked up at him with tremendous hope. For a split second, Tony considered lying to the kid and tell him to pack his bags and hop in the car. But, he couldn’t even say that either. He swallowed, looking down at his feet for a second as he lifted his gaze back to Peter.

Peter’s face dimmed again. “Is everything okay? Is… oh God… is Aunt May—is she hurt? She’s not —”

"Oh! God no, kid! Your hottie of an aunt is alive and kicking me at every chance she can get. She's fine. Good," Tony assured the boy—no, young man!

Peter immediately relaxed. All the nervous tension released in one sweeping breath of relief. “Then that means I can come home. I read that Ross was fired. Right?” Peter looked to Clint. “You said Ross was fired. That means I get to come home now, right?”

Tony inhaled a tremendous breath. “Well, not quite.”

Peter turned his head, askew. “What does that mean?” he questioned. “Ross was fired wasn’t he?”

“Yes, but—”

“Then why can’t I go home?” Peter asked, darting looks between Tony and Clint for answers. “He was the only threat against me.”

Not entirely true. “It’s a bit more complicated than that,” Tony said. “We can’t bring you home yet. Even with Ross fired, we have to wait.”

Peter’s face crumpled in confusion. “I don’t… then why are you here? If my aunt is fine and you can’t bring me home…” Peter stared up at Tony for an answer.

Tony gave it to him. "I wanted to, um, swing by and see how you were doing."

The atmosphere stilled. Peter stared. "Swing by?"
"Err... yeah," Tony said, reviewing his words again to see if he missed something important. He didn't think he did.

Peter drew himself up. "Ten months."

"Come again?"

"Ten months," Peter repeated. Did his voice get deeper too? "It took you ten months to check in on me?"

Oh boy... this was not how Tony wanted things to go. Hawkeye quickly bent down and whispered urgently to his son to get into the house. The boy nervously glanced from Peter to his dad before he passed between Clint and Tony to the door. Tony heard the front door creak and bang shut.

"Okay... um, maybe we should talk privately," Tony said, not wanting Hawkeye to witness Peter's temper.

Peter drew in a heated breath. "Ten acres of grassland with not another human soul isn't private enough?" Peter challenged Tony. "There's no one for miles. I can yell I'm Spider-Man and no one would hear it." He dramatically gestured to the never-ending fields. "So, let's talk. Right here."

Tony arched a brow, surprised by the sudden defiance from a boy who practically puppy-eyed him all last year. A lot has changed for him. For both of them.

"Maybe at another time when your head is cooler," Tony suggested, to which he heard Hawkeye groan.

Perhaps that was not the best answer. Peter's eyes became darts. "Good talk, Mr. Stark," he said, scoffing as he shoved his way into the house. "I'll see you in another ten months."

Peter slammed the front door and Tony heard his stomps up the stairs. The whole interaction at the end threw Tony off completely. He swung his head to Clint. "Okay, wow! What? Did Dr. Banner stop by and dump all of his anger issues on the kid?"

Clint pinched the bridge of his nose, exhaling a waft of frustrated breath. "Don't be an ass, Stark," he said. "He's been through a lot."

"I know that," Tony snapped. How could he not know that? After all, he spent the last ten months battling for Peter. To bring that boy home to his aunt. "You think I don't know that? I've been kidnapped and held hostage plenty of times to know what it is like."

"Then act like it!" Clint returned. "Why the hell did you show up if you couldn't take him home?"

Because it was the only time Tony could come and see him personally without fear of exposing his location to Ross. Clint had no idea how many times Tony considered reaching out to find him, but he held himself back to keep the boy safe. It was a sacrifice none of them liked, but it had to be done.

"I came to visit and report back to his aunt that her kid was fine and safe," Tony said. "May Parker... she's not doing too well. Heart problems, that sort of thing. I can't bring Peter home yet, but I could at least see him and tell her that he's doing well. That I can take a picture and show it to her or pass on notes between them. That's why I am here."

"And just so you know, I've worked my ass off to bring that kid home," Tony added, pointing back to the door Peter walked through seconds ago. "That's all I have been doing the past ten months. Find ways to remove Ross and the Accords all together so that kid could be reunited with his aunt."
So—don’t picture me like I'm some apathetic jerk. I used to be that guy. I'm not anymore. Haven't been since Afghanistan.”

Clint raised his eyebrows, but didn't contradict him. "I know you're not apathetic," he said. "But sometimes, I do wonder if you think first." Clint moved to lean against one of the pillars on the porch. "Look—go and talk to him again. But do it in a nicer tone. None of your sarcastic undertone you always rely on."

Tony scowled at Clint for the comment, but the former archer made a point. Sarcasm was his defense in intense situations. But in this case, it would only escalate the problem to another level of danger.

They entered the house and Tony noticed right away that it looked different. Then again, it was nearly three years ago he last set foot in Clint's family home. Tony maneuvered himself to the staircase.

"Which room is his?" Tony asked as he took a step.

Hawkeye pointed straight to the top. "The attic," he answered and when Tony looked at him funny, shrugged. "It's not exactly a mansion. It was the only space we had left."

Tony accrued and took the stairs, climbing two flights until he arrived at the very top. He knocked once, but heard no response. Typical teenagers. He checked the door. It was unlocked. He turned the knob and made his way into the room. Peter's bedroom was almost similar in style of his old Queen's apartment. Small, cramped and cluttered with junk. His desk had no room for anything and old clothes were thrown here and there on the floor. Again, teenagers, Tony thought.

He stepped around the messy room, making his way to Peter, who lounged on his twin bed, headphones on and holding a tape recorder.

“Hey, kid,” Tony started. "How about we start over, okay?"

Peter's eyes slid from Tony to the wall opposite of them, ignoring Tony all together.

Tony gave an indignant huff. "That's how it's going to be? Fine," he said. "Be as it may, I'm not going to leave here until you talk to me."

Peter still ignored him.

"You know? I get this anger you feel. I really do," Tony said to relate to him. "When I was held hostage in that cave nearly ten years ago, all I wanted was to get out and go home. To be denied that... well, it got me angry. Pissed me off, actually. The only reason I managed to not go all Hulk was a guy named Yinsen.

Tony stopped and took a breath. "I'm rambling," he admitted. "What I'm trying to say is that... I get it. You're mad and you have every right to be. You were taken from your home, family and friends. With no communication whatsoever. Nobody knowing what was happening to one another and being forced to move from one place to another. It sucks."

Tony waited for any sign of recognition from the young man. He didn't get anything. "Look—I'm not great with the whole emotion-sharing, hugging situation. That's not me. I wasn't raised like that," he explained. "So, I'm going to go straight to the point.

“I'm sorry I couldn't visit you sooner," Tony apologized to Peter. "There were... oh god, so many times I picked up that phone to call Cap so that I could speak to you. I didn't. Obviously. Not because I didn't care what was happening to you, but because I was worried that if I knew where
you were, I would lead trouble directly to you.”

Peter finally moved his gaze from the wall to Tony. Good. Progress. "The moment I could make contact without any consequences, I hopped on my jet and came straight here."

Peter merely blinked. Tony inhaled and raked his hair with his hand. "I know it took forever for us to get to this point. I did everything in my power and more to make it safe for you to return. I just need a little more time. Once everything is settled and they can't go back on their word. Okay?"

Peter didn't make a sound or even gestured his understanding. He simply left Tony hanging there.

“Anyway... that's my speech," Tony continued on to fill in the gap of silence. "If you want to ask questions, now is a good time."

Peter didn't say anything. His eyes drifted from Tony back to the wall. He turned a bit onto his side, snubbing Tony.

All the air in Tony's lungs depleted. He riffled through his jacket's pockets. "Well, if you're done talking to me, I do have one more thing," he pulled out a sealed envelope. "May wanted me to pass this onto you if I—"

Peter flipped over and snatched the envelope from Tony's hands. Already, the kid tore it open and ripped the letter out of its packaging. Tony got the hint. He moved off the bed. "I'll let you read it in private," he said. "I'll just be downstairs with the, um, family."

He walked out of Peter's attic room and closed the door. He didn't know if Peter heard a word he said, but it wouldn't be too hard for Peter to find him afterwards. That was, if Peter wanted to speak to him. By how it all went, he doubted Peter wanted to be in the same room.

Tony joined the Bartons in the kitchen. Laura was cooking, ordering Clint around to chop up vegetables. In the corner, surrounded by a playpen, sat a grubby little baby. There wasn't one of those when Tony was here last.

He stepped through the archway, his shoes announcing his appearance. Clint and Laura both turned to him.

Laura put down the ladle. "How did it go?"

Tony slouched, hands in pockets, acting in his best casual manner. "Good. It went well," he said, pulling a chair out and taking a seat. The kitchen was set. All seats occupied. All six seats, including the baby's highchair. "He's um, reading his aunt's letter at the moment. Figured I would give him privacy. That sort of thing."

Clint chuckled as he turned back to his duties. "He gave you the silent treatment, huh?"

Nailed it on the head. "Yeah," Tony exhaled in defeat. "Not used to it, to be honest. I mean, Howard always did it, but... didn't expect it from Peter."

“Well, he's given me the silent treatment too," said Clint. "It's his way to avoid saying something he might regret later."

Clint knew Peter quite well to bring up that analysis. "How long has Peter been with you?"

"Six months?" Laura pondered, looking to Clint for confirmation or contradiction.
Clint nodded. "Around that," he said, finishing up the peppers and moving onto the onions. "Seems longer."

Six months. The Bartons knew Peter longer than Tony did. It was almost cruel. To meet a kid, to groom him as a protégé, only to never get the chance to know him at all. Tony rubbed down his jawline. "Did feel longer," he concurred with Clint. "There were days I thought Peter would never come home."

"Peter thought that as well," Laura said, stirring the pot on the stove. "He's come a long way since we got him, but there were days he lost hope."

“I hope he wasn’t much trouble for you guys,” Tony said, hoping Peter didn’t act immaturely in their company.

Laura waved in dismissal. “Oh, no, he’s such a good kid,” she stated. “He was no trouble at all. Really helpful around here. Especially with Clint.”

“Hey!” Clint cried in mock hurt.

“It’s true,” Laura maintained. “He made sure you didn’t go stir-crazy here by yourself.”

Clint shrugged his answer, somewhat accepting it as part-truth, and finished the last bit of chopping. He handed the vegetables to Laura, who instantly dumped them into the pot. She stirred as Clint pulled out a loaf of bread from the oven. He unwrapped the foil and Tony got a waft of garlic in his nostrils.

Clint sawed through the bread. “Laura’s right. He was a good kid. No problems at all.”

“That’s a relief,” Tony said. “Then again, I didn’t think he would. He’s a nice kid. Polite too.”

“That he is,” Laura agreed, turning off the stove. She cast a look over her shoulder to Tony. “Just give him time. He’ll come around and understand why you did what you did.”

He hoped. All Tony ever wanted was for Peter to stay safe and well-protected from men like Ross who wanted to hurt him. “I hope so,” Tony said as he focused on the Bartons getting dinner ready. “Do you need assistance?”

Laura shook her head. “No, I think we are all good here.” “Kids!” she called, scooping the toddler up from his playpen and settling him in a high chair. “Dinner!”

She turned to Tony. “You are staying for dinner and the night, correct? It’s too late and there’s not a good hotel except for the next city over.”

“I’m sure Tony already has a place,” Clint said to his wife. Clearly he didn’t want him to stay. Not surprising.

“Thank you for the offer,” Tony said. “I’ll have some dinner with you guys, but I’ll find a hotel somewhere. Don’t want to intrude—”

“Nonsense!” Laura batted his words away. “You can stay here with us. That way you don’t have to drive in the dark for hours.”

“If you insist,” Tony said as he smirked in Clint’s direction.

Clint only shook his head at Tony, tossing the cut bread into a bowl. Next minute later, two kids—a
boy and girl—came into the kitchen, running to their seats at the table. The little girl came to an immediate halt when she saw Tony sitting at the table.

Her little eyes doubled in size upon recognition. “Mommy! Iron Man is here.”

Laura patted her daughter’s head. “I know. He’s joining us for dinner tonight,” she said. “Hop in your seat.”

The girl did, climbing up on her chair, but her eyes never left Tony. “You come to visit Daddy?”

“Um… no,” Tony answered the little girl. What was her name again? Lily was it? “I came to see Peter.”

And like that, the girl mimicked her father’s grave, hardened expression. Her sweet face screwed in a tight, mistrustful mien. Her arms crossed over her chest, peevishly glaring at Tony. Her parents didn’t notice. Too busy getting the food to the table to notice.

“Do you need any help?” Tony asked, hoping to get a reason to be away from the little girl’s scrutiny.

“That’s okay,” Clint answered. “We got it.”

They finished putting the food on the table. Laura was scooping up some soup and placing it into large bowls for each person. She glanced around the table. “Coo? Go get Peter.”

Cooper pushed his chair back and sprinted away.

Clint handed one of the first bowls to Tony and then to his daughter. “Don’t start eating yet,” Clint warned his daughter as he turned back to get another bowl of soup.

The older boy returned. Peter wasn’t with him. “Said he wasn’t hungry.”

Laura looked from Cooper to Tony quickly before she turned to Clint. “Do you want to talk to him?”

Clint nodded. “Sure,” he said. “Cooper? Help your mother.”

They switched places. Cooper carried the bowls to the table and Tony still remained in his seat, being horribly judged by the little girl across from him. Tony did his best to ignore her.

“So, um, what type of soup is this?” Tony asked to start a conversation as a distraction.

“Lentil,” Laura responded. “Sorry if you’re not a fan. Wasn’t really expecting—”

“No. No, I like lentils,” Tony said and he did. He just didn’t have them a lot. “Smells good.”

“Thanks,” Laura said, passing Cooper the last bowl to place at the head of the table. Tony imagined Clint sat there. To his other side was an empty chair along with a baby’s high chair where the toddler sat, chewing on its fingers.

Tony watched the little toddler, cringing as the baby’s slobbering fingers went from its mouth to the tabletop, its baby fists pounding to get attention before it squealed. Tony winced at the high pitched sound, reminding him of a missile flying through the air.

Laura came to the toddler’s side and cooed him. “I didn’t forget you, little man,” she said, placing a small bowl of the soup and crackers set for him.
Clint re-entered the kitchen and he too, didn’t have Peter with him. Laura sighed. “Not hungry?”

“That’s what he claims,” Clint said. “I tried to get him to come downstairs, but he put his foot down.”

Tony’s brows furrowed in misunderstanding. Put his foot down? A small tantrum sent Clint running back down? That didn’t make sense. Unless…

“He’s using his adhesives, isn’t he?” Tony said and Clint nodded.

Laura only huffed at them. “Fine, I’ll talk to him,” she said, marching passed them. “Don’t start dinner without me.”

Laura could be heard going up the staircase. Clint picked up milk carton and poured a glass for the kids and the filled his and the adults with water. The toddler already had his spoon in his mouth, tongue sticking out a bit.

Tony tried not to look. “So... a lot of these family dinners?”

Clint looked at him funny. “Every night,” he said, as if it was a ridiculous question to even ask. “Why?”

“No reason,” Tony replied. “So... Fury roped you into this? Peter, I mean.”

“No, my wife did,” Clint answered. “She accepted before asking me. But, I would have agreed in the end. So, it didn’t matter.”

Tony slowly nodded. “He wasn’t too much of a burden, was he?”

Clint shook his head. “Not at all.”

“Because if he was—”

“Are you here to take Peter away?” the little girl piped up, intruding on their conversation.

Tony return his gaze to the girl. She still stared with distrust. “Er... no,” he said to the little girl. “Not yet anyway. Hopefully soon. Once everything is finalized and situated. That sort of thing.”

His response didn’t appease the little girl. She turned her rage inside out. Her mouth a straight, thin line as she glared daggers at him. “You can’t have him!”

Tony recoiled at the girl’s ferocity. “What?”

“You can’t take him!” she shouted, and Tony noticed that the girl’s eyes were glossy. “Daddy! Don’t let him!”

Tony flicked a raising arch of a brow to Clint. Even Clint looked shocked by his daughter’s behavior. “Lila—” Clint started.

“NO!” The girl—Lila—wailed and smacked the table. “No! He can’t take Peter! He’s our family!”

Clint reached across for his daughter’s hand. “Lila, sweetie, we talked about this.”

But Lila shook her head. “No... he lives with us,” she whined. “This is his home.”

“No, Lila, we were only hosting him,” Clint said to soothe his child. “We told you and Cooper this
wasn’t permanent.”

Lila glanced from her father to Tony, tear-tracks staining her round cheeks. “I’m not hungry!” She shoved herself away from the table and hopped down, hurrying to the exit when her mother suddenly appeared.

Laura looked down at her crying child. “What’s the matter?” she asked Lila, concerned.

Lila wiped an eye with her hand. “Peter’s leaving and he’s never coming back!” she whimpered, burying her head in her mother’s shirt.

Laura turned her eyes to Clint and Tony, both who shrugged at the breakdown. Laura squatted down and spoke fondly to her daughter, letting all of Lila’s tears come out. “Peter is still here, sweetie,” Laura cooed. “He’s not going anywhere today.”

Laura ran her hand along her daughter’s back, letting her weep until she finally got a word to Lila to return to her seat. Lila let her mother guide her back to the chair, asking Cooper to switch seats with her so that Lila could sit beside her rather than Clint.

Tony was impressed. How did that one woman get her weeping daughter to stop crying and return to the table?

Laura didn’t even seem to notice her extraordinary gift. “I talked to Peter,” she said to Clint and Tony.

“And?” Tony asked, leaning forward in his chair to see if Peter would appear shortly. He didn’t.

“And that’s it,” Laura finished, settling down with napkin on her lap. “Okay… let’s eat before it goes cold or another drama starts.” Laura looked around table until she saw her son. “Cooper, make sure you eat some of that broccoli.”

And like that Tony had one of the least awkward family dinners. It wasn’t anything like the dinners he had with his parents. To be truthful, he would have rather endure this dinner setting than the one with his father. But, as the kids ate (Lila’s face still raw) and Clint and Laura talked about normal, everyday things, Tony nibbled on the lentils. His mind bombarded with images of his upcoming family and dinner times, tantrums, and screaming fits, wondering if he would be able to handle it as well as Clint and Laura.

Family time wasn’t something he ever had. He never got a chance to spend quality time with his parents as much as he wanted nor have any siblings. Growing up in the Stark household was a lonely existence. He always wanted the closeness other families’ had, but gave up on the notion of it ever happening before he was even ten years old. It was never going to happen. Not for him.

Yet, he couldn’t help conjuring that picturesque image of him, Pepper and the baby together, having these family dinners and sharing stories and laughs.

Maybe he could have it. Have something that resembled what Clint had with his family.

Probably not. Definitely not.

If he couldn’t even deal with Peter, how the hell was he going to handle a miniature version of himself?

Shit. He’s going to need a lot of medication for these future headaches.
Tony couldn't sleep. Maybe it was because of his makeshift bed on the couch? Nah. Definitely the dilemma with Peter. He couldn't stop thinking about the bright-eyed boy who now looked at him with disdain. He flopped back and forth on the couch, debating with himself if he did the right thing not contacting him throughout those ten months. Peter didn't think so, but then again, he wasn't truly aware of the full danger. He still didn't even know about Osborn's participation in his parents' deaths.

Tony gave up on the idea of sleep. He zipped up his jacket, shoved his feet into his shoes and headed out the front door to take in the night. It was quite beautiful. Peaceful even. The stars glittered in the night, and the stillness of nature almost assured Tony that the world was not disturbed or full of trouble. He took in the view, sighing at the sight. He now understood why Barton chose to live out in the middle of nowhere.

He went down the porch steps, planning to walk around the property a bit. He walked past the big oak tree, circling it to head around the barn. He passed the chopping block and the memory of him and Rogers popped back in his mind. He remembered how Rogers ripped a long in half with his bare hands. How time has flown since they were all here last. When they were still the Avengers—a team.

Tony sighed.

“Can't sleep either?”

Peter's voice spooked Tony. He whirled around, eyes scanning the field, but found no one.

“Up here.”

Tony looked up and saw Peter sitting on the roof. The kid waved at him from his high ground position.

Tony approached, but kept a decent distance. "Famous insomniac," he said, gesturing to himself. "I never sleep." He paused, taking in Peter's propped position on the roof. "And I see you still like to sit on rooftops at night."

A small grin peaked on Peter's face. "I like the peace and quiet. Nothing to overwhelm my senses."

"Are your heightened senses that much of a problem?"

Peter shook his head. "No, only on certain occasions," he said, pulling his knees up to his chest. "Do you remember being here? On the farm?"

Tony glanced back at the chopped wood. "I have… some memories."

"Hawkeye told me Captain America once ripped apart a log with his bare hands."

"I know. I saw it firsthand."

"I can do it too," Peter claimed. "After Hawkeye told me, I tested it out. Ripped almost like paper."

Tony huffed a short laugh at the small pun. "No doubt for a man of your abilities."

Peter nodded and paused, looking down at Tony from his perch. "Wanna come up?"

Tony arched a brow at the kid. It didn’t seem like the kid was mad at him anymore. "Only if you want me to," he said, giving Peter a way out.
Peter scooted down the roof and pointed to a part of Clint's porch where there was a column and a railing. "You can climb up from there," he said. "It's easier."

Tony followed Peter's instructions and the kid was right. Tony had no problems getting to the roof and taking a seat beside the kid. It was a step up from where they were in the afternoon. They both looked out at the mass field and the shimmering velvet sky. How long was it that he looked to the sky with relieved hope? Too damn long.

Tony exhaled deeply and turned to look at Peter. "You know, I never meant to discard you."

"And I get that you're mad too. I would be as well."

"You said as much from earlier."

"The thing is, I only did it to protect you," Tony reasoned. "With Ross and the government on my ass and the school looking like a massacre... I did what I thought was best at the time."


"I’m aware."

"She didn’t write very nice things about you."

"That’s not surprising."

"But she did say she admired your tenacity and willpower in helping me—and her too," Peter continued on. "Said that you got the best doctors looking after her and did whatever you could to stop Ross from finding me."

"If I didn’t, she would have murdered me," Tony shivered at the memory of Aunt May’s lioness rage. "In all seriousness though, of course I would do anything to help. Especially when I'm the reason you and May got caught up in all this madness."

That small grin reappeared on Peter’s face. "Well, thank you," he said, sincerely. "It means a lot to me to know she was in good hands after all this time. Kind of a big relief."

Tony ran his hand along his jawline. "Look, kid, I don't say this often. Maybe even not at all, but..." he focused right on Peter's face, "... I'm sorry. I fucked up. And for that, you—and Aunt May—suffered the consequences. Everything that has happened, that's on me. Okay?"

Peter's fingers fumbled together, breath a bit pinched as he listened to Tony.

"I wanted you to know that," Tony finished. "I swear—I'll get you back to your aunt as soon as possible. You have my word."

Peter breathed in and out. "I believe you. As stupid as it is, I think I'll always believe in you."

"Even when I don't deserve it, right?"

"No, I'll cut ties with you by then."

Tony chortled, pressing his mouth down to keep himself from laughing too loud. "I'll take it," he quipped. "Are we good now? You and me?"
Peter nodded his consent. “Yeah, we’re good.”

“Good, because now I have at least one person on my side here,” Tony joked.

“I forgot,” Peter remembered. “Hawkeye isn't a big fan of you.”

“And neither are his kids,” Tony commented. "Lila—the girl—kept giving me the stink eye throughout dinner tonight.”

“Really?” Peter said, puzzled. "Clint never trashed you in front of them.”

“It's not her Dad she's mad at me for.”

Peter's confused expression faded into comprehension. "Oh. I see," he said. "Sorry about that.”

“Sorry? For what? You're a nice kid. It's not impossible for a little girl to have a crush on you,” Tony said, adjusting himself so he could look at Peter better. "Speaking of which, met your girlfriend. She sure has a lot of spitfire.”

Peter jerked his head. "Shuri?"

"Who?"

"Wait... who are you talking about?"

"Michelle," Tony answered, very lost on the conversation. "Who were you referring to?"

"No one," Peter responded. "But—wait—how do you know MJ?"

“She kind of gave me an earful in Washington after one of the many hearings I had and then proceeded to take my plane hostage for her own use, might I add,” recounted Tony. “But, eh, good kid. Even if she's got that terrifying look to her when she's mad. Nearly reminded me of your aunt. Same look. I swear!”

Peter chuckled. "Yeah, that sounds like MJ," he said. "She's very...


“Serious,” Peter finished. "Kind of a loner, but she hangs out with Ned and I at times when she doesn't deem us as losers.”

Innocent, little Peter. Michelle Jones may be observant, but Peter Parker was oblivious. How he didn't notice her underlying crush for him astounded Tony. But, he chose not to reveal it to him tonight. Not when he said another girl's name.

"I see. So, um, who is Shuri?" Tony questioned.


“Girlfriend?”

“What? No," Peter answered hastily, but then his voice got nervous. "I mean, we're just friends. I don't think we're in a relationship. I would know if we were. I mean… we shared a kiss, but that doesn’t mean we're dating. Right?”

Tony blinked rapidly, trying to get his mind organized from Peter's fast talk. "Slow down there,
rabbit," he said. "Who did you kiss? This Shuri girl, right?"

Peter nodded. "Yeah, but it was... I mean, she never explicitly said she's my girlfriend or that I am her boyfriend. But... you don't think I misinterpreted her? Oh God! What if I did? I didn't think I was —"

"One breath at a time there, Mr. Parker," Tony advised as he tried to get Peter to settle back down. "Look—don't overthink it. A kiss is a kiss. She would tell you directly if you were a couple. She would make it obvious enough that even you would notice. So—I think you are in the clear on that."

Peter nodded again, his breathing coming down. "Yeah. Yeah, you're right."

"Of course I am," Tony remarked. "I'm Tony Stark. I know women. Well, most of the time," he added, thinking of the times he was left clueless by Pepper. "Anyway, I think you are safe to call her a friend."

"Okay. Okay."

"Was it your first kiss?"

"What?"

"The kiss with Shuri," Tony repeated. "Was it your first one?"

Peter nodded shyly. "Yeah, it was."

"Who initiated it?"

"She did."

Bold girls. First Michelle and now this mysterious Shuri. Peter must be some kind of magnet for them. "Okay, well, how did it go?"

Peter glanced away, hands wrangling together. "It was... fine."


Peter shook his head, but his cheeks turned a darker red. Now, Tony was curious. "What happened kid? You can tell me. I'm not your aunt."

Peter narrowed his eyes at Tony's comment. "No—you're Tony Stark. Makes it even more embarrassing."

"Come on, kid," Tony probed Peter. "We kind of already crossed that bridge. So, tell me. What happened? Maybe I can help you out for next time? Not that I am saying I give good advice, but I have dated a lot more than you. I’ll share my wisdom if that will help you. Or not, it's up to you."

Peter hesitated, silently debating whether to tell him or not. Tony waited patiently. Then Peter exhaled. "It's not that she caught me by surprise," he said barely above a whisper that forced Tony to concentrate to hear. "It was her brother."

Tony reeled. "Brother? He caught you kissing his sister?"

Peter's face nodded. Tony ripped out a laugh.
“It’s not funny!” Peter argued as Tony bent over laughing. "He threatened to rip my throat open.”

That got Tony to shut up. "Wait—what? Who said this?"

Peter's head lowered. Again, embarrassed. "King T'Challa."

Tony sat up, mind going full speed as it connected the dots. "King T'Challa... King T'Challa of Wakanda," Tony murmured. "The king of Wakanda and also Black Panther?"

Peter nodded.

“And Shuri is his sister.”

Again, Peter nodded.

Tony low whistled. "Shit, kid. You know how to pick them."

They talked on, falling into a comfortable rhythm. Peter told Tony of his adventures the moment he woke up after being shot by Ross’s men. Tony laughed and patted Peter on the back when Peter told him of his violent reaction to Captain America. He listened to the rest of the tale, hearing about his heroic deeds for Wakanda and Peter showed him the ring. Tony was impressed. He never got a friendship ring from T’Challa.

“It’s not a friendship ring,” Peter contended. “It’s a great honor to have this. It’s like a… medal of valor.”

Tony still considered it a friendship ring, but Peter ignored his comment with an indifferent shrug. He turned to Tony with a perceiving look. "Okay, your turn,” he said, “Boy or girl?"

“Excuse me?"

“The baby's gender?” Peter clarified. "Is it a boy or a girl?"

Tony was puzzled. “H-How...”

“Aunt May wrote it in her letter.”

Of course May Parker would inform her nephew of his upcoming father duties. Tony sighed and fell back a little. "I don't know. I've kept myself from knowing."

“Want it to be a surprise?”

"Yeah. Sure," Tony answered.

Peter cocked his head. "What? Are you nervous?” he asked, a teasing smile twitching up. "You're Iron Man! You put yourself between the city and a nuke without much thought and you're freaking out over being a father?"

“No, well, I never had any good role models in that department,” Tony reminded Peter as he thought about Howard and then Obadiah Stane. "My father was absent and cold. He treated me with less love than he did to a neighbor's dog. I don't know how to be a dad and I'm not exactly father material with the drinking, insomnia and the constant danger circling me twenty-four/seven. Not exactly a prized environment for a kid. So—yeah, I'm a bit terrified that I'll fuck up the kid like I did with you.”

Peter was taken aback. “You didn't screw me up, Mr. Stark.”
“Of course, I did.”

“No, not at all. I’m fine. Really.”

“Yeah, but that’s not me. That’s your aunt, uncle and your parents,” Tony argued. "They raised you to be the kid you are. All I did was put you in direct danger.”

Peter went quiet for a moment. "You know, as much as you like to take credit for putting me in danger and everything, you didn't."

Tony squinted at him. "Did you forget that it was I who invited you to Germany? Told you to get into costume to help me fight off Cap's group?"

"If I remember correctly, you asked me to come to Germany to help you talk to Captain America. Not attack," Peter countered. "Plus, I was already doing all this hero antics before I met you. Remember when I stopped that car from crashing into the bus?"

He did. It was how he confronted Peter in his tiny bedroom and twin bed. "Yeah, well, I didn't exactly keep you safer."

“Sure you did. You gave me the suit. And Karen," Peter listed off. "I would have been dead if it wasn't for you."

"And you nearly became a scientific experiment for Ross because of me," Tony refuted.

Peter's eyebrows knitted close together, furrowing deep between his eyes. "Why do you always do this?"

“Do what?”

“Take blame for everything that happens?” Peter questioned. "I mean, I didn't notice it at first, but now… I've noticed."

“That’s not surprising as most things are my fault,” Tony stated, thinking about the destruction of Sokovia, the Vulture’s turn to crime and even the dismantling of the Avengers (with Steve’s help of course!). “Ever since I became Iron Man, the world has gotten… weirder.”

“That’s not because of you,” Peter said. “The world was always weird. People just tended to ignore it. Now… they don’t.”

That was a nicer way of looking at things. Tony knew better. His creation of Iron Man led him to be challenged by madmen like Stane and Justin Hammer and Ivan Vanko and Aldrich Killian and… forget it. The list was too damn long anyway. The point was that Tony’s creation of Iron Man brought challengers, and with that, meant destruction and the loss of innocent lives.

His creation of Ultron and destruction of Sokovia only brought it up to the forefront of his mind. He realized his actions have consequences not on himself, but those surrounding him. The paranoia increased his anxiety. All he wanted was keep his loved ones safe. Pepper often said his measures were drastic, but in time of gods and aliens, nothing seemed drastic enough.

Peter may be right in saying the world was always weird, but it was Iron Man that made it acceptable. And, Tony needed to take responsibility in creating this new era. And that began with ensuring the future was secured.

Tony sighed, rubbing his eyebrows with his fingers. “Maybe you’re right, but someone has to take
responsibility of it all. Most people already hold me accountable for it anyway. Spokesperson and all,” he said with a long, dwindling sigh. “I feel I owe the world.”

“Because of the weapons?” Peter questioned. “Mr. Stark—that was a long time ago. Look how many people you saved then? You and the Avengers?”

“And look how many who have gotten hurt because of us?” Tony snapped back. “Look. Kid. This is why I didn’t want you to become an Avenger early on. There’s so many… complications. You save a life and you lose another. Tit for tat. There are some days when you’re not the hero. You’re the villain.”

“Like with the Vulture?”

Tony nodded. “Yeah. Him or the weeping mother who lost her son because you created a monster that was meant to save humanity.” he said, remembering how the mother cried and slapped him. “It’s a lot of stress to the job and I didn’t want you to deal with that. At least, not until you were twenty-one.”

“Twenty-one!” Peter gaped at him. “That’s like… forever! You weren’t going to let me become an Avenger until I turned twenty-one?”

“That’s when you’re really an adult,” Tony defended his decision. “That’s when I somewhat became an adult. Parents murdered. Head of company. Yeah, twenty-one. Figured it was a good age. You would be finishing up college. Have matured a bit. Got to experience life moments like a first kiss, first beer, first kegger party, first arrest and other moments that you wouldn’t have if you became an Avenger right off the bat.”

Peter scrunched up his face. “First arrest?”

Tony dismissed it with a wave. “The point is, Mr. Parker,” he said. “How can I ensure that my kid will have those first experiences as well when they will be a constant target for my enemies? Or when I’m gone all the time because I am doing Avenger duties? I mean, my life is already stressful for Pepper. I don’t want to put that on my kid. So, yeah, I’m afraid I’m going to screw the kid over like my dad did with me.”

And that the great truth of his fear. He didn’t want to become like Howard. He did his best to act differently with Peter, supporting him and displaying a few praises here and there, unlike Howard. He wasn’t always in contact with Peter, but he was always aware what the boy did almost every single day. But, every now and then, he caught himself acting like Howard and it tore him up. He did not want to be anything like Howard except in looks (which he couldn’t help) and intellect (although, Tony argued he was smarter). But, Peter often pushed him toward that boundary line Tony preferred to never cross.

Thankfully, he hadn’t, but what would happen once he had a kid of his own, who acted like him? That headache was returning again.

“You know, Mr. Stark?” Peter’s voice broke the silence. “I think that kid is going to be lucky to have you as a father.”

Tony raised his brows in a dubious fashion. “Don’t need to comfort me, kid.”

“No! I’m serious,” Peter avowed. “Mr. Stark, I don’t have many father figures in my life. My parents died when I was too young to remember them and then I lost my uncle not too long ago.

“And then you showed up and… and you took me to Germany, gave me a suit, told me I did a good
job and helped me be better hero,” Peter rambled on and Tony realized where it was heading. “You’ve became more than my mentor, Mr. Stark. You became a father to me.”

“And, Mr. Stark,” Peter said, earnestly and honestly. Those wide brown eyes hooked on him, “Not to be cheesy or anything, but I think you’re good enough to be a father. Because, well, you’ve been a good father to me.”

Tony sucked in a deep breath. He looked back to the glittering stars that speckled the deep velvet sky. He thought about what Peter said. What Fury said. Even what Steve Rogers said to him when he once thought Pepper was pregnant. None of them shared the same doubts he held against himself. None of them agreed with him on his statements. And none of them seemed horrified that he was going to become and actual biological father.

Hell, they all seemed happy for him.

Maybe he was overthinking it.

Tony turned back to the kid. Peter’s gaze never left him. “You know what kid? You’re right,” Tony watched as Peter perked up. “That is a bit cheesy for me.”

Peter chuckled and Tony joined in. The two shared the laugh for a bit before Tony clapped Peter on the shoulder. “Thanks, kid,” he said. “Nice to hear it.”

Tony saw his watch. It read three in the morning. That late? Or early? Depended on his lifestyle at the moment. “It’s late,” he announced to Peter. “You better head to bed. I read somewhere teenagers need at least nine hours of sleep.”

Peter scoffed. “I don’t know anyone my age that actually gets nine hours of sleep,” he said, restraining a yawn. “But, I should head to bed.”

They climbed through Peter’s window. Back in the cramped bedroom, Tony spotted a few photographs laying on the table. He looked at them as Peter went to the other side of the room. One photograph was of him and the Barton family, all of them crowding around Peter and a homemade cake. Another was of Peter and Cooper working on what appeared to be a robot arm. Another was of Peter with Lila and the toddler, on a pair of swings in the outdoors. The next one was of Peter in…

“Son of a bitch,” Tony cracked, picking up the photograph as he snickered. “You cannot pull off being blonde to save your life.”

Peter darted to his side and swiped the picture from Tony’s hands. “Don’t laugh.”

“Kid—it’s kind of hard not to laugh,” Tony jested, pointing at the photograph in Peter’s hand. “I mean… do you not see it?”

“I know I look bad as a blonde. I didn’t even want this picture taken.”

“Then why do you have it?” Tony asked, humored by the image.

“Nat took the picture and gave me a copy,” Peter answered. “I told her I looked bad and I didn’t want it, but she insisted on giving it to me.”

“Nat?” Tony’s chest went cold. “Nat as in… Natasha Romanoff?”

Peter nodded. “Yeah. She was here a while back,” he said. “Came to visit the family and she took us
out to town. Which is why I’m wearing the ridiculous blonde wig.”

Tony absently nodded. “Wow… did you meet all the rogue Avengers since we last met?”

Peter stopped to think. “No. Just Nat and Captain.”

“Nat? She allowed you to call her that?”


Only Romanoff, Tony thought. Because Natasha only allows the people she truly cares about call her that nickname and Tony never received that privilege. “Ms. Romanoff,” he said. “But, that’s because we’re pretty formal on the team. Well, back then at least.”

“She didn’t seem upset by you,” Peter offered. “She was nice. Scary, but nice.”

“Aren’t all Black Widows,” Tony grumbled, remembering her pledged loyalty only to betray them. “Anyway, I suggest you don’t ever permanently dye your hair blonde. Actually, I might make that into law. I’ll add it onto the new Accords. How about that?”

“Not going to stop you,” Peter responded and he leapt to his bed, flopping on it. He started messing with a machine on his nightstand. The robotic hand that was pictured with him and Cooper.

Tony studied the droid. “Did you build this?”

Peter nodded. “Oh, yeah,” he answered. “It’s kind of my helper. Turns off my light and handles the snooze button for me on my alarm clock. Laura and Clint gave it to me as a birthday gift, but I made a few minor adjustments.”

The droid’s arm suddenly swung on its own and stuck out its hand to Tony. Peter looked up from the droid to Peter. “It’s introducing itself,” he explained to Tony. “I programmed it that any time it hears a new voice, it must introduce itself. I know it’s not as cool as your AI, but… it’s a working progress.”

Tony’s mouth slackened. The kid built his own miniature droid. Sure it was only a robot arm and hand, but impressive enough with the limited sources he had available. “What’s its name?”

“DUMBO,” Peter answered as he ashamedly shrugged at the name. “There were a few mishaps at the beginning and I kept calling him that. Now, it sort of stuck. It’s great though. Not as good as KAREN. I miss her a lot, but he’s good help.”

“It’s impressive, Mr. Parker,” Tony said and he finally shook the robot’s hand. “Maybe I should actually give you a real scholarship to Stark Industries?”

Peter’s eyes lit up. “Are you serious?” he asked, excited. “I mean… that would be awesome, but if you don’t want to, I understand. I mean, I’m not exactly qualified to—”

“Kid—this is when you stop talking and just say ‘thanks, I’ll consider it once my fugitive status is lifted,’” Tony advised him.

Peter lowered his chin. “Yeah, of course, Mr. Stark,” he said. “Thank you. I’ll consider it once my fugitive status is lifted.”

Tony winked at him. “Good,” he decided, backing up to the door. “Now, get some sleep. I’ll see you in the morning.”
Peter buried himself underneath his covers. “Good-night, Mr. Stark.”

Tony stopped by the door, hand on the knob. “Good-night, Mr. Parker.” He opened the door and flipped the overhead light off just as DUMBO moved to turn off the table lamp. The room darkened and Tony bowed out, leaving Peter to sleep.

He returned to his couch, pulling the sole blanket over his body. Once comfortable, Tony closed his eyes and drifted to sleep.

It would be the best sleep he had in ages.

The next morning, after a good, small breakfast with the Barton family and Peter, Tony called it time. He had to go back, get things in order and ensure that there wouldn't be any double-crosses. He thanked Laura for the lovely meal and shared a rather terse, but respected good-bye with Clint. The kids all said bye to him, albeit not as kind as one would expect. Still a bit bitter at the prospect of him taking away their “older brother”.

Peter was next. He handed a sealed envelope to Tony. “Give this to my aunt, please?” he asked of him. “It’s just a short letter. And a few pictures, so she can recognize me when we meet again.”

“Please tell me you included the blonde photo?” Tony questioned to which Peter gave him a tired look. “All right. I’ll pass it onto her. She’ll be happy to read it.

“Thank you, Mr. Stark.”

“Tony,” he corrected his young protégé. “I think we are pass the whole formal titles now, don’t you think?”

Peter rocked on the balls of feet. “Yeah, I guess so,” he decided. “Well, good-bye, Tony. It was good to see you again.”

Peter stuck out his hand to say goodbye. Tony stared at it. "I think we're a step above that now too."

Tony went for a hug and Peter reciprocated. "The next time I'm here is to bring you back to your aunt," he swore. "I promise."

"I know."

They broke apart and Tony put his sunglasses on his face. "Take care," he said to Peter. "Don't do anything I would do. And especially don't do anything I wouldn't do. There's—a small grey area," Peter finished. He remembered. "I know."

"Good," Tony said, clapping Peter on the shoulder. "I'll see you soon, Crockett." Tony looked over his shoulder. "Hey, um, Barton, if I could talk to you and your wife for a bit before I leave? Privately?"

They obliged. Laura handed Nathaniel off to Peter and Clint held the door opened as they stepped out onto the porch. The kids stayed inside as the adults walked to Tony’s car.

Tony stopped and turned to them. “I want to give you guys something,” he said, pulling out a small, rectangular paper. He handed it to Clint.

Clint took one look. “Nope. Uh-Uh,” he said, handing the check back. “We don’t need this.”
“Think of it as reimbursement,” Tony carefully worded in hopes they took the check, “for taking care of Peter these past six months. I know adding another kid is a financial burden and it wasn’t fair for you guys to have to—”

“Jesus, Stark,” Clint said. Deep lines carved up his forehead as he looked sternly on from the check to Tony. “We don’t need it! We’re good. I used to be an agent for SHIELD. They didn’t pay us those low government wages, so we’re good.”

“I insist—”

“And we insist that you take this check back,” Laura intercepted. “Clint’s right. We don’t need the financial help. And again, Peter wasn’t a burden. If he ever needs a place to hide again, he’s more than welcome to stay with us.”

Tony thought. “Then, give it to your kids,” he suggested. “Set up a college account or a trust fund with the money. I don’t know? Use your imagination.”

Clint groaned, wiping his hand down his face. “And you got to understand that some things aren’t burdens.”

“We will always be there to help family,” Laura added on. “That includes the Avengers. And Peter too.”

“So…” Clint folded the check and stuffed it into Tony’s hand. “Use it to set up a college account or a trust fund for your kid.”

Tony went speechless. The shock strangled the words in his throat. Clint only gave him a sly smile and Laura looked positively happy. “I may have…overheard some of your talk last night,” Clint said and he wrapped his arm around Laura. “Now, you take care of yourself, Futurist. You got your own family to look after soon.”

“Congratulations,” Laura sweetly applauded. “I know you’re probably panicking. Clint and I were too when Cooper was born, but it’ll all be fine. It’ll work out. You’ll be a good father.”

“If you try,” Clint added on and his wife jabbed him in the ribs for the comment. “Anyway, you better head off. Plane to catch and everything.”

Tony nodded, eventually finding his voice again. “The plane leaves whenever I decide,” he said to the married couple (“What a shocker,” Clint said.). “But, yeah. I better get going anyway. Have to ensure that plans are moving forward so Peter can come home and the old gang can get back together.”

Tony switched the check with his keys. “I’ll be back soon,” he said to them, but paused. “He better not be a full-blown Mennonite when I get back.”

Clint rolled his eyes. “Bye, Stark.”

Tony sat back in his car. He turned the engine on. Cranked the music up high and rolled his windows for all to hear. He watched Clint’s face wince at the blaring sound. Tony smirked and he put the car in reverse. He hit the gas, zooming away from the farm and then put the gear back into drive. He turned the wheel and soon, the farmhouse was in the rearview mirror, getting smaller as he drove down the country lane.

He would see it again. The Bartons and Peter too.
Soon.
May Parker

May stood at the edge of the hanger. Neck stretched from the shadows as she scoured the sky, searching for a steel bird. She kept her hands busy either tugging her shirt sleeves, messing with her necklace or brushing the hair out of her face. She had to move. Too much jitters within her not to.

She wished Pepper was beside her. Pepper would hold her hand and talk to her as a way to distract her away from the nervous thoughts. But, Pepper was not there. She was at home, in bed as ordered by the doctor. Bed rest until the birth of the baby. Pepper argued with the doctor, but May (and Stark, surprisingly) convinced her to do as the doctor ordered for the sake of the baby. After all, Pepper wasn’t a twenty-some young woman. She was in her forties and pregnancies were harder for older women.

But, May was not alone. She had Colonel James Rhodes with her. She didn’t know him that well. They talked to one another a few times and he was a polite, yet impassive man. He didn’t show much emotion, but that’s a military man. Straight-face, direct and focused. But, he was kind and he was someone she trusted enough to stand by her side as she waited.

Although, guilt weighed her down upon seeing Rhodes standing for so long in his metal braces. She wished he would take a seat. They brought out chairs for them to sit, but May was too wrecked to sit still and Col. Rhodes stood probably because she was standing and pacing about. She wished he sit. It would make her feel better.

It’s been almost over an hour since they arrived at the airstrip. They should have arrived about forty minutes ago and; yet, no planes have touched the ground. The lack of arrivals only made May more anxious, plaguing her mind with dire images.

May let out a stressful sigh.

“They’ll be here any minute,” Rhodey said to her. “Tony wouldn’t want to delay it purposefully.”

Wouldn’t he? May scornfully thought. She shouldn’t have to wait this long. It’s been eleven months since she last saw her nephew. She remembered it well. He wore his favorite jeans, a silly math pun shirt along with a plaid shirt and his hair was still damp from the quick shower he took in the morning before running to meet up with his decathlon team. As he left the door, he called to her. “I’ll see you for dinner!”

That was the last thing he ever said to her before a big man came to her workplace and collected her for protection reasons. Instantly, she knew it involved Peter’s secret identity. She asked the man if Peter was all right, but he didn’t have an answer for her. All he said was that he was taking her to the compound for safety. Something bad happen then.

When Stark told her the news, she broke down. Too distraught and in pain that her heart couldn’t bear the burden. It broke too and she ended up in the compound’s medical ward. And there she stayed for a long time as she tried to cope with the fact that her nephew was gone. Away from her safe embrace.

She spent hours thinking of how terrible she was and how she could have handle things differently. She thought of what Ben would say or do in such a situation or even Peter’s parents. And each day that passed, with no messages from Peter and no hope from the government, May only sunk deeper into her depression.
It wasn’t until an agent came with a video of Peter. She replayed the recording over and over again, laughing and crying along. He was safe. He was alive. And, he was okay. That alone brought strength back within her. If Peter could do it, then so could she. She must if she ever wanted Peter to come back home.

And, now, after all this time, it was finally happening.

Stark returned from his long trip with a letter and photographs from Peter. May read the letter every night and flipped through the pictures almost twice a day, cracking up over the picture of Peter in the blonde wig. He didn’t look good with blonde hair at all. Stark spent the next month finalizing and sealing deals with the agencies, working hard to get it all done so Peter could return home. And finally, the time came.

May blinked back to the sky. Her eyes widened. “There!” she pointed to a descending plane.

A plane came upon the landing strip, touching ground as it drew closer to them. It was a Stark plane.

May held her body tight, eyes following the plane as it crept up to where they were. The plane came to a stop and the engines all groaned in relief. A few minutes later, the stairs of the plane fell back, stiffly landing on the ground.

May leaned, her nails pinching into her skin as if holding on to dear life. What if she didn’t recognize him? What if he didn’t recognize her? She kept telling herself it was nonsense. She knew what Peter looked like, blonde and brown. And she didn’t change her appearance except the loss of ten pounds from stress.

But what if he’s not the same boy? Experiences such as what he went through changes a person. She knew that. What if he’s not the same kind and loving boy? May prayed that wasn’t the case.

A figure emerged from the plane and May’s heart leapt to her throat. She made a choking sound and immediately covered her mouth to hide it. It wasn’t Peter. A random man. Probably security. After all, this arrival was hush-hush. No one, not even the President or the press were aware of the arrival. Only a select few. Stark didn’t want to draw any attention to Peter. He wanted the boy to have a safe and easy homecoming.

May didn’t argue.

The man spoke something into his radio and went down the steps.

Then, another figured ducked out of the plane. He was smaller than the previous fellow. Brown hair cut short and wearing a rather large navy jacket that covered up a shirt that read ‘Don’t trust an atom. They make up everything’, a youthful face paused at the top to take in the surroundings.

Head turned. Eyes met. A jubilant shout. “Aunt May!”

All her fears and nerves evaporated upon hearing those two syllables.

She didn’t remember running. All she knew was that she had to go to her nephew. Get to him and protect him before someone snatched him away from her all over again.

Peter Parker collided into her and hooked around her. May embraced her nephew, her hold like a strong grapple. Her fingers wound through his hair, feeling him. He was here. In her arms. Safe. Here. With her.

She breathed him in and cried. He was really here with her. “Oh Peter!” she sobbed, tears rolling
down her cheeks and onto Peter’s head. “My boy! I was so worried. I—don’t you ever scare me like that again! You understand? Don’t ever do this to me. I won’t be able to take it.”

May heard Peter choke on a chuckle. “I won’t. I promise.”

Regrettably, she parted from Peter only to get a better look at him. She took a second to study his face, cupping the side of his cheek. He didn’t look any different. He lost a bit of his baby cheeks. His bone structure a bit more defined and he seemed have grown a few inches than she last remembered. But, the kind eyes were still there. The innocent, brightness he harbored hadn’t gone away completely.

Or was it because of his tears? May stroke one of the tears away. “Peter.”

“Unc May,” Peter returned.

May cried harder as she embraced him wholeheartedly once more. She felt Peter’s head move to the crook of her neck. He squeezed tighter. She did too.

Peter was home.

“I hate to break up this sweet reunion, but we better head out if we don’t want to be spotted.”

May looked up and saw Tony Stark standing off to the side. Hands deep in his trouser pockets, sunglasses on his face, and relaxed as ever. She wished she could make some biting remark, but Stark was right. If they wanted to avoid the press, they needed to get back to the compound.

May nodded, but she didn’t break her hold on Peter. Her arm remained wrapped around her nephew as they walked back to the car. The other fellow beside Stark took the suitcase and backpack from the plane and placed them in the trunk. May and Peter slid into the back of the car, arm looped around each other. Peter dropped his head on May’s shoulder. Stark and Rhodes sat up further, instructing the driver where to go to ensure no one was following them.

The long ride allowed May and Peter to simply enjoy each other’s presence. No one bothered them. Something May was greatly thankful for. She only wanted to hold her child in her arms again and never let go.

After a while, Peter picked his head up from her shoulder. “Where are we going?” he questioned, staring at the passing greenery. “I don’t remember this being the way to Queens.”

It appeared Stark didn’t tell him. May stroked his hair back. “We’re not going to Queens.”

“We aren’t?”

May shook her head and Stark leaned over the seats. “After the debacle at the school, the government seized your apartment and belongings,” he explained to Peter. “We had May move into the compound. Set up a nice apartment for her and you.”

Peter blinked, eyes glancing from Stark to May. “W-We’re living in the Avengers Compound?”

May nodded. “Just for the time being.” Although, as she said it, she knew it was a lie. This was to be their life. Living in the Avengers Compound until either Peter losses his gifts or…

May slammed her thoughts down. “Don’t worry,” she said to Peter, rubbing his arm like she used to do as a kid. “We get a decent amount of privacy. And you still have your own room.”
But, Peter didn’t seem heartbroken. He looked the opposite. Ecstatic!

The ride came to an end. Peter scooted closer to the window, looking out at the Avengers compound. “Did it get bigger?” he asked.

Stark glanced back. “No, it just seems that way because your previous living quarters were smaller.”

They pulled into the private garage, driving passed all of Stark’s expensive collectibles. When they got near the back end, the car rolled to a stop and Stark’s and Rhodes hopped out.

Their doors opened and Peter slid out first. May followed closely, watching Peter head to back of the car to collect his bags. Stark, however, stopped him. "Someone will bring your bags in."

“Oh,” Peter glanced back to the small suitcase and backpack he brought with him. "But, can't I just...”

He reached over and snatched the backpack, slugging it on his shoulder. Stark rolled his eyes, but gestured him to follow. May pulled Peter close to her. He didn't resist as they walked together into the compound. She watched her nephew’s eyes go wide at the elegance of the compound. The pristine, modernize structure greatly differed from their Queens apartment. Even a single square-foot of the building would be triple the amount of their old rent. Peter turned as they walked, taking in the full view.

Stark caught him gaping at the building. "Kid? You've been here before."

Peter looked away from the vast floor-to-ceiling windows. "Not this part. Only the lobby."

May thought. When was Peter here before? No—she didn't want to know. Peter was here now. That's all that matter.

They passed through the double doors and immediately met with a bursting smile and sincere greeting.

"You’re back!” Pepper Potts rolled forward in a wheelchair, hair brushed up in a high ponytail. Her green eyes scanned each face until resting on Peter’s. “Welcome home, Peter. It’s good to see you here."

“Um, honey?” Stark interrupted, stepping toward her. “What did we talk about? You have to be in bed. Doctor’s orders. Remember?”

Pepper swatted the notion aside. “Doctor said I can’t stand on my feet,” she refuted. “I’m not. I’m in a wheelchair with a pillow underneath me. I’m perfectly comfortable.”

She did have a pillow underneath her. But that wasn't what the doctor meant. Not that Pepper cared. She wanted to meet Peter. The boy who started this whole revolution.

She turned back to Peter. “We were never introduced,” she said, stretching her hand out. “I’m Pepper Potts.”

Peter broke away from May and went to Pepper to shake her hand. "Ms. Potts," he said. "You look —"

"Big? Fat? Pregnant?” Pepper tried to fill the gap.

"Err... I was going to say radiant. Happy," Peter said.
Pepper smiled. "You are a real charmer, aren't you?"

Peter blushed, eyes dropping to the floor. "Stating the truth."

Pepper laughed and wheeled around. "Well, I won’t take up too much of your time," she said. "I’m sure you probably want to get settle in and spend some time with your aunt. She missed you so much. A lot of people did."

Peter’s eyes darted back to May. "I know. I missed them too."

Stark, Pepper and Rhodes led May and Peter down the corridors of the compound. They passed the indoor pool, gym, massage parlor, and the library before they entered the living quarters. May observed Peter, still wide-eyed at the massive building that was to become his home.

When they reached their apartment, May opened it with her key and held the door open for Peter to enter. "Welcome to your new home, sweetie."

Peter treaded carefully into the apartment. He stopped a few feet in, surveying the area. He saw the living room, the entrance to the kitchen and the little foyer out front that had a few of May’s shoes that Pepper managed to purchase for her since her collection was being held hostage by the government.

In fact, the apartment had very little in terms of furniture and decorations. It resembled a hotel room rather than an actual home. May looked around the apartment too, seeing the bare walls that no longer held memories of their past. The couch was plain beige and the bookcase had large gaps. She should have spiced the place up. Make it homier.

Peter walked further, checking each door. "Where’s my room?"

May jumpstarted. "It’s down the hall," she said, "This way."

Stark made a sound as if he was clearing his throat. "We’ll let you guys get settled," he said. "If there is anything you need, let me know. Or Rhody. Not Pepper." Stark glared down at his fiancée, a bit peeved that she disobeyed doctor’s orders. "We’ll do our best to get whatever you want."

Peter dropped his backpack on the couch. "Thanks, Tony."

"No problem, kid," Stark said. "Don’t feel rush, okay? Take your time."

And that was it. The three left them in their apartment. May led Peter down the hallway to his new bedroom. She opened the door and Peter peered inside. "Oh—wow!" he said, mesmerized as he strolled into the room. "It’s big!"

It was. May’s room was about the same size. Each bedroom came with a sizeable walk-in closet along with a private bathroom. May no longer had to share the bathroom with her nephew and Peter can hide all of his junk in his closet rather than the broom closet like he once did.

And the room itself was nice. A skylight, plus a window from floor to ceiling with windows that automatically tint depending on the sun’s position in the sky. Not to mention it had curtains that would be drawn together and drawn apart at certain times each day.

Peter circled the room. It was mostly empty. All it had was a simple desk, desk chair, lamp and a king-sized bed flanked with two nightstands. Nothing inside, though, belonged to Peter. No clothes or books or computer. Nothing belonged to him. He didn’t have his photographs or bed covers. Or even his Lego set. May should have ordered some things to make it his room, but that wasn’t her first
concern.

“I know it doesn’t have a lot of stuff,” May said, leaning against the doorframe. “But, we could order a few items from Amazon to make it your own room. Like different bedspreads, some posters, or even other furniture.”

Peter shrugged, heading over to the window. He looked out. “Oh! Aunt May!” he exclaimed. “Do you see this? It’s a basketball court!”

May smiled. Peter was an optimistic kid. Even in the dreariest situation, he always saw the best of things. “Yeah, I’ve seen a few people play on the court.”

“Am I allowed?”

“I don’t see why not?” she said. “But, Peter, before you run off to play hoops, why don’t we get yourself unpack and figure out what you need. Okay?”

Peter nodded and he smiled at May. Then, in a few strides, Peter was back, hugging her tight. “I missed you so much, Aunt May.”

More tears welled in her eyes as she returned Peter’s embrace. She smoothed down his hair, her heart fluttering in relief. “Oh, Peter,” she murmured, kissing the top of his head. “I larve you.”

Another chuckle. “Larve you, too.”

Peter didn’t have much to unpack. Only a few outfits plus two pairs of shoes. He had a robotic hand too that he promptly set up at his nightstand. He gleefully showed it off to her and May jumped at how the arm moved upon her voice.

Once Peter moved into his room, May had Peter join her on the couch and just talk. Peter relayed everything that happened since the attack at school. May experienced a lot of emotions as she listened to her nephew tell her stories about his adventure. She swore she had mini strokes as Peter explained how he saved the royal family of Wakanda. He showed her the ring on his finger, explain that it wasn’t a friendship ring. He was very adamant on that matter. Whatever the ring meant, May was proud of him.

She grew jealous of the stories involving Hawkeye. He got to raise her child, celebrate his sixteenth birthday and basically be his parent, while she rotted here, devastated.

At the same time, she felt an overwhelming gratitude to all who took care of Peter. Captain America for smuggling him out of the country and away from Ross. King T’Challa for granting him sanctuary in his country and instructing him in self-defense. Everett Ross for going against his duty. Hawkeye for accepting Peter like he was his own son. She was thankful for all of them and never knew how she could repay them for their effort.

May made a quick lunch as they listed items that Peter needed. May immediately wrote clothes at the top. He needed to do some serious shopping. He had a handful of clothes, but not nearly enough. She wondered why Hawkeye didn’t purchase more clothes for him.

“Hey, um, Aunt May?” Peter said, after pushing his plate of spaghetti aside. “Do you know when we will get our stuff back?”

May stopped penciling the list. She looked up, her glasses sliding somewhat down from the bridge of her nose. “Oh… I-I don’t know,” she confessed. She really didn’t. When she first asked for her
belongings, the government denied her. All of their belongings were evidence and therefore, they had no right to them. “I can ask Stark, but I’m not sure if we could get them back.”

“Why not? What about pictures? Or Uncle Ben’s chair?”

“I’ll ask again,” May promised Peter. “Last time I was denied, but maybe now that it’s over, we might be able to get our items back.”

“Okay, it’s just... I don’t want to lose all our stuff.”

Lose his mother, father or Ben, May clarified to herself only. He took Peter’s hand. “Don’t worry. We won’t,” she assured him. “We’ll find a way to get them back.”

Peter nodded, sharing the same hope as May. At least, she hoped he did. May offered more spaghetti, but Peter claimed he was full. “What did you do here?” he asked. “I mean, besides terrorizing Tony.”

May chuckled. “Oh, sweetie, I did that every day,” she teased, taking his plate and putting the dishes into the dishwasher. A luxury they never had in Queens. “But, when I wasn’t in the medical wing or screaming at Stark, I was in here. Thinking about you. Trying to figure out how to get you home. Wishing you were home.” She drew in an unsteady breath. “All I thought about was you.”

Peter looked at her, finger picking at his nail beds. “I’m sorry, Aunt May,” he said, somber. “I… I didn’t mean to hurt you. Or get you scared. I know with your heart—”

May lifted her hand to stop him. “I don’t blame you.”

“But you’re heart—”


Peter’s eyes casted down, half believing in her words. May took her nephew’s chin and held it up so that she could see his wonderful eyes once more. “I don’t blame you, Peter,” she said. “I will never blame you for my pain. Got it?”

Peter slowly nodded.

“Good,” May affirmed and she did her best attempt at a smile. She glanced at their handwritten list, pulling it over to her to pocket. “So, we finished that. Is there something else you want to do? Or talk about?”

Her nephew pondered on the options. “Can I get a tour of the compound?”

Not exactly what May thought he would say, but it was a reasonable request. After all, this was his new home. He should know how to get around the compound and find his way back to the apartment.

As May walked her nephew through the compound, pointing out different areas, she told Peter more about her time in the compound. She spoke of the attempts by journalists to get her to speak, by Ross’s men to get her to come out, and her own experience of cabin fever. She informed Peter how Pepper Potts became a good friend to her, helping her cope. May mentioned that she lost her job too because of her inability to leave the compound for the sake of her own safety. Stark and Pepper provided for her, but she never liked the idea of being indebted to them.
May finished showing Peter the theater room when they bumped into Tony Stark and Colonel Rhodes. "Hey!" he said, surprised to find them walking the hallway. "All settled? Everything good?"

Peter nodded. "Yeah, yeah, it’s all amazing Mr. Stark—I mean, Tony," he corrected. "Aunt May was giving me a tour of the place."

"That’s probably a good idea," Stark commented. "Did you see the um, gym? Library? Oh—the built-in theater?"

Peter nodded to all of them. "Yeah, she showed me all those places."

"Lap pool?" Stark asked. "It's indoors so you don't have to wait until summer to use it."

Peter nodded again.

"Research labs? Training salles? Equipment room?"

Peter stopped nodding. "Err... no."

"Ah, well, then," Stark stated, as if he hit the jackpot. "You haven't had the full tour yet." Stark turned to Rhodes. "Can we put this on hold? Talk after?"

Rhodes agreed. "I'll see you afterwards," he said, walking away with his prosthetic legs clicking on the tile flooring.

Stark nudged his head in the direction behind him. "This way, young grasshopper," he motioned. "You can come too, May."

Stark took over the tour, pointing out nearly every room they passed. Peter and Stark were side-by-side, and May stayed right behind, following as she observed her nephew checking out the massive training salle, the observation deck for equipment testing, the jet hanger and many other rooms May never even heard of. Stark engaged in Peter with some light conversation, discussing what most of the rooms were for and informing Peter of the areas that were off-limits to him.

They reached the research labs. Stark opened one of the many doors and held it open for Peter and May to enter. May scanned the room. It was a decent size, filled with all sort of tools and gadgets. As Peter wandered the room, checking out the large chemistry set on the glass table, Stark lingered at the door and watched with a humored smile. May wondered what he was thinking or if he found Peter gushing over the equipment hilarious.

Peter glanced to Stark. "Whose lab is this?" he inquired. "What do they do?"

Stark's smile only got wider. "Up to you," he said, "considering it belongs to you."

May twisted around, gaze frozen at Stark as if she waited for the following joke. Peter, however, thought he misheard. "What?"

"It's yours," Stark clarified, moving away from the door. "I set this lab up for you. Well, Spider-man to be exact. Got you a chemistry set so you can make your web fluids. Incubator, scissors jack and other things. I wasn't too sure what you needed, but I got a lot of random things for you. Some of them used to belong in my own lab."

Peter gawked. "Are you... are you serious?" he said, spinning on the spot to take in the whole room. "This is mine? All of it?"
“Yep, but please, try not to break anything. You know, expensive stuff here. Also, I have rules for you when you are in here. I don't want you to accidentally blow the place up. So, first is that you must always tell me or May here when you are going to come here. Okay? No mixing chemicals unless approved by me. And if there is anything that involves fire or is combustible, you will have either myself or another in the room with you. Capiche?”

Peter enthusiastically nodded. "Yeah! Yeah, of course! I... yeah, no, I won't blow it all up. I swear!"

May was stunned too. A whole lab to Peter, filled with all this fancy, expensive equipment. That was too much! She glanced around the room, filled with unbelievable awe at the shine of all the objects in the room. She was aware Stark was a billionaire and money wasn’t a concern, but May… this was a nice, but grand gesture to her nephew.

Stark, however, was oblivious to it all. "Good, so that leaves one more thing," he pulled something out of his jacket's pocket and tossed it to Peter.

"A Starkphone," Stark corrected him. "I already upgraded it. So, it's all set to go. I advise holding off calling or texting anyone at the moment. Well, I mean, your contacts are just me, Happy, Rhodey, Pepper and your aunt. I don't know who else you want to add in there. Up to you. But, again, wait before making contact with someone.

"There is also another surprise," Stark said, pointing to the phone. "Hit the pound key twice."

May worried what the surprise may be. She watched as Peter pressed the key twice. A sound boomed from the phone followed by a FRIDAY-like voice. "Hello, Peter," it said. "It's been a long time."

Peter's eyes lit up. "KAREN!"

KAREN? May remembered her. The AI that monitored Peter when he was out on patrol. Her lifeline to Peter whenever he went swinging into the city night-life.

KAREN’s embodiment voice responded to Peter’s recognition. “Yes. I am glad you remember me.”

“Of course!” Peter said to the phone. "How've you been?"

Stark's brows dipped. "You do know it's an AI?" he quipped. "It doesn't actually go out or have a personal life."

Peter's cheeks reddened upon that realization. "Oh, right," he muttered. "Um... it's good to hear from you KAREN."

“Good to hear from you, Peter.”

Peter held the phone with delicacy, afraid to hurt it if he held it too tight. "So... KAREN is programmed to my phone now?"

“Among other things," Stark replied. "I can hook her up to your apartment, but I figured better to get your aunt's permission seeing as she didn't appreciate FRIDAY’s... what did you call it again? Oh—invasiveness.”
May crossed her arms. "I don't like the idea of something being able to hear and document everything I say or do," she stated. "And the answer is no, Peter. I'm not having an AI monitor us in our own apartment. You can have it on your phone and suit, but not in the apartment."

Peter didn’t try to fight her on it. She made it perfectly clear there was no negotiation on the subject. Anyway, he was already running around his new lab, checking out all the equipment that Stark bought for him, which allowed May some time to speak to Stark.

She requested a quick word with Stark, pointing to the door meaning she didn’t want Peter to overhear them. Perhaps Stark already knew what she wanted to talk about. He had this look of guilt in his eyes as he obliged to her request. He politely held the door open for her, giving her room to exit first. He closed the door behind him, but not before reminding Peter one more time to not break anything.

Once the door the closed, May spoke. “I want to thank you for all that you have done in bringing Peter back home. Back to me,” she started, fingers tapping together. “But… I wish you spoke to me about the lab and phone. I mean… this is all too much!”

Stark braved her with a virtuous look. “This? It’s nothing. There a lot of open labs that were being unused and I know Peter likes chemistry. It would be a place for him to do some science stuff.”

“Still,” May persisted. “You should have asked me. Not that I would have said no, but—”

Stark stopped her. “I get it. You’re his guardian. You want the final say,” he said and exhaled. “Okay. I’ll run things by you from now on.”

Somehow, Stark managed to throw his guilt back at her. Clever. “It’s not that I don’t appreciate what you are doing,” she tried to clarify. “I am, but… I don’t want you to feel obligated to Peter. You don’t have to buy him presents or… or spoil him. You did what you promised. You brought him home. So, please, no more of these flashy things. At least, not before asking me.”

Stark’s mouth pinched a bit. “I’m not trying to spoil him.”

“You are. A little.”

Stark shrugged innocently. “He’s a good kid. A smart kid. He deserves some things that can help him reach his full potential.”

“And I appreciate your interest in my nephew’s well-being,” May said again. “But, his life already changed dramatically enough as it is. I don’t want any more major changes. I want to bring back some normalcy for him. And that includes not getting a flashy phone or a car—”

“Whoa—I did not buy him car,” Stark claimed. “He doesn’t even have a driver’s license.”

“What I mean is, I don’t want Peter to be spoiled because his circumstances have changed,” May elucidated. “I want him to live his life close as to the way it was before all this ever happened.”

She saw in Stark’s eyes that he understood. “Okay,” was Stark’s final response.

Once that was sorted, May went around Stark to return to the lab. Peter was speaking with KAREN on his phone as he tinkered with the incubator. He didn’t even look their way when she and Stark re-entered the lab.

“Come on!” May called to her nephew. “You can come back to this place at another time.”
Peter joined her and Stark at the door. “You guys finished talking about me?” he said, slipping his new Starkphone in his pocket.

May was stupefied. “H-How did you—”

Peter tapped his ear. “Super-hearing.”

“You can hear behind closed doors?”

Peter nodded. “Behind closed doors, whispers and I can even overhear the other person on the phone,” he said. “Hawkeye and I tested to see how far away I can hear and I was able to hear someone speaking from at least five miles away.”

May gaped. She never knew this about him. She knew his biological make-up was changed and that he had extraordinary powers, but she never knew the extent of his abilities.

“Well, that’s good to know,” May said, uncomfortable that Peter heard her talk to Stark. The billionaire, however, didn’t look at all surprised. Probably because the bastard was aware. “So, if I yell in close quarters to you, will that hurt your hearing? Like a whistle being blown in your ear?”

Peter thought. “Not really. It’s loud, but not that loud.”

“Noted,” May said. “But, do me a favor, sweetie,” She waited until she had Peter’s full attention. “Promise me you won’t ever eavesdrop on me again?”

Now it was Peter’s turn to flush with embarrassment. “Yeah, sorry,” he mumbled. “Sometimes it’s hard to not listen, but I’ll do my best to tune you out when not talking to me. I promise.”

“Good,” May said, fixing Peter’s hair in a fond manner. She turned back to Stark. “Is there more to the tour?”

Stark shook his head. “Nope. Finished it. It’s not a terribly complicated facility,” he said, mostly to Peter. “Did you have any questions? Or did you figure out everything you needed? Because, we can start that ordering process right now. Hell—we might be able to get a few of those things today.”

May pulled out the list from her pocket and handed it to Stark. “That’s what we have for now.”

Stark reviewed the list in a quick second. “Really? That’s all?” he said, doubting that their required items were that few. “There isn’t anything else?”

May shook her head. “Nope. Just those items for now.”

“Actually... there is one other thing,” Peter garnered May’s and Stark’s attention.

May and Stark both turned to Peter to learn of this new, mysterious request.

“I want to see Ned.”

It took a lot of strong-arming Stark, but eventually May managed to grant Peter's wish. Stark adamantly disagreed with the idea of him leaving the compound, but conceded to May as long as they had tight security. Meaning they were transported in a heavily armed vehicle, two security officers and Peter had to wear a hood or mask to hide his face so no one would recognize him outside.

“All these precautions is to ensure your safety and others,” Stark insisted as he fitted Peter with an
over-sized hood coat. "Plus, I don't want the press knowing that you are back in the States. Not yet anyway."

"I'll be careful," Peter promised to him. "I won't do anything stupid."

"You're a teenager," Stark remarked. "I expect it no matter what."

Peter just smirked and got into the car with May. They wheeled out of the compound, driving long, winding roads that took them the longest time to get into the city. Peter, May noted, sat at the edge of his seat, peering through the windshield in search of New York's famous skyscrapers.

"Relax, Peter," May said, trying to get him to recline in his seat. "We'll be there soon. I already talked to Ned's mother. She knows you are coming."

"Sorry. I'm excited to be home again" he said, still searching for the skyscrapers. "And to see Ned. I have so much to say to him."

"Remember, Peter," May warned. "You cannot tell him everything."

"I know. I know," Peter waved away her forewarnings. "I won’t, but I still have so much to say to him."

When they finally entered New York, Peter wondered at the sight of familiarity. He eyes were glued on the window, watching busses pass, subway trains rumble overhead and people hanging around corners of bodegas. As Peter looked on with excitement, May found herself at peace, listening to the sounds of home. It was louder and cruder, but it reminded her back to a time less-hectic. It brought memories of Ben and Peter when he was younger. Good times.

"Aunt May?"

"Yeah? What is it?"

"Is that my school picture on that billboard?"

May ducked around Peter to get a good look. It was. A big poster of Peter was put up on one of the empty billboards by the subway station. Underneath it, it read *Fuck Accord*.

"Appears so," May responded, leaning back in her seat.

Peter twisted away from the window. "Why is there a picture of me on a billboard?"

May shrugged. She wasn’t aware of all the dealings outside the compound. She knew the public supported Peter rather than the government and maybe, this was their way of showing support for her nephew.

"I don’t know," May said, truthfully. "From what I heard, you were supported by the general public. Maybe this was their way of protesting on your behalf?"

Peter scrunched his nose as he looked back to the window. "Weird. Never thought I would turn into some kind of poster boy."

"Neither did I."

They turned off one of the main streets and May recognized a few of the buildings they passed. Peter did too as his foot started tapping wildly away. The car rolled to a stop, not too far from a front door May had seen multiple times in her life.
She nudged Peter. “Hood up, mister.”

Peter pulled his oversized hood up and over his face. May handed him a pair of dark sunglasses and he put them on as well. One glance and even May couldn’t tell if she was staring at her nephew or not. They got out of the car and walked down the uneven sidewalk. A few people passed them, but none of them even looked their way. Too engrossed with their own world to recognize Peter was walking passed them.

Security stayed by the car. They weren’t dressed in any fancy attire that gave them away. They did their duty by blending in the environment they entered. Which was good because it meant it didn’t distract the neighbors to look at them.

Peter hurried up the steps and rang the bell. May hopped up the stairs just as the door opened.

“Oh MY GOD! YOU’RE HERE!”

Mrs. Leeds was a short, plumped woman with a jovial face. She welcomed them warmly, waving them inside their small duplex. Peter and May ducked into the tight foyer. Peter shrugged off the coat and handed it to Mrs. Leeds. She hung it up in the closet.

“Oh Peter! It's do good to see you again! Welcome back,” Mrs. Leeds eagerly greeted. “Now, let me take a look at you.”

She clasped her hands on the side of Peter’s face, tilting his head to the side in the light. “You look good,” she smiled. “Very good! Ned will be so happy to see you.”

Peter returned the smile. “You look well yourself, Mrs. Leeds,” he said. “Is Ned home?”

She shook his head. “He’s at decathlon practice,” she explained, ushering them down the hallway to the living room. Already there were a plate of gingersnap cookies on a plate for them. “Would you like a cookie? You’re so thin as it is.”

Mrs. Leeds pushed the plate of cookies to Peter.

“Thank you, but I’m good,” Peter replied, looking around the living room. “The place looks nice.”


“Tea would be nice,” May answered just as Peter responded with a kind rejection.

Mrs. Leeds snapped her fingers. “Tea, it is!” she said and darted to the kitchen to get the mug. “Black or herbal?”

“Herbal, please,” May called out, pausing. “Do you need help?”

Mrs. Leeds waved a rejection. “No, I got it. Thank you.” She busied herself with the tea, talking away. “Peter—are you sure you don’t want anything?”

Peter insisted he was fine as he roamed around their living room. May held on her elbows, watching Peter as if he was a toddler. Too afraid that if she let him out of sight, he would be instantly gone.

A minute later, Mrs. Leeds returned with a hot brew of tea. She cautiously passed it to May’s skinny fingers. “Careful! It’s a little hot.”

May accepted the warm mug in her fingers. It was a bit on the hot side, but May tolerated it. She
took a tiny sip, the tea spilling over her lips and continued down her throat, warming her chest. May sighed, happy to have that cup of tea.

Mrs. Leeds looked at the clock. “If you want, Peter, you can wait upstairs for Ned? He’ll be home soon.”

Peter ran up the stairs, leaving the two adults in the living room together. May took another sip of her herbal tea, basking in the warmth it provided her. Mrs. Leeds’ smile never faltered, remaining merry as if it was Christmas day.

“You must be over the moon!” Mrs. Leeds commented, taking a seat on the couch. “To have Peter back… Ned will be so happy! This past year—”

She left her voice fall, memories spoiled the happy mien. She inhaled deeply, wiping her face for a split second. “I’m sorry,” she apologized. “I know it’s not fair to complain to you. Of all people. You lost Peter and I still had Ned, but—”

May put her tea aside, moving to sit beside Mrs. Leeds. She wrapped her arm around her. “I get it,” May assured her. “It wasn’t easy for anyone. I’m sorry you and your family had to go through all of this. Alone too.”

Mrs. Leeds sniffled. “Ned was so depressed. He struggled for months and I didn’t think he would ever be happy again.”

It was the same for May. Each day that passed and Peter wasn’t home, she thought that she may never be happy again. The Parker curse, Peter once said after Uncle Ben’s funeral. May didn’t believe him, but when Peter was taken away from her, she did wonder if the curse existed.

She kept Mrs. Leeds in an embrace until Mrs. Leeds pulled herself together. She brushed the last bit of the silent tears away from her face. “I’m basically a ball of nerves right now,” she said to May. “I can’t wait for Ned to come home. He’s going to be so… excited to see Peter again.”

May understood the underlying meaning behind her words. With Peter’s return, the son she remembered and loved may return as well.

Just then, they heard the front door unlock and open. “I’m home!” Ned’s voice carried from the front to the back. “I’m going to be upstairs for a minute, but be right back down.”

Mrs. Leeds looked to May, returning with that cheery grin. “Take your time, sweetie!”

There was a hesitation in Ned’s footsteps as he climbed up the stairs. Then, it picked up and May heard him walk to his bedroom.

Silence followed.


At first, May thought maybe Ned fainted or something terrible happened. But then they heard footsteps and dual mutters came through the vent in the ceiling above May and Mrs. Leeds. Murmurs that sounded like Peter's and Ned's voice.

Mrs. Leeds sighed in content. “Boys… they’re home.”

May fell back to her natural composure. Yes, their boys were home. Safe, sound and happy.
“Where is he?”

It’s a little past six-thirty in the morning. The entire academic decathlon team sat around one of the library tables. Abe and Cindy chatted quietly between themselves. Sally sat hunched over her physics book, her bushy hair falling all over her face. Charles was on his phone, checking his social media pages. Flash took up two seats, using one as a foot rest. Harry sat next to Michelle, phone in hand, but not using it. And at the head of the table was Mr. Harrington, who had his phone out, scrolling as he drank his morning coffee.

The only person missing was Ned Leeds.

Michelle checked the time again. “Did you text him?”

She directed the question to Harry, Ned’s new best friend since the start of the school year. Harry Osborn was the opposite of Peter Parker. Fair, extrovert and stylish, Harry was not a person she thought Ned would befriend. Yet, she slowly found the pair walking the hallways together, becoming lab partners, sitting at the same lunch table and even visiting each other’s apartments. Harry became Ned’s new confidante.

Harry twirled his phone in his hand. “Yeah, I called and texted him,” he answered. “No response.”

“Call again,” Michelle ordered and Harry dialed Ned again.

“He’s probably sleeping in,” Flash’s tired voice moaned from the other end of the table. “Something I should have done then get up at this ridiculous hour. You’re running us down, Michelle. We haven’t had a single morning off.”

“And we won’t until I know for certain that we have a chance to keep our title this year,” Michelle snapped back at Flash. “We lost some of our brightest players last year and we’re not exactly a full team. That gives us a disadvantage.”

Flash stretched his arms and yawned. “Well, we’re at a disadvantage anyway for not getting enough sleep to fully function.”

Harry closed his phone and shook his head to Michelle. “No answer, Princess.”

“Stop calling me that,” Michelle growled as she snatched up her phone to call Ned. It went directly to voicemail. “Ned—where the hell are you? We are all waiting her for you to show up. You better have a damn good excuse.”

She hung up and put her phone on the table. She looked at it, half expecting it to ring with Ned’s face flashing at her. It didn’t.

“I’ll text him again,” Harry offered, already opening his contact page. He typed away.

Michelle knew it was pointless, but didn’t stop him. “Did he tell you anything last night?”

Harry shook his head. “Nope,” he said. “Just the normal ‘see you tomorrow’.”
Nothing made sense. Ned would never skip out of practices. That was more of Peter’s forte than anything. However, Peter had a good reason considering he was Spider-man.

“Ms. Jones?” Mr. Harrington said, pushing his glasses up his nose. “Why don’t we just start? If Mr. Leeds comes, he can just hop right in.”

Michelle exhaled, aggravated. “Sure. Let’s do that,” she said, but thinking already how she was going to scold Ned for his tardiness. She addressed the team. “Let’s start with the flash—”

The sound of a heavy door opening distracted her. Michelle looked up. Ned Leeds sauntered into the library, a giddy expression barely concealed on his face. Almost like he was bursting to tell some fantastic news to everyone.

Michelle didn’t give a crap. “Where the hell have you been?”

“Someone is in trouble….” Flash cheekily intoned at Ned’s expense.

Ned slowed to a stop, hovering by the doors. “Sorry! Sorry! I know I’m late, I—”

“Late is five minutes after the start time,” Michelle sternly cut him off. “We have our first competition in two weeks! And you being late isn’t going to help us keep our national title. It’s not fair for the rest of us to pick up your slack. We are a team! We all need to be in this together or not at all.”

Ned stammered. “I—of course, Michelle,” he said. “I didn’t mean to be late. I was just… I was bringing a friend—”

A friend? What friend? Ned’s only two friends were seated right next to each other at the table.

Ned backtracked to the door and swung it open, sticking his head between the doors. He called for someone. Everyone around the table craned their necks to see, curious as to who Ned brought to their small team.

Another person stepped across the threshold, joining Ned inside the library. “Hey guys…”

The friend was none other than Peter Parker.

Peter’s unannounced arrival sent everyone into stunned silence. The famous student of Midtown stood in front of them, hands wrangled together as he took in his former teammates. He didn’t say another word, only gazing at their faces to gauge their reactions. They had none. At least, Michelle didn’t. Her heart leapt while her face fell. Mouth slack as she gaped at Peter, noticing the subtle differences of him. He still had that thick, brown hair, gentle eyes, but he looked taller, muscular and a bit tanner to be honest. His style didn’t change either. He wore another one of his classic, graphic T-shirts, paired with a navy jacket. It was almost as if nothing changed about him and yet, Michelle saw something in his eyes that told her differently.

Peter suddenly looked uncomfortable, his feet shifting backwards. Ned was bemused by their reaction. "Guys, it's Peter," Ned said to spark life back into them. "You know? Peter—"

"Parker!" It was Flash who shouted, surprising everyone as the guy leapt out of his chair.

Flash’s shout jolted the rest of the team out of their stupor. They all rushed at Peter with huge grins. Everyone talked right away, asking question after question before Peter even answered the first one. They all huddled around him like crazed disciples, brightly looking at their returned hero.

“Where have you been?” asked Cindy Moon.
“Is it true that you can command an army of spiders?” questioned Charles.

Sally investigated Peter’s wrists. “So do you produce the web from your body?”

Peter remained polite, although baffled by the attention. Michelle stood off to the side. She didn’t ask any questions. She opted to only observe Peter’s interaction with his old teammates. She watched Mr. Harrington stroll through the crowd to give a nice, welcoming pat on Peter’s shoulder.

“It’s good to see you, Mr. Parker,” Mr. Harrington said to him. “I’m glad you’re okay.”

“I could say the same to you,” Peter responded. “I’m sorry about what happened to you, Mr. Harrington. I… I didn’t mean for you to get shot. I’m sorry—”

Mr. Harrington stopped him. “I will always take a bullet for my students, Mr. Parker. Enhanced or not,” he said. “I have no regrets.”

Peter thanked Mr. Harrington again and as Mr. Harrington moved aside, Peter spotted Michelle staring at him. “MJ.”

Michelle’s muscles tensed for a brief second. He called her MJ. No one had called her that. Not even when she told them too nearly a year ago. Peter broke away from the group, coming up to her. Michelle breathed in, trying to figure out what to say to him.

“Parker,” she crossed her arms, speaking in that accusing tone of hers that made Peter hesitant. "You're late.”

Peter snorted, realizing the joke. "Yeah, but I have a note," he teased in return. "Oh—I have to ask you something, did you really yell at Tony?"

Michelle scrunched up her face all innocently. "Yell? At Mr. Stark? That's not really my thing. Besides, how would I do that?"

Flash nudged himself back into the inner circle, squeezing himself next to Michelle. "Parker! Parker! Can you really stick to everything? Like the ceiling? And like, where have you been all this time? I read in a blog..."

Flash kept yapping away, excited to ask Peter a lot of random questions all at once. Michelle rolled her eyes at Flash's interrogation. "Will you, like, chill out?" Michelle cut in Flash's ramblings. "He's not going to give you an interview. Plus, I doubt he can tell you anything."

Based off Peter’s reaction, she was right. There was a code silence and Peter had to keep it sealed behind his lips. "There's not much I can tell you," Peter said to the overall group. "Just that I was away and now I'm home."

“What can you tell us?” asked Charles, eagerly awaiting for an answer like the rest of them.

Peter hunched his shoulders and hands dug into the pockets of his jeans, before he shrugged his answer. He looked uncomfortable being the center of attention, looked upon like he was some kind of god. He casted a look over his team until he stopped on someone in the back. Michelle trailed his line of sight and spotted Harry.

Harry stood outside the circle of admirers. He was not smiling. He appeared relatively calm, but Michelle noticed the uncertainty brewing in Harry’s blue eyes. Harry was no longer an insider amongst them. He was an outsider, looking in as his teammates gushed over another. Harry kept himself occupied, tugging on his shirt or playing with his phone as if he got an important message.
Anything to hide his discomfort at not being able to join in on the welcoming party.

Seeing Harry’s despondency, Michelle called out to him. “Hey, Harry.”

Harry snapped his head up to her. Michelle stretched out her hand and grabbed his arm, pulling him through the crowd. Harry, at first, resisted, but eventually gave up when Michelle pulled him right beside her. Right in front of Peter.

“Peter, this is Harry,” Michelle introduced. “Harry—Peter.”

Harry extended his hand. “I, um, heard a lot of good things about you.”

“Good to meet you too,” Peter took his hand. “You must be new to Midtown”

“Yeah, Harry joined this year,” Flash inserted himself into the conversation. “He replaced you.”

Michelle wanted to slap Flash’s mouth shut. Peter looked from Flash to Harry, who frowned in resentment at Flash’s interjection. Harry turned back to Peter. "You can have it back," he offered, although there was not much conviction in his voice. Only obligation upon Peter’s return. "I can be an alternate or something—"

“Oh, no, that's okay,” Peter reassured Harry. "Have to be a student to be on the team anyway.”

Harry looked relieved to still have his position, but then tightened when he comprehended Peter's words. So did everyone else. Michelle’s heart fell as Ned faced Peter.

"Wait... you're not coming back?" Ned said, tone soft in disbelief.

Peter slowly—regretfully—shook his head. "I-I can't," he said, apologetic. "I talked to Tony about it and Aunt May too. They think it would be best if I was homeschooled instead."

“Homeschooled!” Ned said, outrageous over the very idea. "But—you have to come back! We all want you to come back!"

A chorus of ‘yes’ followed, the decathlon team all voicing their support in Peter to return. Michelle didn’t say anything. She saw Ned dismantle, his smile slipping further down on his face. She examined Peter, noticing the way his nose twitched, lips thinning and the constant avoidance of everyone’s gaze. He was happiness and hurt all bundled together in one unbreakable knot. She too was disheartened, but she understood the reason. Michelle imagined parents wouldn’t be accepting of Peter’s return to the school with all the risks he brought. He already caused a school shooting. Now that he was well-known as Spider-man, what other dangers might he bring?

Michelle knew it wasn’t fair. But, when was life ever fair?

Peter spoke again, mostly addressing Ned. “I can't," he said. "It's too dangerous. For you guys. People may come after me and... I can't have another repeat.”

The excitable mood turned to a more solemn as everyone realized that Peter Parker was not returning to school ever again. Michelle sighed and lifted her gaze up. Her eyes immediately met Peter’s. He was looking at her with those puppy eyes—kind, but sad.

And in that one shared look, Michelle understood what Peter conveyed. She dipped her chin a bit, a tiny nod of compassion that only Peter would see before she clapped her hands loudly. “All right team,” she said aloud, looking at all the gloomed faces of her teammates. “We have about an hour before school starts and as much as I am happy Peter is back, we have a competition coming up that
we need to get ready for.”

She return her focus on Peter. “If you want to, Parker, you can join us in practice,” she offered, extending the invitation to still be a part of their group even if he no longer could. “That is… if you can keep up. You were out for an entire school year. Don’t want you to get embarrassed.”

Michelle’s stomach nearly flipped at Peter’s humored smile. "Yeah, all right," he accepted. "Don't see the harm."

They all gathered around the library table like normal. Peter pulled up a chair next to Ned, but everyone kind of squished together anyway to be close to Peter. Michelle started with a lightning round to warm everyone up. It was quickly followed by a face-off round, to which—no surprise here—Peter dominated, knocking off his opponents with ease. It was almost like the good, old days. Michelle tried very hard to stump him, but Peter parried off all her attempts to dethrone him. The only person to almost beat him was Harry. His knowledge on genetic mutation was surprisingly strong. But, that made sense considering his father’s business. In the end, Peter still held the title of being the smartest one on the team—former team.

Michelle twisted her lips in deep thought. It was the last round of questions. She needed to find a subject Peter knew little. Then, genius hit her. She stood erect in her seat, pulling herself together as she drew up another pile of flash cards.

“Okay, our next subject is… literary," Michelle announced, knowing English was not Peter's strong suit. She drew the first card. "Okay, Parker, what was seen as the archetypal modern African novel in English?"

In the first time in the history of their decathlon team, Peter Parker froze. The muscles in his face went rigid, jaw hardening in frantic thought. Michelle coolly folded her arms in the table, a victorious, little grin spreading on her face as she watched Peter struggled for an answer. Everyone else around the table watched, eyes darting from Peter to Michelle, waiting with tensed anticipation to see whether Peter was the ultimate champion or not.

Ned, who sat next to Peter, gripped onto his seat like he was on a roller coaster. “You got this, Peter!”

“Shut it,” came Flash’s voice. “Don’t disturb him.”

Peter hadn’t answered in twenty seconds. Michelle finally caught him in a bind. She smiled, ready to read the answer when she saw something flicker in Peter. Her friend relaxed, a slow, lopsided grin rising as he gazed directly at Michelle.

"Things Fall Apart," Peter answered as he reclined in his seat. “Final answer.”

Michelle glanced down at her card. It was the correct answer. “Lucky guess,” she scowled. "Oh—I don't know about that. He's a smart ass.”

The new voice shocked everyone, causing them to jump a little in their seats. Only Peter didn’t react strongly to the surprise visitor. It appeared he recognized that voice as he snapped his neck in the direction of the library doors. Michelle looked to the doors as well, spotting a rather hefty guy with short, brown, wavy hair, and a square jaw that didn’t form a smile at all.

Peter, however, burst into a smile. "Happy!"

He flipped over his chair with great flexibility that gymnasts envied, and rushed at the guy. He
collided into the big man, crushing him in a hug. Michelle studied the man’s face again. There was some familiarity there, but she couldn’t quite pin why she recognized him. Or where.

The guy tottered backwards a bit from the force. "Jesus, kid! What are you trying to do? Knock me down?” he said and he clapped the back of Peter's back to signal the hug was over. "You look good? Got a bit of a tan there."

"Where were you? You weren’t at the airport," asked Peter.

“You missed me that much, huh?” the guy—Happy, Michelle presumed—joked before he got serious. "I have other duties to attend to besides you now. I've moved up the ladder."

“Then what are you doing here?”

Happy deflated a bit. "Well, to pick you up and take you back to the compound," he answered, "but I volunteered. I wasn't told to do it."

“Hiya Happy!” Ned called, waving his hand at the guy with a stupid grin on his face.

Happy’s eyes fell into slits. “Who’s that guy?” he pointed to Ned’s direction while speaking to Peter.


“The ‘Guy-in-the-Chair’,” Ned tried to clarify, but it only left Happy even more puzzled. “I talked to you on the phone once."

“Yeah, er… okay, whatever… hey,” Happy said, which dispirited Ned a little on the dismissal. But Happy’s ultimate focus was on Peter. “So—you ready?”

Michelle scooted away from the table, watching the interaction with cold ice floating in her stomach. She remembered. He was the chauffer. The guy who picked Peter up from the school a few times for the fake Stark internship program. He worked for Tony Stark. That meant Happy was here to take Peter away again.

Michelle wasn’t the only person sad about the prospect of leaving. “Do we have to leave now?” Peter whined. “It’s still early. And we’re almost done.”

“I know you want to hang out with your friends,” Happy acknowledged their table. “But, kid, you have places to be. And the school is about to open soon enough and Tony doesn’t want you here when everyone starts coming in.”

“Ten minutes."

“One minute."

“Five minutes."

“Thirty seconds.”

Peter huffed. “Fine. Let me grab my stuff,” he said, walking back to the table.

“What stuff?” Happy called out to him.

Peter paused. His eyes flickered back to the empty seat. “Oh. Right,” he muttered. “Then let me say goodbye.”
The big guy exaggeratedly threw his arms up, but gave a head nod as permission. Peter returned to the table. “I gotta go, guys,” he said to everyone. “It was… really good to see everyone. You have no idea how much I missed this. So, um, thanks for letting me join in at practice. I’ll be rooting for you at the meet next weekend.”

Ned stood up and gave his friend a hug. "Will I see you later?" Ned asked.

“Um, yeah, not tonight though," Peter said to Ned. "Got a lot going on, but I will definitely text you. Promise!”

Peter stuck out his hand and Michelle knew what was going to happen next. Ned laughed and responded to Peter’s initiation. They performed their not-so-secret handshake as if their separation never occurred at all.

He looked back at everyone on the team. “Sorry to leave like this again,” he apologized again. “It was great to see you guys and that everyone is well,” he said, looking at Mr. Harrington as he spoke. Peter looked across the table. “It was really nice to meet you, Harry.”

Harry returned the polite platitude. “Nice to meet you too.”

Peter then turned to Michelle. Her heart thumped hard against her chest as her stomach clenched in anticipation of what he was about to say. Peter breathed out. “You’re doing a great job, MJ. I have no doubt you guys will win Nationals again this year.”

It was a comment that threw Michelle off. She didn’t know why she expected a different response. After all, she and Peter weren’t great friends outside of school, or even outside the decathlon team. Then, he was gone for an entire school year, so they never got that chance to buddy up their friendship like the way she did with Ned. So, she shouldn’t be surprised nor hurt that he only spoke about decathlon.

So, she responded in her typical, moody self as before he vanished. She raised her middle finger.

Rather than look rejected, Peter only laughed. “Thanks, MJ,” he said and giving out final goodbye one more time before heading out of the library with the guy called Happy.

When the library door closed behind them, everyone chatted all at once. Mostly to Ned. They all wanted to know when Peter returned home and how long Ned knew Peter was in town. Ned did his best of fend himself off the questions, answering as truthfully as possible without betraying Peter’s trust.

Michelle didn’t bother asking Ned anything. She still looked at the door, somewhat hoping that Peter would come back through.

“What does he call you MJ?”

Harry’s question interrupted her dreams. “What?”

“Peter,” Harry said again as everyone remained focus on Ned. Only he focused on her. “He called you MJ. I never heard anyone call you that.”

The question threw Michelle off for a moment, baffled why Harry would be concerned over a nickname. “Oh, it’s a nickname that I have. Only my friends call me that.”

“But… no one calls you that,” Harry pointed out. “Not even Ned.”
“Yeah,” Michelle murmured, not sure how to explain it. “I guess not everyone picked up on it except Peter.”

Harry nodded. “So, um, does that mean I can call you MJ?”

“Does that mean you would stop calling me Princess?”

Harry’s wicked smile returned. “Can’t say that I will, Princess MJ.”

Michelle bristled as Harry winked at her. “Oh, shut up,” she grumbled, piling her flash cards together again. She looked back to her chattering clan of academic athletes. “Okay—everyone focus! We have less than fifteen minutes to finish up. We can do better, okay? Parker was gone for an entire school year and still whipped our asses (“Language, Miss Jones,” warned Mr. Harrington). So, let’s get busy.”

“But that’s Peter,” Abe claimed. “He was always the smartest. He could miss another year and still get every answer correct.”

Abe was probably right, but Michelle wasn’t going to let that be an excuse. “Doesn’t matter. He just proved to us that we need to work harder,” she said. “Now… let’s go back to literary because I don’t think it’s our best subject.”

As Michelle read another question out-loud, Flash’s voice erupted in agony. “Oh shit!” he smacked his forehead dramatically before looking at all of them. “Did any of you guys get a picture of Parker?”

A ruffled murmured went around the table as everyone turned to one another to ask the same question. Funny enough, no one took a single picture of Peter since he walked through the library doors. It turned out they all forgot to get a snap of the famous celebrity. All too busy to engage in their friend that they had completely forgotten he was Spider-man.

And for that, Michelle couldn’t help the smile on her face. “Let’s get back to practice,” she said, turning to Cindy for her first round of questioning. “What was the original title for Fahrenheit 451?”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading A HERO’S PERSPECTIVE. This is the conclusion of the second part of the series. The next (and final) installment will come in a week’s time. Please keep a look out for the third story of the series titled, A HERO’S RETURN. The third installment will include more viewpoints from favorites (Tony, Captain America, Everett Ross) and newcomers (Happy, Shuri and Harry).

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