# Tipping The Scale

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating:</th>
<th>Explicit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Archive Warning:</td>
<td>Choose Not To Use Archive Warnings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category:</td>
<td>M/M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fandom:</td>
<td>Spider-Man: Homecoming (2017), Spider-Man - All Media Types, Iron Man (Movies), Marvel Cinematic Universe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship:</td>
<td>Peter Parker/Tony Stark, James &quot;Bucky&quot; Barnes/Steve Rogers, Peter Parker/Other(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character:</td>
<td>Peter Parker, Tony Stark, James &quot;Bucky&quot; Barnes, Steve Rogers, James &quot;Rhodey&quot; Rhodes, Pepper Potts, May Parker (Spider-Man), Ben Parker, Brock Rumlow, Adrian Toomes, Jarvis (Iron Man movies)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Tags:</td>
<td>Alternate Universe - No Powers, Alternate Universe - Restaurant, Prostitution, Tony Stark Has A Heart, Peter Parker Needs a Hug, Angst, Hurt/Comfort, Eventual Happy Ending, Dark, Falling In Love, Explicit Sexual Content, College Student Peter, the one where Rumlow runs an upscale vegan restaurant because my Muse is weird</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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## Tipping The Scale

by [JayPendragon](http://archiveofourown.org)

### Summary

Peter has a rhythm. A system. All runs like a well-oiled machine, engineering pun intended.

He trades sleep for caffeine probably more often than is strictly healthy but he's doing well enough at Columbia to keep his scholarship, which is what counts.

Come summer, Peter can take on more shifts at the restaurant and do some additional private events for Rumlow for extra cash. May and Ben think it's all from tips, which is exactly what Peter needs them to believe.

Every wheel of his life is churning perfectly.

He doesn’t expect Tony Stark of all people to throw a wrench in it.

~*~

... aka the angsty hooker fic no one asked for.

Warnings for dark themes, consent issues inherent to the hooker fic genre (not between main pairing), and somewhat longer gaps between updates (due to real life and mental health reasons).
Additional warnings in respective chapter notes if applicable.

- Inspired by Bon Appétit by romanticalgirl
Chapter Notes

This story is the product of a rather severe bout of depression coupled with reading a Gallavich fic and wondering how awesome a dark Starker hooker fic AU would be… Add a dash of merlenhiver being the best cheerleader and beta on the planet and here I am, seven chapters in and ready to share this with you!

If you’re unsure whether or not this might be for you, do me a favour: reserve judgment until after chapter 2, okay?

Updates every Tuesday as my schedule, Muse, and mental health permit.

About the Hybrid Puppy Verse: part II and III are in the works and will be finished once my headspace is more fluffy =)

Heed the warnings… and I hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Welcome to No Bones,” Peter says, giving the first-time patrons his best smile. “My name is Peter and I have the pleasure of serving you today.”

The four guests – wealthy tourists from out-of-state, he thinks – all give curt nods.

Okay, that won’t do.

“As a sign of our hospitality,” Peter continues, handing out menus, “would you like a glass of Dom Perignon while you consider?”

Now he has everyone’s attention.

“Oh yes, how wonderful,” says the apparent leader of the group, a voluptuous lady in her 50s with what Peter has learned to recognize as a $75,000 Hermes bag casually slung over her chair.

“These are exquisite,” the man across from her says, eyes on the small booklets that house the No Bones’ food options.

“Our menus are hand-bound in bamboo and hemp jackets,” Peter explains. “You can find information on the artist behind the design inside. If you have any other questions, please don’t hesitate to ask.”

He’s dismissed with another nod, friendlier this time, and Peter breathes a sigh of relief as he winds his way through the tables towards the bar.

Every single one of them is either taken or reserved – status quo since the No Bones received a gushing review in The New York Times.

The restaurant is exclusively vegan, branding itself as sustainable and eco-friendly, and draws an eclectic crowd of corporate types on business dinners, wealthy environmentalists and curious tourists.
who want to be able to post pictures of the restaurant’s pine wood tableware on Instagram.

Peter is thrilled they’re constantly booked-out; more guests means a higher chance of tips, and over the course of the past two years Peter has figured out what he needs to do to maximize his income.

Inside the restaurant, and beyond.

“Business or pleasure?”

It takes Peter a moment to make sense of Bucky’s question. The bartender is pouring champagne without looking, waiting for his response.

“Uh, pleasure, I think? Their accent’s sort of West Coast.”

Bucky grins at him. “Then be sure to talk up my specials, alright? They don’t wanna miss out on vegan Prohibition era drinks.”

Peter promises to do so, then takes the champagne to what’s so far only his second table. He answers all their questions and eventually takes their orders.

On the way back to the kitchen, he stops by table five to clear their entrée plates. The elderly couple comes here quite often, even though the husband can’t stop complaining about the lack of meat.

“One meal is fine, but I truly couldn’t go an entire day like this. I don’t know how you do it, Helen. Me, I need a bit of flesh between my teeth.”

The wife laughs, like always.

And like always, Peter makes sure to lean in a little closer when he picks up the man’s plate. He smiles at Helen even as he feels her husband’s hand slide up the back of his thigh.

Once he’s back in the kitchen, he gives table two’s orders to the line cooks, alerting their pastry chef Steve to the nut allergy and ensuring he relates all special wishes.

“Parker!”

Thankfully the next course for table five is still being plated, otherwise his startling might have messed up the arrangement.

“Yes, Chef?” he says.

Brock Rumlow looks more like he just stepped off a prison bus than a star cook, but according to MJ that’s part of what made him famous. He refused to cover up his tattoos and scars when he was on Top Chef, and while he’s written books about gourmet vegan food on a budget he never answers questions about how he got the money to start No Bones.

A cut-throat business man with a heart for the environment is a strange combination and Peter still hasn’t completely figured him out.

Rumlow grabs Peter’s shoulder and steers him into the doorway to his office. Everyone will think it’s so they’re out of the way, but Peter knows his boss wouldn’t want anyone to overhear this.

“Adrian is bringing a prospective business partner,” Rumlow whispers. “He requested you explicitly. Their table is your first priority tonight, understood?”

“Yes, sir.”
“Yuri Kirilenko. He’s in town for two nights,” Rumlow adds, his tone clear.

Peter holds his gaze and nods. Rumlow smiles, pats his cheek, and returns to check on his line cooks and sous chef.

*

Adrian Toomes and his guests arrive just as Peter is advising the tourists (definitely tourists, in town to see Hamilton and do some shopping, they explained) on dessert.

“Our pastry chef is Steve Rogers, you might have heard about his legendary pop-up cupcake shop Stars and Stripes. With us, he’s taking vegan pastries to a new level. I can literally recommend every single option,” Peter explains, trying to rein in his excited gesturing.

Half of it is because Steve’s creations truly warrant it… Peter blames the other half on the adrenaline coursing through his veins.

You’d think that, after two years, the nerves would fade yet he’s had his share of bad experiences so that every time fills him with nervous anticipation.

“I think we need another moment,” Hermes Lady says.

Peter slides away, picks up three menus, and swoops in a few moments after their Maître has pulled out the chair for Doris, Toomes’s wife and CFO of his billion-dollar recycling company.

“Ah, Peter, quick as ever,” Toomes says.

He’s wearing his best suit, Doris has donned Channel. That alone would have told Peter that this is serious, even if he hadn’t noticed that Mr. Kirilenko’s suit is in another league entirely. Peter even spots a Patek Phillip watch on his wrist.

And if anyone had told him back when he took his first waitressing job at a seedy diner in Queens that six years later he’s be able to tell if someone is wealthy or just rich off a single look, Peter would have thrown their Lego Death Star at them.

“Welcome back, Mr. and Mrs. Toomes,” Peter says, then introduces himself to Mr. Kirilenko.

“This is the server I told you about, Yuri,” Toomes explains. “He truly goes above and beyond for his guests.”

“Is that so?” Mr. Kirilenko arches an eyebrow.

He has a British accent and a deep voice with a rough edge to it, maybe from smoking. He’s not bad-looking, per se, but he’s not attractive either. He wears his age well, though, and appears quite fit underneath his clothes.

“Oh, yes,” Doris agrees, her tone heavy with innuendo.

Peter feels himself blush under their gazes but looks Mr. Kirilenko straight in the eye as he gives a nod. His experience tells him the man might prefer silent deference…

.. and indeed, his eyes darken before gliding down Peter's body.

Rumlow puts his all-male staff in tight, charcoal pants, white shirts and figure-hugging waistcoats with the restaurant’s logo on the chest. Peter has found that styling his hair back earns him more tips than parting it on a side or letting it fall into his face (cause it lets them imagine messing it up
themselves, one regular explained once), and he’s allowed to leave the upper two buttons undone.

Mr. Kirilenko’s gaze, however, skips right past that on the way up and lingers on Peter’s lips instead.

Oh, he can work with that.

* 

By 10:30 pm, Peter is in high spirits.

He already made $250 in tips, was able to get the tourists addicted to Bucky’s drinks and impressed the producers at table four with his knowledge of the wine list which is currently earning him another hundred bucks.

Plus, Toomes is grinning like he did back when he secured that government contract, so whatever deal he’s proposing must be developing well.

Yet when Peter delivers their bill with a complimentary shot of Grey Goose, Mr. Kirilenko surprises him by keeping his hands to himself. If it weren’t for the subtle leers and stares that have been following Peter throughout the evening, he’d be wondering if he heard his boss correctly.

As such, it’s Mr. Toomes who slips something into the breast pocket of his vest while Mr. Kirilenko helps Doris back into her summer coat.

When Peter checks, after the cleanup is done and he’s changing into street clothes along with Azim, Jordan, Cisco and Neil, he finds four folded fifty dollar bills along with a keycard.

He’s sure Rumlow demands a lot more from Toomes than two hundred bucks, though after what happened the only time he asked, he’s accepted that he has no leverage in this. At least he gets to keep every penny of any tips he’s given at the end of his time with the clients, or any additional payment, should they decide to extend Peter’s services beyond what was agreed.

“You coming with us?” Azim asks once they’re heading down the quiet side street towards the subway station.

“Uh, no, you go ahead. See ya tomorrow,” Peter calls after them.

At first he hated the icy atmosphere among the service staff. He’s heard of restaurants that feel like a family, but No Bones is not one of them. Rumlow is quick to fire anyone who underperforms, can’t keep up, or complains about his way of doing things.

He also kicks out the waiter who brings in the least revenue at the end of each quarter, which has created a pretty shitty work environment cause they’re all competing with each other.

It works in Peter’s favor on nights like these. He’s a bad liar and coming up with excuses for why he’s walking to the Mandarin Oriental after his shift instead of heading back to student housing would have ended in disaster.

Unless any of the others have similar arrangements with Rumlow… but Peter never found the courage to ask. Part of him – the one that’s in a constant state of panic about how May, Ben and he will ever pay off their debts – hopes he’s special cause it would mean job security.

Another part of him…

Well, that part doesn’t matter.
The fifteen minutes it takes to get from *No Bones* to the luxury hotel near Columbus Circle are enough to clear his mind and get himself into the right headspace for whatever awaits him inside the suite.

Rumlow noticed Peter’s effect on a certain segment of his clientele within the first month of hiring him. Two months later, Peter had regulars who repaid his attention and indulging their touches with hefty tips.

Another month after that, Peter gave his first blow job in the accessible toilet.

Today, he nods at the receptionist as he crosses the lobby, chats amicably with the bellboy on the elevator ride up to the fifty-fourth floor, and steps up to the door with much less trepidation than he would have a year ago.

He lets himself in. Hangs his jacket into the wardrobe. Takes off his shoes.

He leaves his backpack outside since he never knows if he’ll need his own supplies. Usually these kinds of hotels are willing to cater to every whim of their guests, and most men are considerate enough to plan ahead.

Most, but not all.

That’s a lesson he’ll never forget.

He finds Mr. Kirilenko in the living room, standing at one of the floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the Hudson River with a tumbler in his hand.

Peter spots the man’s jacket on one of the sofas and wonders if he should say something – but if the time at the restaurant was any indication, Mr. Kirilenko isn’t interested in conversation.

So he waits.

When Mr. Kirilenko turns, he’s clearly amused by Peter’s fidgeting.

Peter bites down his apology and averts his gaze, only to look up again at the sound of a glass hitting a table.

Mr. Kirilenko is standing over a selection of expensive liquor, considering him. Probably weighing politeness against how much he wants Peter’s mouth on his cock.

Politeness wins.

“Have you ever had Yamazaki?” he asks, already pouring a second glass. “Matured in rare mizunara Japanese oak for at least eighteen years. Here, taste it.”

Peter obeys, doing his best to make it a show. At first he felt weird in his attempts to lasciviously do *anything*, really, but by now he knows to look up to other men through his lashes as he takes a slow sip, knows how to gather up spare drops with his tongue, knows how to fake relishing the taste of whatever expensive nonsense they offer him.

“Incredible, isn’t it?”

Mr. Kirilenko is suddenly right in front of Peter, his voice more like a breath. Peter nods and sets down the glass, letting his hand rest on the side table. In this position, the twist of his spine will stretch his shirt across his chest and stomach as well as tease how great his ass looks in the snug
cotton pants.

The first time he did this, he had gone to work in jeans and a zip hoodie and suffered a great deal of mortification on his way to the hotel bar where some entrepreneur was waiting for him. Luckily, the guy had laughed and handed Peter a thousand bucks with the order to go shopping.

It’s easier this way – Peter never wears his fancy clothes to class or when he’s visiting Ben with May. They’re just a different kind of uniform.

A uniform that Mr. Kirilenko appreciates, judging by the amount of attention he pays to Peter’s movements.

He lifts a hand to Peter’s cheek, fingertips ghosting over his skin and sending a shiver down his spine. He anticipates the move, so when Mr. Kirilenko brushes his thumb against Peter’s mouth, he’s ready, pressing his lips against the pad and sucking lightly.

Mr. Kirilenko’s hum is the only sign he needs before he drops to his knees. The guy’s growing erection makes lowering the pants and underwear a bit of a challenge, but Peter’s nothing if not resourceful and soon enough, he’s mouthing at the man’s slit.

“Look at me,” he orders when Peter closes his eyes. He quickly opens them again, just as he wraps his lips around the man’s glans. “Damn, you’re gorgeous.”

It’s about control, Peter quickly realizes. Kirilenko buries both his hands in Peter’s hair to guide the rhythm, which is slower than anything he’s ever experienced. It makes him glad the man showered before this, and hope his lips won’t be too obviously bruised tomorrow.

After what feels like an eternity, Kirilenko hits the back of Peter’s throat… and stays there. A moment of panic, then Peter’s brain reroutes his breathing through his nose, but his eyes are watering anyway.

With a groan, the other man pulls out and waves at Peter to get to his feet.

“I’m gonna finish my drink. Do what you need in the bathroom, then wait for me on the bed.”

“Yes, sir.”

It was the right response since Kirilenko makes a noise in the back of his throat. He doesn’t stop Peter, though, when he rounds the corner to the only other door in the room and finds the bathroom to his left.

Peter cleans up, stretches himself with generous amounts of lube and relaxes slightly when he spots a few condoms on the nightstand.

He arranges himself on his stomach so he can both enjoy the view from the fifty-fourth floor over Manhattan at night and spot Kirilenko the moment he enters, yet the guy takes his time.

At least he didn’t blindfold Peter before he went off to answer some more emails. He’s nervous enough as it is.

Three minutes later, the sound of footsteps heralds Kirilenko’s arrival. Peter gets on his knees on the mattress, glad his erection hasn’t disappeared completely. While the men he’s with rarely care when or how he finds his own release, they do want to think that he’s getting off on it.

Not Kirilenko, though. He doesn’t spare Peter’s cock a single glance, merely stops at the edge of the
bed so that Peter can undress him.

As he assumed, the man keeps in shape. There’s some greying hair on his chest and his paunch is modest. Peter could do worse, for sure.

Kirilenko runs a hand down Peter’s back and slips a finger between his cheeks, feeling his hole.

“Hm, good boy,” he murmurs, and slips the lube-slicked fingertip into Peter’s mouth. “Do you want to ride me?”

It’s not really a question but Peter treats it as such. He nods eagerly, eyes open and meeting Kirilenko’s dark gaze. The man gets on the bed and lies down in the middle, removing a condom from the nightstand and tossing it between his splayed legs.

Peter fumbles a bit, he always does, but as soon as he’s got the condom out of the foil he’s on safe shores again. He even taught himself (eventually) how to put it on with his mouth, which never fails to impress.

Based on the leisurely pace the man set during the blow job, Peter takes his time with this, too, rubbing the tip of Kirilenko’s cock against his entrance for a moment before lowering himself onto it. Kirilenko seems content to watch him at first, letting Peter adjust and loosen up, lift his hips and bear down again… though that all ends once he bottoms out.

Kirilenko doesn’t want Peter to ride him as much as he wants Peter to work his cock for him, taking all the pleasure he can get no matter how strenuous the position is for Peter. Strong hands hold Peter in place as Kirilenko pushes up in tiny increments, then keep him hovering a bit over his groin as he thrusts up with enough force to jostle Peter’s entire body.

The more Peter lets the strain show, the more aroused Kirilenko seems to become. He runs his hands over Peter’s chest and abs greedily, covering them as they twitch and tense, then does the same thing to his back when he sits up abruptly and presses Peter firmly against his front.

He’s gasping with every thrust, clutching Kirilenko’s shoulders and struggling to keep his eyes open cause every time he closes them there’s a hand pulling his hair, until finally, the other man stills, buried deep inside him.

The kiss takes him by surprise but he goes with it – not that he’d have the energy to do anything else.

“Do you want to stay the night?” Kirilenko murmurs between kisses. “Or do you work in the morning?”

“Not until one.”

The other man pulls back and smiles. “Perfect. You can shower first.”

* 

Given his schedule, sleep is precious to Peter and he’s taught himself to find rest no matter what the circumstances.

Even if it’s with an older man’s fingers lazily fondling his genitals as they drift off.

Waking up, on the other hand, is more difficult. At his room at the student residence, he has three alarms to make sure he gets to classes on time.
Someone sliding a finger inside him turns out to be even more effective.

“Shh, relax, Peter,” Kirilenko whispers, stroking Peter’s back with his free hand. “It’s just me.”

Peter wills his body into submission. The pain makes him hiss regardless.

When Kirilenko pushes in, he knows he’s going to be sore all day, but at least this time Kirilenko sets a quicker pace. He isn’t holding himself up, though; all his weight rests on Peter who’s starting to feel a bit too confined by the body pressing him into the mattress.

Kirilenko pulls out soon enough that Peter doesn’t actually panic yet he has to blink a few times before turning around to school his expression. Kirilenko licks a path up his body, ending with a kiss.

“I want to come in your mouth,” he says, then maneuvers them until he’s leaning against the headboard and Peter’s lying between his legs.

The fact that Peter’s brain isn’t fully online somehow makes this easier. He doesn’t think, just loses himself in the rhythm his partner sets, relaxes his throat as needed and barely closes his eyes.

Kirilenko comes down his throat with a curse and pulls Peter onto his chest afterwards. Peter traces formulas against the man’s skin until Kirilenko stretches, decides they need a shower and room service, calls to order the former and tugs Peter along for the latter.

Peter hates being fed like nothing else in the world but he indulges the man.

He also really wants to leave since the time he has for his course work is dwindling with every passing minute, yet he senses that speaking up would cost him in tips, which would make the entire night redundant.

When Kirilenko finally tells him to get dressed since he has a meeting to attend, Peter doesn’t hesitate. He remembers the key card and holds it out, but Kirilenko closes his palm around the plastic.

“I’m here for another night. Will you join me after your shift?”

Peter is glad Rumlow already told him, otherwise he wouldn’t be able to smile as convincingly as he does.

“I’d like that.”

“Good. There’s some cab money on the dresser for you. I’ll see you tonight.”

Peter doesn’t count it until he’s back in his dorm thirty minutes later.

His roommate is some soccer prodigy, and between his training schedule and Peter taking every shift he can legally get, they barely see each other.

One thousand bucks.

Peter collapses on his bed and stares at the ceiling.

With last night’s tips, he made $1,550 in one night, on top of the $80 he gets for the shift from the restaurant.

He’ll be able to give $300 or so to May tomorrow to help with her expenses, and will split the rest
between his own account and the savings account he opened when Rumlow started sending him out to meet guests in hotels.

It’s not enough to settle their legal bills, not nearly enough… but it’s the best Peter can do.

*

“Partying or studying?”

Peter blinks at May, who’s smirking before she turns her attention back to the road.

“You look dead on your feet, sweetie. You could have said, I can go alone, you know.”

He’d rather miss essay deadlines than their weekly trip, but his aunt wouldn’t be happy to hear that.

“Uh, just, my shift ran long, and, um… I had some reading to catch up on for aerodynamics.”

“Maybe you should reduce your hours at the restaurant, sweetie, have you thought about that? We’ll be fine.”

“No, no, it’s okay, I promise – just got my time management mixed up this week, is all.”

Or rather, Kirilenko had wanted to celebrate the deal he reached, and Peter barely had time to change before meeting May for their trip to the correctional facility. It’s an hour each way, leaving maybe half an hour of actual time to spend with Ben depending on how quickly they’re called into the visiting room.

Today, fortunately, they’re allowed to go in right away.

They spot Ben about two-thirds down the counter that winds around the room and immediately see why he was so cagey on the phone, as May said – he has a split lip and a black eye.

“Who did this?” May hisses instead of a greeting.

“Wonderful day to you, too, my love. Hey, slugger.”

“Hi Ben,” Peter replies, tugging at his aunt’s sleeve to make her sit down cause the Correctional Officer at the head of the room is eying them.

“What happened?”

“It’s nothing, love. Heck, Peter here’s looking worse than I am.”

That’s a bit of an exaggeration but it’s clear Ben doesn’t want to talk about this, so Peter distracts his guardians with the latest crazy MIT story Ned told him about and how MJ is trying to rope him into joining Krav Maga at the university’s fitness center.

“But it’s Thursdays during my shift, so…” Peter trails off. He’d love to see MJ more often than the brief three times a week for their morning workout dates, but their schedules simply don’t allow for more.

Ben doesn’t suggest he reduce his hours, for which Peter is incredibly grateful. It took his uncle long enough to accept Peter’s help with bills and stuff, and he’s very aware that Peter is just as stubborn as Ben himself.

Otherwise, they wouldn’t be filing an appeal on State level.
Otherwise, they’d have rolled over and accepted that Ben was wrongly convicted for a murder he didn’t commit.

Otherwise, they wouldn’t have hunted down the best lawyer they could and be drowning in legal fees because of it.

Otherwise, Peter wouldn’t …

Well, that’s moot now. It’s not about Peter, it’s about saving Ben.

And Peter won’t let anything stop him.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading :)

Chapter 2 will follow Tuesday, April 17.
two

Chapter Notes

GUYS... just woah. I wasn’t sure if there’s a readership in the Starker fandom for angsty hooker fic but your reaction has blown me away! So glad you’re giving this a chance, folks, and I hope chapter 2 will show it’s warranted.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony makes a disgusted sound around the wrench between his teeth before removing it, yet all Pepper does is give him a flat look. Meaning…

“Oh, you’re serious.”

“As a heart attack.”

“Ha, situational metaphors, nice,” Tony grins.

They are, after all, in the StarkMedical lab where Pepper tracked him down after he ignored all of her calls cause seriously, perfecting the next generation of Stark Industries MRIs is way more important than boring business dinners.

Business dinners held at an all-vegan restaurant to boot.

“It’s a great place –”

“You said that about that molecular dive thingy, too,” Tony points out before snorting at the memory. “Gawd, I’m so glad that craze is over. How long d’you think we have to keep matcha on the menu in the cafeteria until everyone figures out that it’s basically just overpriced green tea and moves on to something else?”

“You’ll like it. I took my father there for brunch last month and it was delicious, so you can stomach one dinner for a good cause.”

“You mean earning me an obscene consultancy fee for being the amazing genius that I am?”

Pepper nods. “It’s for the Munroe Group; they’re an eco-friendly upcycling company. Their chief engineer was poached two weeks ago, right after they discovered extensive problems in their manufacturing processes. They’re desperate.”

“And…”

“And they think Toomes wants to force them into selling to him. He’s been snatching up a number of start-ups in the niche, now he’s aiming for the big girls.”

Tony tosses the wrench into his tool box with a clang. “Argh, that fucking vulture –”

“Stop calling him that.”

“It’s an apt nickname.”
“I agree, but our PR department has better things to do than clean up your mess if you insult popular CEOs on live television again.”

Point for Pepper.

“Now, can I confirm Thursday evening for the Munroes?”

“Yeah, sure.”

Tony even remembers the appointment.

Okay, JARVIS does, which basically counts as Tony remembering since he built the AI and no one except a handful of people know he exists… So yeah, Tony totally claims credit for stepping out of the limo on West 72nd Street on the Upper West Side on Thursday to brave the temple to kale and broccoli.

The things he does for this world, honestly. But he can’t split himself into even more pieces; Stark Industries is already pioneering medical equipment, revolutionizing the transportation industry, personal computing and the Internet Of Things, plus Tony has a standing reservation at the Capitol Hill Hotel cause he’s called to testify before Congress so often. And no, he won’t change his mind, no government is gonna get his users’ data. He’s making enough profit from his products; no need to turn his customers into one.

Tony waltzes into No Bones fashionably late, is positively surprised when the Maître doesn’t flounder his way through receiving him and leads him to the correct table without missing a beat.

Tony himself doesn’t do reservations anymore. By now he’s famous enough, especially in Manhattan, that any child would recognize him and offer him their zippy cup.

The joint is spacious but not cramped, artfully decorated, everyone’s in yummy uniforms – all-male staff, huh, not very progressive – and oh Jesus, what a bar.

Hopefully the barkeeper knows what he’s doing, though the messy man bun he’s wearing doesn’t inspire confidence.

The Maître guides him past a partition holding some paintings or prints or whatever to one of the more secluded tables. It grants a great view of the bar and the double doors to what’s probably the kitchen on its left, and Tony would bet his newest Ferrari that the CEOs of the Munroe Group name-dropped him when they made the reservations.

“Mr. Stark, thank you so much for meeting with us,” says one of two women rising to greet him. “I’m Linda Munroe, and this is my business partner, Anne.”

“I’m also her twin sister,” Anne adds with a nervous chuckle.

Tony kisses both their hands before sitting down on the chair the Maître pulled out for him. “Intriguing place.”

“Very ecological,” Anne assures him. “The owner’s so inspiring; he really loves the planet.”

Tony almost calls bullshit, but the arrival of their waiter stops him.

“Hello, Miss and Mrs. Munroe, welcome back,” the kid greets the women with a smile that seems
genuine, though the real test of how good he is at the job will start in three, two, one…

The young man’s eyes widen as they fall on Tony, but he manages to stifle whatever sound or exclamation that obviously was at the tip of his tongue before it devolves into actual stammering.

The result is still endearing, though.

“M-Mr. Stark, wow – uh, I mean.” He takes a deep breath. “My apologies, sir –”

“Don’t worry, kid,” Tony interrupts with a grin, “I get that a lot.”

The kid opens his mouth but stops himself at the last second, and instead welcomes Tony to No Bones. “My name is Peter and I have the pleasure of being your server today.”

“A pleasure alright,” Tony mutters, cause hell yeah, the kid is a dish unto himself. A bit young maybe, but tall, lean and blushing adorably while distributing the menus.

“Our barkeeper has refined the Super Green Smoothie you enjoyed last time, Miss Munroe,” Peter says, “if you’d like to try it. For you, madam,” he directs at Linda, “I can recommend the Berrylicious. We only added it this week.”

Huh, someone’s really good at his job. Tony usually bases his tips on how staff treat other people cause they’re always on their a-game with him.

“What may I get you, sir, while you discover our menu?”

Tony grins up at him. “Something not green. And with more spirit.”

“Right away, sir.”

Tony tracks the kid’s path around other guests, notes how his eyes dart from table to table, and watches out of the corner of his eye how he confers with the barkeeper while the Munroe sisters engage him in the usual small talk.

Peter checks in with the guests at two other tables, his smile just as sincere every time, expertly carries a few empty plates towards the double doors and returns in time for the ladies’ drinks to be placed on the counter of the bar.

If Tony hadn’t been paying attention, he wouldn’t have noticed him delivering the drinks cause both sisters are too focused on proving to him that their business is worth taking on as a client and Peter apparently knows when to be invisible.

So Tony makes sure to pause the conversation when the kid approaches with his little tray.

“Well, it’s orange, that’s a good start.”

Peter presents the drink before setting it down. “It’s a variation of the Gimlet, inspired by a German recipe but adapted to accommodate the gin we used.”

Tony takes a sip and yup, they chose Monkey 47. Meaning they either googled his favorite brand – unlikely, neither the barkeeper nor Peter went for their phones, as far as Tony saw – or someone at the restaurant found out beforehand and ensured to stock it.

Either way, Tony appreciates the effort. “Keep ’em coming, kid.”

Peter grins and takes their orders.
Five courses, three glasses of wine and two more special Gimlets later, the Munroes finally ask for the bill.

The ramifications of Tony’s contract had been ironed out before the soup arrived and he learned everything he can without physically visiting the company’s factories by dessert, so the last hour has been an exercise in self-control.

Sure, the ladies are nice enough, but Tony hates wasting time on idle chit-chat when he could be doing something meaningful. The only reason he didn’t conjure up a reason to bolt right after the last plates had been cleared is the person who did the clearing.

Over the course of the evening, Tony has discovered Peter treats everyone with the same level of attention and charm and has a knack for reading people. He kept his distance from a young couple out on their first date, advised a group of Japanese tourists on the best places to get authentic New York pizza, and stoically suffered through one asshole’s indecision regarding his wine choices, all while never once losing his nerve.

The Munroes settle the bill, adding a decent tip and promising to return.

“We’re looking forward to it,” Peter says. “I’ll fetch your coats. Should I also call for a cab?”

Anne turns to Tony. “Would you like to share?”

He waves her off. “I’m staying. I wanna quiz the barkeeper about what’s in that drink.”

The guy, Bucky – and what sort of a name is that? – refuses to outright tell him, meaning Tony orders another one so he can watch with much complaining. Both of them know he doesn’t mean a word of it, though.

“Just to be clear, you’re gonna name this one after me, right?”

“Who said we’ll put it on the menu?”

“Your boss, when he personally brought the main course.”

That guy also has the sensitivity of a fish knife and thought the thing that’s missing from Tony Stark’s life is knowing precisely where each of the ingredients in his vegetable casserole came from. Not that he called it a casserole, but you get the gist.

“Touché,” Bucky says. “You want another one?”

Tony shakes his head and pulls out his wallet.

“None of that, sir. Compliments of the house.”

“Then let me at least tip you. You guys got a shared pool?”

Which would mean whatever Tony gives him would be thrown into the same pot as everyone else’s, and Tony refuses to reward people he didn’t see in action.

Yet Bucky says, “Nope,” popping the ‘p’, and adding with a wink, “And my boyfriend’s the guy who made the dessert you liked so much.”

“Who says I liked it?”
Bucky gives him a veritable ‘bitch, please’ look that’s so refreshing Tony has to laugh. It’s also true, cause that pineapple and coconut layer cake under a chocolate dome was both pretty and delicious.

“Then be sure to share this with him,” Tony says, handing Bucky a hundred dollar bill. “Oh, and pass this one on to Peter, will ya? He did a really good job.”

Bucky accepts the fifty with a nod.

“Now, where’s the men’s room?”

Tony only has to round the corner of the bar for the door, then pass by an elevator and head downstairs where he takes Bucky’s advice and goes for the accessible toilet since it doesn’t hold the same risk of having to engage with other dinner guests.

He’s drying off his hands at the sink when he hears someone entering the code into the keypad. He figures the mechanism will tell whoever’s outside that it’s occupied, yet that’s not what happens.

The door opens and in comes… Peter the waiter, wearing a nervous smile.

“Yes…?” Tony prompts, cause for some reason Peter’s looking at him expectantly.

The moment Tony’s confusion registers, however, the kid goes pale.

“Um, sorry, sir, uh, I… I thought… Bucky said he gave you the code for – I mean, obviously he did, or you wouldn’t be here, but…”

“Hang on…” Even a mind as fast as Tony’s needs a couple of seconds to piece together what Peter’s trying to say. “You thought my tip was, what?”

“Nothing, sir, I apologize and I’ll leave you to, um, finish,” Peter stammers, gesturing towards the towel in Tony’s hand.

“No, no, wait a moment.” He drops the towel into the provided miniature hamper and leans his hip against the sink. “You thought I was signaling you I’d be up for a quickie in the men’s room?”

Seriously, the way that kid blushes is delicious.

“Well, uh… Kind of?” Peter finally admits. “I-I’m sorry I misunderstood, sir, really, I’m usually better at these things –”

Oh…?

“– but I guess I’m not immune to wishful thinking and, um, please don’t tell my boss.”

“Well, right now I’m still stuck on the ‘wishful thinking’ part, so no worries there, kid.”

Peter’s eyes widen when Tony’s words register, lips parted in a surprised ‘oh’ that’s pretty enticing. It’s not every day Tony’s so tempted, and making up his mind takes all of two-point-three seconds.

Seriously, like Tony would pass up on some instant gratification? Not a chance.

Two steps are all that’s necessary to close the distance between them and since they’re almost of equal height, capturing Peter’s lips with his is no challenge at all.

He’s a great kisser, eager and enthusiastic but able to pace himself despite his obvious excitement. Tony feels the physical proof when he presses Peter against the door, rubbing their groins together,
and quickly changes his plan of attack.

He hasn’t done hand jobs in restroom for at least five years and he’s not sure what makes him go for Peter’s belt, only that he doesn’t want to stop kissing him long enough to start anything else.

When his fingers wriggle their way into Peter’s underwear and close around the shaft, the kid gives a full-body shiver.

Tony chuckles against his lips. “Guess I shoulda used the hot water, huh.”

“No, sir, it’s fine,” Peter gasps.

“Kidding. And hey, I’m jacking you off, you should call me Tony.”

Peter’s nod is lost in a stifled moan as Tony tightens his grip. His range of motion’s pretty limited and he’d love to see, cause if Peter’s cock is only half as hot as he is then he wants to commit it to memory.

On top of that, his own is getting harder to ignore.

So Tony kills two birds with one stone and maneuvers them towards the sink where he spotted some skin lotion, then lowers both their pants enough to expose their erections.

A fistful of lotion to ease the way and bam, Tony can get them off simultaneously and enjoy the sight that is Peter trying desperately not to shoot too soon.

No wonder people call him a genius.

Peter’s knuckles are turning white from gripping the sink and he’s having trouble keeping quiet, which only edges Tony on more. It’s frantic and dirty and so not how he expected the night to end, but Tony relishes every second of it.

He has a thing for getting his partners off before him. Peter’s proving to have a lot of self-control for a twenty-something guy, but he stands no chance against the stamina of Tony Stark. He could do this all night – hell, he’s tempted to try and draw this out, tell Peter he’s gotta wait for permission, but Tony prefers a bed for games like that.

When Peter eventually succumbs to his orgasm, it’s a thing of beauty: eyes closed, mouth open on a silent gasp, small tremors shaking his body.

Tony had enough presence of mind to catch the kid’s come before it soiled anything, and uses it to ease the way to his own release. He spills himself onto the floor shortly after, his forehead propped up on Peter’s shoulder.

“You good?” Tony asks as he straightens.

All he gets is a dazed nod that has him grin while he pulls his pants back up (and boy, if that isn’t doing wonders for his ego) and checks his reflection in the mirror.

He’s tempted to ask when the kid’s done with his shift and send a car for him so they can find out how far Peter’s body control truly goes… Yet up this close, Tony notes how tired the kid actually is – he’s no stranger to hiding dark shadows himself and knows how to spot the signs of concealer.

But hey, maybe another night… if he thinks it’s worth suffering through Pepper’s gloating that returning to a vegan restaurant is gonna earn him.
For now, Tony washes his hands while Peter tucks himself in. He’s fumbling with the zipper and biting his lips, looking positively edible, and well, Tony’s never been known for his restraint, so he steals a parting kiss.

It’s short but firm, and leaves Tony grinning.

“Enjoy the rest of your night,” he says, and exits the bathroom.

On his way out, he pauses at the side of the bar. Bucky materializes a moment later, polishing a wine glass.

“Do you happen to know Peter’s shift schedule?”

Bucky arches an eyebrow at him. “You thinking about going vegan?”

“Wouldn’t go that far, barkeep. Maybe for a couple of nights a week. Any recommendations?”

“Hm, let me think…” Damn, that guy’s poker face is almost as great as Tony’s. “I’d say Thursdays are good. Fridays, too. And the weekend, of course.”

“Brunch?”

“Nah, brunch’s overrated.”

“Thanks.”

“You can thank me next time you tip me,” Bucky says, finally dropping the straight face and smirking instead.

Chuckling, Tony leaves the No Bones, his mind already made up. Granted, he’s still not big on the food, but he won’t let that stop him from seeing Peter again.

He slips into the car Happy brought around and whips out his phone. “JARVIS, when’s my next dinner meeting?”

“Three weeks from now, sir.”

Okay, that won’t do.

“If I may make a suggestion, sir: Mr. Williams has been asking to speak to you personally for quite some time. He might be amenable to a dinner invitation.”

Bingo, Tony thinks, and lets JARVIS take care of the rest.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed this as much as Tony and I did :)

Chapter 3 awaits you on Tuesday, April 24.
Peter still can’t wrap his mind around it: he had sex with *Tony Stark*.

No, not just sex – cause what they did wasn’t sex; Peter knows sex and what happened between Tony and him was… something else entirely.

He thinks he finally gets the expression ‘five minutes in heaven’, cause that’s what it felt like. The scrape of Tony’s beard, the unexpected calluses on his hands, and *god*, the scent of him…

To think Peter was about to beat a hasty retreat when he realized the tip was just meant to be a tip and that he would have never found out what an awesome kisser Tony is if he had... Yet now that they’re both on the same page, maybe Tony will come back and hire him for real?

“If you’re smiling, you’re doing it wrong.”

With that, MJ adds another plate to each side of his barbell.

“Hey!”

She chuckles at his protest and picks up her dumbbells again.

It’s 6:30 am on Friday morning and the fitness center is pretty empty. More students manage to drag themselves in when Peter and MJ meet Mondays and Wednesdays, but apparently on Fridays, their classmates are prone to hitting snooze.

He started those ninety-minute morning workouts before his first lectures and seminars on his own, back in his very first semester when he realized what his body could do for him. Free weights aren’t as much fun as gymnastics used to be, but ever since MJ joined him – after much grousing about the demands of the theater program – it’s what gets him out of bed three times a week.

Not that MJ knows that. Or that the real reason Peter can’t do weekends is that he’s never sure if he’ll be available. Or able to walk. Better keep his head down; MJ has an attention to detail that’s daunting.

Skyping with Ned is much easier in that regard. They don’t manage to do it often, but that’s okay; Peter’s schedule doesn’t allow much time for socializing anyway.

The engineering program is tough, and classes run well into the evening. Peter stacks all those on Mondays through Wednesdays, packs as much as he can into Thursdays and Fridays before his shifts (even if it means missing out on the career fair preparation workshops every semester) and uses every
second of time in-between doing his reading, course work, experiments and lab time.

He has a rhythm. A system. It all runs like a well-oiled machine, engineering pun intended.

He trades sleep for caffeine probably more often than is strictly healthy and he’s not too great in terms of grades even though he knows he’s one of the best in the department, but it’s enough to keep his scholarship, which is what counts.

Come summer, Peter can increase his hours at No Bones and do some additional private events for Rumlow like the last few breaks.

Every wheel of his life is churning perfectly.

He doesn’t expect Tony Stark of all people to throw a wrench in it.

* 

On Saturday, Peter is five minutes late but his engineering design assignment is done, which of course Patrick doesn’t care about so Peter doesn’t explain when he takes over his tables.

Rumlow is too busy talking with guests to notice and the other second shift brunch waiter, Jake, is refilling freshly pressed orange juices in his half of the restaurant.

Weekend brunches are a huge thing at No Bones: having a showy cooking style is what got Rumlow notoriety on the Food Network in the first place and he knows how to work a crowd. Turning vegan brunches into experiences put the place on the map. What’s more, Rumlow is not above making Steve wear a skin-tight T-shirt that clings to his body while he prepares crêpes and pancakes inside the dining area if it leads to a two-month waiting list for a table.

Due to the cooking and pastry stations they only seat forty-five instead of ninety-seven, but it’s roughly the same amount of guests Peter usually serves at dinner. Too bad they’re less willing to tip.

Once the last of them clears out, the waiters have to re-arrange everything, prep the tables for dinner, then change out of their uniforms before grabbing a plate of whatever one of the line cooks conjured up for meal time.

Peter’s really hoping it’s something edible today cause he’s starving –

“Parker,” Rumlow calls from his office. “A word.”

Peter turns on his heels immediately despite the clammy feeling in his stomach. ‘A word’ has never been followed by anything enjoyable.

“Yes, sir?”

There’s no need to close the door; everyone else is in the break room downstairs. His boss rolls his chair away from the computer and motions for him to take a seat facing the desk.

In the artificial light, Peter can see every single one of his scars. The official story says it was a bottle in a bar fight. Peter isn’t sure if he believes that.

“Just heard Whitmore will be in town tomorrow, wants to have a little dinner party. His place, this time. You up for it?”

“Of course.”
Peter doesn’t even need to fake his enthusiasm. He’s only ever been allowed to serve at one of the banker’s private gatherings and sure, there are parts of the night he’d prefer not to remember – or relive – but the money made it all worth it in the end.

“Is that all?”

His boss flashes teeth. “Neil’s gonna take table three tonight.”

Peter blinks. That usually means some VIP’s publicist called to reserve a table at the last minute and whoever Rumlow chooses to serve them will have less tables so they can focus on the celebrity. But who –

“Stark Industries just called. Guess you left an impression on Thursday.”

Tony.

*

Adrenaline is such a constant presence in Peter’s life, especially during working hours, that the prospect of serving Tony again doesn’t suddenly make him drop plates or trip over his words.

He also refuses to change his behavior. Some of the others, like Neil, only go the extra mile when they see a sizeable tip in it for them or deal with someone famous. Peter, on the other hand, continues to advise the grandparents here with their three granddaughters on the best à la carte options even though he spots Tony approach table five.

He’s with another gentleman – Aylwin Williams, according to the briefing. In his 60s, grey hair, moustache, broad lapels, leaning heavily on a cane.

He’s also scowling.

Not a fan of vegan, then, Peter assumes. He’s going to have his work cut out for him.

One of the three granddaughters turns to him with an apologetic look. “I think we’ll need another moment, I’m sorry.”

“No problem. Take all the time you need,” Peter assures her, then slides off to pick up two menus and give Bucky a heads-up.

“Mr. Stark, welcome back to No Bones,” he says, then turns to Mr. Williams. “Good evening, sir. My name is Peter and I will be your server today.”

He waits for some form of reaction from the man, but none is forthcoming. At least Tony is smiling.

“You’ll be delighted to hear we have added your drink to our menu, Mr. Stark. Would you like to start your evening with a Stark Gimlet?”

“You bet I do, Peter. Hey, Al, you should have one, too. They’re really – oh, wait, are you a gin man? Something tells me you aren’t.”

“I ain’t a vegan man either, and that didn’t stop ya from taking me here.”

Tony turns to Peter with an amused twinkle in his eye. It’s almost like he’s doing this on purpose.

“We’ll take two.”
Peter’s suspicion proves correct over the course of the ordering process. Whatever Mr. Williams wants from Stark Industries (presumably a partnership with StarkMedical since Mr. Williams heads a sizeable pharmaceutical company), Tony’s going to make it difficult. Peter can’t say whether that’s rude or hilarious – but from what he knows about Big Pharma, the guy deserves to be taken down a notch.

Williams complains every step of the way, much to Tony’s amusement, yet orders pretty quickly. Right after the indecisive grandparents table, in fact, meaning Peter has two demanding tables having à la carte at the same time, with one getting chef treatment, while his other tables clear out and make way for the second wave of reservations.

Peter can’t remember the last time he’s had such a stressful shift.

Feeling Tony’s eyes on him no matter what he does and all the subtle innuendo makes it even worse, cause shit, Rumlow is going to notice and there go all of Peter’s hopes of keeping Tony’s interest in his services a secret.

Rumlow isn’t his agent or manager; he isn’t acting in any official capacity beyond Peter’s hours at No Bones. This way, neither of them has to pay taxes on their earnings and Peter is allowed to take on, uh, clients of his own. He’s just never had to actively look.

It all fell into his lap – or he into theirs, with a push from Rumlow.

And to be honest, Peter’s never really cared much before: Rumlow’s involvement guarantees job security, and many of the men return to him outside of the restaurant.

None of his experiences with them have ever been as awesome as last night with Tony, though, and if Tony’s presence here today means he’s interested in more…

Then Peter doesn’t want Rumlow’s hands all over this.

As always, however, his life doesn’t work out that way.

When Rumlow brings out the main course, a butternut squash burger with sweet potato fries and a bit of summer ratatouille salad, Peter follows with the condiment tray, a three-tier monstrosity with twelve dips that took Peter half an hour to memorize back when he started.

As expected Tony’s gaze lingers on him as he sets it down on the table and Peter looks up to see the calculating glimmer in Rumlow’s eyes.

Shit.

He knows the spiel that follows.

“I’m honored you chose to return to my establishment, Mr. Stark. We also cater select private events, all with our own staff,” Rumlow says, innuendo dripping from his words. “We pride ourselves with providing a full-service sensual experience. Here, take my card.”

Tony accepts it matter-of-factly, and he glances at Peter again right after he pockets the card.

Once Rumlow has returned to the kitchen with a spring in his step, Peter busies himself with his other tables to get his disappointment under control. Rumlow being part of it now doesn’t change how much Peter looks forward to the end of his shift... if Tony decides to make a move as soon as tonight, that is.
But when Peter almost screws up opening another bottle of wine for the granddaughters cause Tony seems fascinated by the way he works the bottle, he simply knows.

The moment comes when Peter clears their plates – empty, even Mr. Williams’ – and Tony stops him with a hand on his arm.

“I think I’m in the mood for dessert. Would you be a dear and bring us the menu again?”

“O-Of course, sir.”

Mr. Williams asks for the restroom before dessert, so Peter waves down Dan from the front to show the way. All attention in the dining area is on the grousing old man and the Maître when Peter picks up Tony’s empty tumbler to replace it with a full one.

“I’d love to see you again,” Tony says without preamble. “I’ll send a car round after closing. Unless you, I don’t know, got other plans?”

“No, no, I,” Peter blurs, remembering himself enough to whisper, “I’ll be there.”

Tony grins at him. “Can’t wait.”

*

Stark Tower stretches into the night sky above him, 77 floors topped by a terrace overlooking the helipad. The monument of patented Stark Industries materials and glass is even more impressive when you realize it’s been designed to be completely self-sustainable.

Peter is no stranger to intimidating buildings, but they’re rarely this awe-inspiring.

His steps don’t falter when he finally gets his feet to move towards the front door. He’s high from a successful evening, pockets filled with tips and praise. He’s also dead on his feet but doesn’t let himself stop to dwell on that too much.

A friendly night guard waves him along to a private elevator tucked away near the vacant reception but hard to find if you don’t know what to look for. It’s not one of the scenic elevators he’s seen on Instagram, granted, but he doubts those reach any of the private floors on top.

Or operate without him needing to press a button.

Which, okay, a bit creepy... but also awesome.

There’s a mirror inside, for which Peter is grateful. He straightens his button down shirt and checks his slacks are sitting perfectly on his hips, then opens the top three buttons before the doors open with a bright ding to...

The penthouse.

The penthouse of Stark Tower.

There’s a cozy sitting area on his right overlooking the city; plush sofas facing a giant screen, definitely custom made, to his left. Further into the room, Peter spots a large kitchen, a dining table also at the window, and a large staircase leading downstairs.

“Hey, kid.”

Tony’s voice startles him a little – turns out there’s an impressive bar installed against the wall to his
right, which Peter totally didn’t notice because of the distracting view. The shelves don’t quite reach
the ceiling and extend above the state-of-the-art fridge, and the u-shaped counter is an absolute mess.
Tony waves at him to come closer, brandishing a… a twig of some kind?

“Hi, Mr. Stark – Tony,” Peter manages.

He remembers to switch his brain-to-mouth filter on before blurting anything else but his ‘Wow’
must have shown on his face since Tony smirks.

“Wait till you see the bedroom.”

Peter’s averting his eyes already, about to toy with his open collar and biting his lip, trying to see if
his natural shyness will be the way to go tonight or if he’s got to be a bit more coy or –

“But first, how about a drink?”

… or put that thought on hold and approach Tony at the bar.

On closer inspection, he can identify some of the ingredients splayed out: the twig comes from a
bundle of fresh rosemary, next to orange zest and something self-made that smells like orange
blossom water, and a bottle of Monkey 47 gin is hiding behind a cold brew dripper.

“Are you, uh, are you trying to recreate your drink?” Peter guesses.

“Hell yeah, I am. Been perfecting it, too. You wanna try? Or do you prefer something sparkly and
sweet?”

To be honest, Peter’s more of a water person, yet no one ever wants to hear that.

“I’d love to.”

Tony grabs two tumblers from inside a glass cabinet, then slides past Peter to get some ice from the
fridge, close enough that their arms touch. Tony clearly knows his way around drink preparation,
even tops it off with an orange twirl and a bit of the rosemary.

Peter feels Tony’s fingers against his own when Tony hands him the glass.

By some miracle, he doesn’t spill it all over him as he takes a sip. He has nothing to compare it to,
but it’s okay.

“Oh yeah, this drink’s really rocking your world, kid,” Tony drawls, a twinkle in his eye. “Well,
more for me.”

Peter chuckles, only now noticing the pictures and notes stuck to the fridge with tiny magnets.

They’re all private photos: He recognizes Pepper Potts, CEO of Stark Industries, Dr. Bruce Banner,
head of StarkMedical, Colonel Rhodes, government liaison and the driving force in the rescue
mission in Afghanistan, plus a man and a woman Peter’s seen often as Tony’s security detail in
paparazzi shots.

When he turns away, he finds Tony is looking at him, a soft smile tugging at the corners of his
mouth. Peter mentally chides himself – he’s here for a job, not to snoop into Tony Stark’s private
affairs. But then again, Tony didn’t tell him to stop… maybe he likes a more personal touch?

Before he can adapt his plan, however, Tony drains his own glass and sets it down on the counter,
only inches away from where Peter is leaning against it.
He only notices that he’s been glancing at Tony’s lips when the other man’s leaning in.

Kissing Tony is heady, electrifying, and way too distracting at the moment. Peter should talk about payment before they get any further, he really should, but it’s difficult to make himself pull away when Tony’s sucking on his lower lip, scraping his teeth and teasing with his tongue, all the while pressing closer against Peter.

It gets even harder to think when Tony’s hands encourage him to slide up onto the counter, which makes Peter’s pants pull tighter against his growing erection and his breath hitch.

Tony grins against his mouth then and Peter decides fuck it, this is Tony Stark, one of the richest people in the world. Talk about payment can wait.

Hand winds around Peter’s back to pull him closer. The position means Tony can feel Peter’s cock against his stomach through the layers of fabric, and hearing Tony’s breath hitch sends sparks down Peter’s spine.

When Tony breaks their kiss, he’s grinning like Peter’s never seen him before. It lights up his entire face, but there’s also a mischievous glint in his eyes.

“Hold on tight, kid. Ready to be impressed?”

Peter grips Tony’s shoulders while Tony slips his hands between Peter’s ass and the counter and – oh…

“Impressed yet?”

He definitely is, once he’s wrapped his legs around Tony’s waist and his brain is able to produce a coherent thought again cause damn, Tony just lifted him off the bar and is now walking them past the sofas and the kitchen to a door he casually kicks open.

Peter catches glimpses of floor-to-ceiling windows and two other doors, probably to the ensuite and the walk-in closet he’s heard rumors about, before they reach the bed. Tony doesn’t simply drop him and rip his clothes off, though – he pauses, still holding Peter up, and meets his eye with a soft smile.

“What’re you in the mood for?”

“Oh…” That’s not a question he’s been asked in two years. “You.”

Tony hums, not quite buying it. Shit, Peter thought that was the right answer, he’s usually so much better at predicting this.

“What about you?” he asks, hoping it will cover up his mistake.

“Oh, I’d really like to blow you. Either way, I’m gonna set you down now –”

Which Peter takes as his clue to slide down Tony’s body but Tony also started moving towards the bed at the same time and they end up stumbling. Peter falls onto the bed in a graceless pile of limbs but Tony ends up at the foot of it with an “Oomph.”

“Sorry, I – god, are you alright?”

But Tony’s grinning like the cat that got the canary, already settled on his knees and spreading Peter’s legs that only made it half onto the mattress.

“Oh, I’m peachy. I like where this is going…”
Peter realizes what Tony’s intending as the man’s hand slide up his thighs and reach for his belt.

“You don’t need to, I’m –”

“I want to,” Tony says, looking up at him with pleading eyes and woah, Tony Stark ready to blow him is a sight Peter never even dreamed about seeing.

He’s nodding before his mind catches up with what he’s doing and unbuttoning his shirt while Tony watches him as he does the same. He’s still in the suit he wore to dinner, sans jacket and tie, but manages to get out of it a lot sooner than Peter does.

Opening his belt trips him up a bit since his hands are shaking and his cock’s already straining against the pants. Tony takes over with a smirk, pulling down both his slacks and underwear and throwing them to the side before turning his attention to Peter’s erection.

He thought he’s had blow jobs before but feeling Tony’s tongue against his slit and his hands caressing the skin of Peter’s thighs is unlike anything he’s ever experienced. He expected Tony to get him off quickly but instead he spends what feels like an eternity just mapping Peter’s cock with his tongue and lips until he takes the tip into his mouth.

Peter’s propped himself up on his elbows to watch, though he quickly realizes that it’s Tony who’s watching him – checking for gasps and low moans, then adjusting based on his reactions.

He should’ve known a genius like Tony would bring the same dedication to sex like he does to anything else but Peter’s mind isn’t doing too well with thoughts right now, not when he’s finally fully enveloped by Tony’s mouth.

The fingers caressing his balls startle him and he can’t suppress his moan. Tony gives an appreciative hum that sets Peter’s nerve endings on fire and has him tip his head back on a gasp.

“Soundproof walls, kid,” Tony says. One of fingers is creeping lower, inching towards his entrance. “No need to hold back.”

He couldn’t even if he tried. His entire world has narrowed down to Tony’s tongue massaging the spot where his glans meets the shaft and to that fingertip slowly circling his hole.

The teasing is driving Peter insane – he’s never ever meant a “Please,” more in his life. “Please, Tony, just… I need…”

“What do you want?”

“You, inside me.”

Tony pulls off completely. The air of the room is cool against Peter’s erection and he releases a shuddering breath as Tony gets to his feet. He’s still wearing his underwear, Peter notices, a wet sport forming where the tip of his cock has been beading precome.

In the dim light of the bedroom, he can barely make out the scars on Tony’s chest, remnants of the shrapnel from the explosion in Afghanistan. He’s seen them before in a photo shoot Tony did, but they’ve faded more in the years since then. A few centimeters, that’s all it would have taken, and the metal would have been too close to Tony’s heart for him to survive.

“Move back, I’m gonna get… ah.”

Peter shuffles back on the mattress while Tony grabs a tub of lube from the nightstand drawer as well
as a condom. Peter reaches for it, cause he wants to see all of Tony, get his hands on him, too, but Tony covers his fingers with his own.

“Later. I promise.”

“Why,” is as far Peter gets cause Tony settles right back between his legs and swallows him down in a truly impressive move.

He tries to watch, he really does, but by now Tony’s figured out what makes him moan and gasp and whimper, and it feels so damn good that he doesn’t even notice the first slick finger until it’s already inside him.

He’s never been worked open like this, never had someone’s mouth on him as a finger brushed his prostate, never known anything could feel this awesome.

“How long’s your refractory period?”

“I,” Peter tries, but Tony chooses that moment to add more pressure on his prostate and the rest is lost in a sound of pleasure.

“Guess we’ll find out.”

If Peter thought Tony was holding back before, there’s no trace of it now. He doesn’t know what to focus on, the delicious burn of being stretched this thoroughly or the rhythm of Tony’s lips around his cock, his wires crossing and firing in too many directions to count.

He comes with a gasp – and without warning – his back arching off the mattress and sparks against his eyelids.

Tony stays right where he is, swallowing every last drop and easing off his spent cock with a gentleness that makes something warm settle in the pit of Peter’s stomach. Tony’s lips are swollen from his efforts and his chin is wet, and Peter really wants to kiss him.

So he pulls him on top of himself and does, finally able to run his hands down Tony’s sides and up his back, feel the muscles in his arms and neck, before reaching down to the hem of his underwear.

Tony chuckles against his lips and leans back to give Peter access. He’s too eager to try for finesse, just lowers the dark boxer briefs to expose the erection underneath. He grabs the condom from where he left it earlier and tears it open as fast as he can.

Tony’s watching intently, eyes half-lidded and clearly aroused beyond what’s probably comfortable, as Peter slides down the condom, then lies back in a wordless plea.

Tony goes slow, filling him up with shallow thrusts, Peter’s legs loosely around his waist. He doesn’t increase his pace once he bottoms out, even lets one hand roam Peter’s chest and stomach and discovers how receptive Peter’s nipples are to touch.

It’s only when Peter’s cock has stirred again, lying heavy and hot against his abs, that Tony’s restraint starts to break.

Peter crosses his ankles and digs his heels into Tony’s lower back to drive him even deeper, matching his thrusts with his hips. He arches into Tony whenever he feels his cock against his prostate, finds out that scraping his fingernails against Tony’s shoulders makes his movements stutter and leaves a hand buried in his hair when a tug has Tony gasp into their kiss.
His second orgasm hits him out of nowhere. One moment he’s matching Tony’s rhythm, the next he’s spilling all over his chest and clenching around Tony’s length.

Tony fucks him through the aftershocks, his own movements growing erratic. The condom means Peter can barely feel Tony throb, but he sees the release make Tony’s face go slack before he buries it in Peter’s shoulder as he shudders.

They stay like that for a long time, locked together, just trying to catch their breath again.

With one last kiss, Tony pulls out. Peter can’t get his legs to work so he just watches Tony walk to the door that hides the bathroom and return in the blink of an eye – or did Peter just zone out for a minute? – with a wash cloth that eventually ends up on the floor since apparently blissed-out Tony is too lazy to put it back.

It means more kissing, though, gentle and soft as opposed to heated and hard now that they’re both sated and relaxed.

Peter couldn’t find any words even if he wanted to, and Tony seems happy to just settle in on his stomach next to Peter and drift off with one arm draped over Peter’s body.

It’s so tempting to just do the same. Sleep is tugging at Peter, trying to coax him to give in but he knows he can’t.

Later, that was his plan. He’ll have to bring it up before he leaves, or at least find out if Tony meant for him to stay the night.

Carefully, he removes Tony’s arm from his stomach and slips off the bed. He finds his clothes on the floor and spends a moment looking for his second shoe. He remembers he left his jacket and satchel at the foot of the bar, but that’s also when Tony stirs on the bed.

Peter watches him stretch, still completely naked, splayed out across the soft sheets. His eyes flutter open and his hand pats the mattress in an uncoordinated way that’s quite adorable, but Tony stops when he spots Peter next to the bed.

“Where you going, kid?”

“Uh,” Peter starts, insecurity creeping up on him again. “I thought you’d only wanted… But, um, if you want me to stay the night, that’s great—”

“Course I want you to stay the night, kid,” he says, rolling onto his stomach again and patting the bed. “Breakfast’s included at Casa Stark.”

Peter perches on the edge of the mattress with a smile. “Sorry, I just thought – I mean we haven’t discussed payment, so I wasn’t sure what you’d planned, and my boss didn’t say, so…”

Peter trails off because Tony’s blinking up at him with a look of confusion on his face.

“Payment.”

Peter nods. “Yeah, the two hundred? But for the night, it would be…”

He trails off cause for some reason, Tony’s expression isn’t changing and there’s a chill creeping up Peter’s spine. But why would –

“Wait,” Tony says, “you’re expecting me to pay you?”
“Y-yes…”

“You mean you’re a hooker?”

Shit.

“It’s sex worker,” Peter corrects after a beat. Which is sort of beside the point considering that Tony is staring at him like he’s seeing Peter for the first time.

“So you thought,” Tony says, enunciating every word, “you thought I hired you?”

“Of course, what else would I…” Peter trails off as Tony reels back, grimacing. He doesn’t get it.

“You took Rumlow’s card. You asked me to come. What else was I supposed to think?”

“Christ…” Tony gets off the bed like it’s made of hot coals. “So that was all fake? Tonight, all of it was fake?”

“No!”

“And how would I know?”

Peter’s jaw clicks shut and he’s off the bed a second later while Tony snatches up his underwear from the floor and puts it on, then runs a hand through his hair that’s still messed up from Peter’s tugging.

“Well,” Tony eventually sighs, “this is awkward. Not the most awkward situation I’ve ever been in but the bar’s pretty high for that.”

Peter swallows. Tony’s apparent dislike of his profession stings.

“What’s the big deal?” His voice is calmer than he feared. “It’s not, I mean… It’s not like you don’t have the money.”

“It’s not about the money. I don’t pay for sex, kid. Never have, never will.”

“Seriously?” Peter blurts. Apparently his brain-to-mouth filter decided to take off without him.

Tony crosses his arms. “Well, excuse me if I prefer to know my bed partners are willing.”

“I am willing –”

“You said you only had sex with me for money, pal. Excuse me if I’m missing a crucial bit of consent here.”

“I consented,” Peter argues, cause he never does anything he doesn’t want to do. He always has a choice.

Tony snorts. “Yeah, right. Look, I don’t wanna stiff you. You’re a hard-working professional, after all. Two hundred, you said? Wait there.”

Peter watches Tony disappear through the other door. As he figured, it leads to a walk-in closet and apparently also houses Tony’s safe since the man returns with a wad of bills which he throws onto the bed.

“You can let yourself out. The elevator’s gonna take you downstairs. I need a shower.”
With that, Tony turns on his heels and heads for the bathroom.

Peter feels chilled all over as he collects the money.

Ten fifty-dollar bills. Five hundred.

Any other day he’d be over the moon about a hundred-fifty-percent tip but he can’t muster the energy right now. He shouldn’t accept it, really, not after all this, but then he thinks of seeing May and Ben tomorrow morning and can’t not pocket the cash.

Peter flees the penthouse to the sound of running water.

Chapter End Notes

... *hugs Peter* ...

Chapter 4 will be posted on May 1.
Well, unless Infinity War on Friday actually kills me, but even then I swear to Thanos I’ll find a way to update from beyond the grave!
I'M ALIVE! I survived the weekend! I hope y'all are still here, too.

Thank you all so much for your support on this story, I can't express how much your enthusiasm means to me. I hope this chapter lives up to your expectations :)

**Chapter warning** for recreational drug use.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Stupid.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

In retrospect, that’s the only word Peter has for himself.

Stupid not to make sure, stupid not to bring it up, stupid to forget his place, stupid to get lost in the sensations and the heat of it all.

Stupid not to stop for one minute and really *think* about this – cause if he had, he’d have realized that Tony Stark would never ever pay for sex.

No, not even before Afghanistan. Among all the DUI and possession scandals, he was never once caught with prostitutes. Tony Stark screws socialites and models and, on one memorable occasion, the daughter of a Middle Eastern sultan.

And Peter is anything but.

Stupid, indeed.

Peter stops. He’s walked the entire way from Park Avenue up to Museum Mile. At least his jacket’s warm enough, but it’s way past 2 am and May’s picking him up in six hours to visit Ben. He’ll be lucky if he can find a bus or subway that’ll take him back to his campus dorm in time.

“*Course I want you to stay the night, kid. Breakfast’s included at Casa Stark.*”

Peter can just about picture it, too. It would have been –

* stupid.

Shaking himself, Peter pulls up Citymapper.

* * *

“They’re done with dessert. Come on.”

Peter abandons the pot he’s scrubbing to let it soak in the sink some more and follows Rumlow from the large kitchen into the extravagant dining room.
Burt Whitmore presides at the head of the table, older and wealthier than any of his guests, but Rumlow’s taking his plate so Peter starts with the other men. None of them has spared him a second glance all evening – except for the bulky one with the glasses. Robert Silverstein, if Peter remembers the brief correctly.

“Truly excellent, Brock, as always,” Whitmore says. “Has our entertainment arrived? I’d like to take this party to the sitting room.”

Rumlow, who’s been going back and forth between the kitchen, the dining room, and the other parts of the lavish Fifth Avenue apartment to coordinate with the rest of the, uh, staff, nods immediately.

“Wonderful. And why don’t you bring your boy once you’ve cleaned up? He deserves a break, too.”

Peter makes sure to look grateful and honored, then beats a hasty retreat. He can feel Robert Silverstein’s eyes follow him out of the room and they’re on him the moment he returns for the rest of the plates.

All too soon the clean-up is done and Rumlow is back with a self-satisfied grin from revealing to his clients what he pulled together. He passes Peter something – a pair of jeans and a simple white T-shirt – then fetches the empty garment bag for Peter’s uniform from the corner.

“Oh, okay…”

Peter unbuttons his No Bones vest and hands it to his boss, then hesitates before mentally kicking himself. Rumlow’s seen him in much less flattering states; getting changed in front of him makes no difference whatsoever.

“I overheard Silverstein’s gonna head up the branch in Manhattan; big office with big accounts. I expect you to give him your full attention. If you do a good job… I’ll remember you during Spring Break.”

Peter nods, holding Rumlow’s gaze as he slips back into his shoes.

“I will, sir,” he promises.

His boss smirks.

At least holding Silverstein’s attention won’t require much effort, considering that the clothes Rumlow gave him are about two sizes too small. The jeans do wonders for his ass, Peter has to admit, and the white short-sleeve clings to his arms and chest.

The other guests as well as Rumlow’s crowd are way past their second glasses of whiskey and cocktails when Rumlow and Peter join them.

Peter recognizes the two girls cozied up to Whitmore and another banker on the sofa from the previous party he attended, as well as Lady Payne, a professional Dominatrix from the city, dressed down but no less commanding in her presence. She’s in one of the armchairs, accepting a longdrink from one of the older men in attendance. Peter doesn’t need to check to know the guy’s wearing a wedding ring.
He ends up perched on the armrest of a sofa, listening to Silverstein talk about his past accomplishments and pushing Peter to drink up. The gin and tonic is heavy on the gin and tastes vile to him, but he’s had enough practice at hiding his dislike that Silverstein doesn’t notice.

The party escalates quickly. One minute Peter’s fetching another round of drinks for Silverstein and himself, the next he watches the banker snort a line of coke and one of the ladies next to Whitmore open the man’s zipper.

Silverstein pulls Peter into his lap and makes sure he’s watching.

“I had the same thought, you know,” the man murmurs against Peter’s ear. “Goes to show that great minds think alike.”

Peter can feel the man’s erection against his ass and rotates his hips a little. That’s why he’s here, after all.

“Been thinking about your mouth all night, boy… but then I saw your ass.”

Across the room, Whitmore’s grip tightens in the woman’s long hair.

“Go upstairs, second door to the right. Prepare yourself, then come back.”

Peter shudders and hopes it’ll seem like anticipation, not like he’s ready to bolt.

Last summer, Rumlow took him to Whitmore’s final party of the season up in the Hamptons, and Peter couldn’t look his boss in the eye for a solid week after that. Maybe exhibitionism is part of the alpha male culture of this world, or maybe Whitmore’s friends are a special bunch… but either way, Peter’s not getting out of this tonight. He needs to stop fretting and get a fucking move on.

He takes his satchel to the bathroom and works quickly, but his body refuses to fully relax.

A knock on the bathroom door makes him freeze. He’s scissoring himself open with two slicked-up fingers, jeans folded on the toilet seat.

“Open up for me, boy,” Silverstein’s voice says, with no trace of a request.

Peter washes his fingers as fast as he can but even then the other man is gruff when he shoulds his way into the bathroom. Peter sees enough of his face to tell Silverstein must have snorted another line in the past five minutes, but then he’s turned around and told to grip the sink.

The hands that pull his cheeks apart tell him a lot about the man: regular manicures, little patience – and a taste for the crude if the way he curses appreciatively at the sight of what Peter’s been up to is any indication.

The slap against his ass startles him but Peter manages to keep quiet. He chances a glance at the mirror to see if that really is a condom the guy’s fumbling with, not another bag of cocaine.

He doesn’t look down in time and Silverstein catches his eye. The man smiles, though, and runs a soft hand over his back.

“Trust me, boy. I know what I’m doing.”

Peter has to bite his tongue to keep from arguing. He tries to play it off as naiveté when he remembers Rumlow’s words.

“I’m sorry, it’s just… I don’t have much experience with this.”
It was the right thing to say. Silverstein’s smile widens and he lines himself up without much finesse.

“Lucky for you, I do.”

It’s fine. Peter knows how to make grunts of pain sound like moans of pleasure.

*

Peter forgoes the communal showers after his workout on Monday.

There are finger-shaped bruises on his hips and bite marks on his neck – with all the sexual violence awareness campaigns going on across college campuses at the moment, he doesn’t want to risk anyone getting the wrong impression.

Not that he was able to work up much of a sweat anyway.

He’s putting on a zip hoodie cause he’s cold despite the weirdly mild March weather (plus, the high neckline will hide the marks from his project partner in the lab today) when his phone rings in his pocket.

*Withheld number.* Probably one of his clients.

It’s not.

“Hiya Peter, this is Bucky – you got a moment?”

“How did you get my number?”

“It’s on the roster Rumlow keeps stuck to the wall. Listen, you’re an engineering student, right?”

Bucky sounds really stressed. Peter didn’t think the barkeeper could ever be frazzled, especially not on the one day of the week that *No Bones* is closed.

“Yeah…”

“Great. Cause we got an emergency. You know Stevie does some freelance baking on the side?”

Peter shakes his head, then remembers that Bucky can’t see him. “Uh, no. Does Rumlow –”

“Yeah, that dumb fuck knows, alright, no need to go snitching.”

“I wasn’t… Uh, what’s the problem?”

“Yeah, Steve has a gig and I’m assisting but now our oven’s bust. We ain’t got the money – or the time – to call a pro and I thought of you, man. Any chance you could hop over to Brooklyn?”

“Like, uh, now?”

“Shit’s supposed to be delivered by four. Please, Peter. You strike me as a good guy, please don’t let me down.”

“I’ve got class – well, lab time…” Where he’ll need to focus and be innovative with Nara Yuki, his partner, when every fiber of his body just wants to drop into bed and sleep. Fixing an electric range sounds like bliss compared to that. “I guess I could, uh, postpone?”

“You’re the best, man. I’ll text you the address.”
Steve and Bucky’s apartment is small and filled with cooking utensils.

The majority of them is packed away for easy transportation in the couple’s ancient van. “Most of our gigs let us prep at the location,” Bucky explains since Steve’s busy freaking out again after thanking Peter profusely and showing him the well-used oven. “Our kitchen’s too tiny to do much of anything, really.”

It’s squeaky clean, so at least the problem probably won’t be a clogged pilot.

Peter brought some tools and tests the heating elements, fusing system, and anything else to ensure he’s considering all potential problems while Bucky keeps up a constant stream of chatter from the other room. Mainly since it seems to calm Steve down, who’s revising his plans now that he has less time.

“... after we got back, but Stevie dreamed of selling his own stuff so I just got some of the guys together and we organized a food-cart for a couple o’weeks. Didn’t expect that to make the papers, but the buzz helped us score jobs doing what we love and with the tips I get we can save up for going solo one day.”

Peter doesn’t need to see him to hear the smile in Bucky’s voice.

“So, what’re you gonna do, man? After college?”

“I, uh, I don’t know yet,” Peter admits. He has some ideas, sure, but it’s still two years until he graduates and besides, he doesn’t have much time for research that’s not immediately relevant to his studies. He’ll just check out the next career fair or something, to put an end to May and Ben’s nagging.

“Ha, maybe you’ll be the next Tony Stark.”

Peter’s hand slips and he cuts off the hiss before Bucky comes running, but he needn’t have worried cause Bucky’s still talking.

“Wouldn’t that be cool, Stevie? We could say he fixed our oven once.”

“It’s not fixed yet,” he hears the other man grumble and seizes the moment to explain that he’s figured out what’s wrong.

“Is there a store around here? It’s a quick fix; I just need a few new heating elements...”

He’s glad for the reason to get out of the apartment for a bit while Bucky helps Steve get the baking trays ready. The memory of Saturday is vibrant enough without the reminder, and seeing the familiarity of Bucky and Steve’s movements, hearing them bicker, makes Peter think a bit too much of his aunt and uncle on top of everything. May used to help Ben in the kitchen during holidays, but like Bucky she was only trusted with the most basic tasks.

Once all the ports and valves have been cleaned and the new burners installed, Peter switches the oven on... and it works.

Peter sits back with a profound sense of accomplishment.

“That’s the first time I’ve seen you smile today, man,” Bucky comments. “That mean you done?”
“Uh – yeah, good as new.”

Steve appears in the doorway, wearing an apron and flour in his hair, and he hugs Peter without warning, muttering thanks.

“Release him, you damn marshmallow. Ain’t there an almond sponge that’s gotta go into the oven?”

“Shit, Buck, yeah. Sorry,” Steve says to Peter as he releases him.

Peter shrugs, still a bit dazed. Steve gives great hugs.

“You wanna borrow a T-shirt or something?” Bucky offers. “You got… oven all over yours.”

Peter wouldn’t usually but he’s got a class at 11:40 he can still make, so he accepts Bucky’s tee and cleans up in the bathroom. It’s large on him, and makes him look small, somehow, but it’s soft and comfy and smells of lavender.

When he returns, Steve is piping dough onto a tray with laser focus while Bucky’s whipping cream by hand. He stops when he spots Peter in the doorway.

“Seems like someone had fun last night.”

“Huh?”

Bucky points the whisk towards Peter’s neck – oh god, the marks, he totally forgot.

Peter blushes and gives a vague, “Yeah, I did,” but Bucky doesn’t stop looking at him.

“You sure?”

“Yeah, of course, why, uh, why wouldn’t I be?”

For a moment, Bucky just contemplates him. “Must have been one hell of a weekend.”

Peter schools his features even as his stomach drops. They’ve never talked explicitly about anything that goes on at No Bones below the surface layer of food and drinks, but as the barkeeper Bucky is bound to have picked up on a few things. While giving out the combination to the accessible toilet is a thing he’s been doing ever since Peter can remember, to think he never noticed anything in the past two years about how Peter treats certain guests or disappears sometimes would be… stupid.

“You should come to dinner.”

Peter blinks at Steve as the moment breaks. “Sorry?”

“As a thank you. Oh, and if you leave the receipts we’ll pay you back for the parts. Tonight?”

“Uh…” Peter bites his lips. “That’s really not necessary. You could’ve probably done this yourself with enough googling. And I’ve got Thermodynamics until 9:30 and then it’d be another hour each way and I’ve got forty-six pages of reading due on Wednesday that I really have to – it’s fine. Save me one of your awesome petits gâteaux this week and we’ll call it even?”

Steve looks a bit overwhelmed but smiles, obviously proud that his creations are worth that much to Peter, but Bucky’s eyes have narrowed. Peter can see more questions creasing his brow so he hightails out of their apartment.

Damn.
He’ll have to be careful the next few weeks with how he acts at *No Bones*. It’s difficult enough to keep MJ in the dark; he doesn’t need to have his co-workers take an interest in his affairs.

* 

When Tony can’t sleep, he turns to his projects.

When he runs out of projects or ideas, he scours the offices of his company.

Lehnsherr calls this “meddling” but Tony calls it “impacting his genius on the less talented”, which this week includes the jesters from appliances.

“Stop harassing my people, Stark,” his chief engineer snaps. “Ramos has enough grey hairs without you adding to them.”

“They’re my people, too, you know, or did you change the name on the building while I was revolutionizing the way we do laundry?”

As usual, Erik Lehnsherr refuses to acknowledge his genius and turns his eyes towards the car ceiling instead, cursing under his breath.

Tony gulps down the last of the coffee Lehnsherr made him get after he came to drag him away from the prototype cause “Damn it, Stark, this is important.”

Which is the only reason Lehnsherr is currently wearing business formal instead of one of his boring turtlenecks that make Tony reconsider hiring an in-house stylist for his executive employees.

Tony himself left his jacket at home since it’s gonna be hot enough at the career fair in just a shirt and a vest, no matter how great the AC at their venue is. Besides, Hanna from HR told him to be approachable.

“Why’s that guy still working, anyway?” Tony wonders. “He’s, like, what, seventy?”

“Sixty-nine,” Lehnsherr corrects. “And you should be grateful Ramos is waiting to retire until we found a replacement for him. Page already told me to fuck off, and I heard Henrickson’s bought a waterfront in Florida last month. They’re not staying on.”

Tony cringes. “You’re not very subtle, buddy.”

“The time for subtlety is over, Stark. We gotta stop losing the best candidates to our competitors, and with Toomes expanding like a –”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it, I got the same lecture from HR you did –”

“Then act like it, *verdammt nochmal,*” Lehnsherr hisses, and boy, he’s gotta be beyond frustrated if he’s slipping into German. “Don’t pull an all-nighter right before the biggest engineering fair on the East Coast.”

“Yes, mom.”

Tony hates it when Lehnsherr is right. It happens often, or else the guy would never have become SI’s chief engineer, and since he deals with each department’s needs on a day-to-day basis he’s a lot more knowledgeable than Tony, who only breezes in for meeting and emergencies. And supplies them with half their ideas, never forget that.

Lehnsherr heaves a sigh. Oh no, Tony knows where that –
“Anything wrong?”

Bingo...

“Nothing.”

Lehnsherr arches an eyebrow.

Sometimes Tony forgets how long the man’s known him. Or that they met during Tony’s third stint at rehab, where Lehnsherr worked as a janitor since no one else would hire anyone with a rap sheet as long as his, no matter how brilliant an engineer he was and – where was he?

Right, Lehnsherr, and his perfectly attuned bullshit radar.

“Is this about the date?”

And his eerie connection to SI’s gossip mill.

“Not for the reasons you think,” Tony says cause damn it, it isn’t. He has no problem with Pepper dating again; she deserves to be happy… just maybe not with some philandering douchebag spending thirty percent of his income on alimony to four ex-wives.

Lehnsherr’s expression mellows. “Forget Mason. I need you on your best today, Stark.”

“Shouldn’t I be saying that to you?”

The engineer just bares his teeth. Oh yeah, that’s the smile that scares interns and long-term employees alike.

It’s impressive to watch him turn from shark-like exec to charming representative in the blink of an eye when they enter the hotel lobby and follow the sign pointing to Engineering Career Fair and Registration. The venue – a huge, modern ballroom – is swarming with staffers and technicians setting up booths, half an hour before the fair officially opens its doors to students from all over the State.

The Stark Industries booth already is the most eye-catching. Taking up an entire corner near the exit to the hotel garden, it’s been expertly designed to be both informative and exciting. The layout guides students past interactive holograms about the internships and entry-level positions SI is offering to little tables with engineering problems to solve. They brought a team of twelve staffers, all actual employees who can share their experiences and vet potential candidates, plus pretty amazing swag to give away for free, and –

“Why is there a coffee machine, Stark?”

Now it’s Tony who arches an eyebrow at Lehnsherr. “Why would I design anything without one? We gotta spend twelve hours in this joint – you really wanna trust the hotel to have decent java?”

*

Two hours later, Lehnsherr is mainlining coffee and has stopped questioning Tony’s design choices for the time being – score one for him.

Or wait, he deserves more points for that. After all, he’s been mingling and pre-selecting interviewees without a break and deciding who’s getting to wait on the settees for one of the HR people to interview them at the tables near the back of their booth. As always, Tony’s instincts don’t
That will so make up for almost giving the department a heart attack when they found him in their offices after an all-nighter spent revamping their approach to career fairs.

The majority of students that have come are organized and perfectly prepared. Their personal pitches would sound natural to anyone who doesn’t have Tony’s history of rehearsing bullshit – and spotting it – so he spends a couple of minutes explaining to one girl from NYU that “I want to improve my skills” is the pitch equivalent of vanilla ice cream.

“Do you think of Stark Industries as vanilla ice cream?” he asks. “No? Then don’t pitch yourself as vanilla ice cream, Jesus… This isn’t rocket science, people, that’s at table four.”

“Rocket science would be much easier,” Vanilla Girl mumbles, and a few minutes later Tony thinks he found their new aerospace engineering intern for the summer.

He brings the lady to Erin, the head of their aviation and space engineering department, and rewards himself for a job well done by waving at Lehnsherr to tell him he’s taking a break.

It gives him a chance to check out the competition – not much of one, in terms of booth design or giveaways, ha – and ensure he seems approachable to the high-strung crowds.

One booth, however, makes him slow his steps.

Of course Toomes is here too. Only… he doesn’t have any swag. Seems they’re doing a charity giveaway: students write the charity of their choice on a piece of paper (recycled, duh) along with their contact info, put it into a box and every hour, the banner next to it says, Toomes and his wife will draw one card. The winner’s swag is a donation of $25 to the organization of their choice.

Tony has to concede that’s a good idea. Ugh… He better get back to his own booth and double down on his efforts. No way he’s losing ‘most tweeted-about employer’ or whatever the press is gonna pull from this event to a scumbag like Adrian Toomes.

Not that there seems to be a need, cause when Tony returns, there’s a sizeable crowd gathered around Lehnsherr’s table.

Unlike the rest of the staffers, his chief engineer brought actual mechanical parts. None of them do anything specific, really – it’s the first test he gives prospective employees during assessment sessions; designed to be solvable, yet only with some out-of-the-box thinking.

Seems like someone’s on the right track, though.

Tony approaches, using his coffee mug to ward off any students who look like they want to speak to him...

… and almost drops it at the sound of a familiar voice.

“I, uh, I don’t think the issue’s with the hardware, Mr. Lehnsherr. Does this, uh, is the table connected to the software?”

Tony doesn’t catch Lehnsherr’s reply but he’s finally close enough to get a look at the kid fumbling with the holographic displays like he’s never used that type of interface.

Guess being a hooker – pardon, a sex worker – doesn’t award Peter much of a chance.
Cause fuck, that’s actually Peter, there’s no doubt about it. Dressed more formally than he remembers but with the same soft brown eyes, same blond hair, and he’d know that smile anywhere.

A smile that’s definitely warranted, since the hologram’s displaying an error code and Peter even manages to identify the underlying issue with the contraption.

Lehnsherr nods, letting his approval show. “Well done, Mr. Parker. What are your plans after… Columbia, you said?”

The kid blushes at the praise. “Uh, yes. But, um, to be honest, sir, I’ve been working a lot and haven’t had time to research internships or graduate programs. I figured I’d get more valuable information here?”

“Good instincts. Follow me, I’ll tell you a bit about the opportunities Stark Industries offers.”

Lehnsherr’s path is going to take them past Tony, who has just enough time to school his expression before Peter spots him, leaning against the wall of the booth, sipping coffee from an SI mug.

The kid’s step falter and shock makes his eyes widen – not surprise. He knew Tony would be here, then. Maybe that’s why he didn’t come to the booth until Tony left for a break?

Peter gets over it quickly, though, and follows Lehnsherr towards the high-table around the partition.

Tony’s intrigued now. With the kid’s obvious talent, he should have interned at 16, then gone for a co-operative educational scheme or something. What happened to make this kid start selling himself instead?

He ambles over to Hanna, head of HR, who’s interviewing some trust fund shoo-in right next to Lehnsherr and Peter, and pretends to be observing the conversation.

Naturally, he’s eavesdropping.

Peter’s a lot less rattled by Tony’s proximity than Trust Fund Boy, asks a lot of questions that show he’s not only talented but also passionate – and researching medical adhesives, gee, Bruce would adopt him instantly – all the while sneaking glances at Tony out of the corner of his eye.

“We’d be lucky to have you at our company, Mr. Parker,” Lehnsherr says eventually. “Do you have a card?” At the kid’s shake of the head, Erik continues, “Then would you please leave your name and email. I’d like to follow up with you personally.”

“Uh, sure, sir, I’ll… oh, thanks.”

Peter scribbles his info on the piece of notebook paper Lehnsherr provides and stammers his way through accepting the promotional messenger bag reserved for the most promising attendees.

There’s an awkward moment when Peter turns to leave and can’t stop looking at Tony. He’s blushing a bit more while Tony’s too torn between asking for a word in private and forgetting he ever saw Peter again to react.

Lehnsherr doesn’t have that problem.

“May I steal Mr. Stark for a moment?”

Hanna waves him off and Tony grudgingly follows the man a few steps away. A couple of students shoot them hopeful glances but keep their distance.
Lehnsherr doesn’t say anything, just crosses his arms and looks disapprovingly.

“What?”

“Don’t scare away my best candidates, Stark, or we’re never gonna stay competitive.”

“Won’t happen again,” Tony vows.

“What even was that? Do you have something against talented juniors?”

“Nah, quite a fan, actually. Just a tad curious why he didn’t shove his resume at you right away.”

“Hm.”

Ugh, he hates that hum. That’s Lehnsherr’s ‘I call bullshit but this isn’t the time nor the place so I’ll let you believe I’m buying it while adding it to the list of things I’ll corner you about instead’.

He also likes that hum, since it’s kept him from relapsing once or twice.

Tony empties his coffee mug and nudges Lehnsherr.

“Come on, buddy,” Tony says. “Let’s find you some more minions.”

*

Peter flees to the nearest men’s room so he can freak out in peace.

He doesn’t even know what sends his heart racing more: the fact that Tony didn’t ignore him or that he managed to impress Erik Lehnsherr, SI’s most legendary engineer, second only to Tony Stark himself.

Lehnsherr even said he could ask for help on his thesis in case he wanted to intern some place else first, keep his options open.

Options. Plural.

And Tony... Tony didn’t chase him off. Or cut the interview short, or sabotage it because he doesn’t want a hooker interning at SL... Peter has no idea what to make of that.

When his stomach eventually reminds him that he forgot breakfast in his hurry to change into more formal clothes (George had a late morning flight out of town, meaning Peter didn’t get home until 5 am and promptly slept through his alarm), he buys an overpriced sandwich and takes it to the terrace.

It’s a sunny but cold March Saturday and he’s pretty much alone outside.

Until Tony joins him.

“You know, most students jump with joy when they hear our internships are paid… but I guess we won’t be able to match your hourly rate.”

Peter’s glad that finishing his last bite is a perfect excuse not to reply cause he wouldn’t have known what to say anyway.

“With your talent, I’m surprised you don’t have a scholarship…”

Tony trails off and gives him a prompting look but Peter opts for an evasive shrug before balling up
his napkin and walking over to the bin. The hidden compliment registers way too late – but to his surprise, Tony has fallen into step next to him.

“Uh, th-thank you?” he says. “And, um, sorry about… I thought you were on your lunch break so I figured I didn’t have to make things awkward…”

Tony waves it off with a smile that doesn’t quite reach his eyes. “So... you aren’t working today?”

Peter blinks. Does he mean…?

“At the restaurant,” Tony clarifies.

Of course… Given how repulsed he was by Peter’s second job, why would he ask about that?

“Not exactly – I mean, we’re catering a private event and I don’t have to come in before that, which is awesome cause I really wanted to catch your, um…” Peter cuts himself off but Tony’s already smirking.

“My talk? Ha, told the organizers the title would be a draw.”

“How Not To Suck Up To Your Boss – Tipping the scale in your favor without being too obvious about it? Yeah,” Peter agrees, reining in the blush creeping up his cheeks. “Uh, you thought of that?”

Tony smirks. “Yup. I designed the booth, too. And some of the giveaways.”

“Oh, wow, they’re great,” Peter says, touching the messenger back for emphasis. “I never thought – I mean… Um, I’d expect you’d be too busy for…”

“Trivial things like that?” Tony finishes, raising an eyebrow. “It’s not trivial, kid. It affects how future applicants view my company, and I’d be damned if I left that up to Marketing.”

Peter’s surprised by the level of emotion in Tony’s tone – he always thought he gave up the CEO position to Pepper Potts to spend less time on the business side of things, to be able to focus on inventions and consultations. Just how much time does Tony spend at work every day?

His thoughts must be showing on his face at least a little, cause Tony’s expression softens.

“I hope you enjoy the talk. There’s a Q&A afterwards, too,” he adds, and ventures back inside the building.

Peter blinks after him, and he’s still confused when he’s waiting in line in front of the conference room.

He finds a place at the end of the second row, right next to the wall, and tries to ignore the memories his mind supplies every time he looks up from taking notes.

Tony’s charming and engaging, shares a lot of great tips, doesn’t pretend to be humble and makes the entire room laugh on multiple occasions.

Peter takes it all in, ignoring the voice in his head asking him when he thinks he’ll actually get to implement them.

He’s trying to decide whether or not he should participate in the Q&A element of the talk, but forty minutes into the presentation, his phone buzzes with a text.

It’s from Rumlow.
Change of plans. Mr. Maddox wants us there 2hrs earlier. Details when you get here.

Peter hesitates.

On stage, Tony’s showing a slide with an email he’s probably going to tear into before sharing how to do it better in a minute or two…

… but Peter can’t ignore his boss. Not after taking on less clients this past week to have at least a little time to study for midterms. Not when it’s the start of Spring Break and he needs to be on his best behavior to make up for it.

Peter waits until Tony’s back is turned to the audience and skips out.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 5 will follow next Tuesday, May 8!

... by the way ...

... I even got through a surprising 36 hours after I saw Infinity War before one of merlenhiver’s comments made me start writing post-IW fic xD
So if any of you are down for my canon-compliant oneshot take on what Infinity War Part II might have in store for us, keep your eyes out for that. Or just wait until I link to it in the chapter notes cause I’m not above blatant self-advertising^^
Welcome back, my dears!

First of all, apologies for taking ages to respond to comments and that I'll take a bit to respond this time as well, but life's been crazy full (I'm co-organising a short film festival and this was a hot few days). On top of that, my laptop died on me, so I'm posting from my sister's laptop she was kind enough to lend me for this.

Secondly... Given my need to take on some more work to afford a replacement, there might be longer gaps between new chapters soon. Chapter 6 and 7 shouldn't be any problem, but after that... fair warning.

Thirdly, the canon-compliant IW oneshot I'm writing has – to no one's surprise – morphed into a three-chapter fic that will follow shortly as well.

Okay, but now... I hope you enjoy =) Might be a bit on the shorter side, but I hope the plot makes up for it!

Rhodey stops in his tracks as soon as the place comes into view.

“Hell, no.”

“Hell yes, buddy,” Tony says, patting his shoulder. “Come on.”

“It’s vegan.”

“It’s delicious.”

“You talking about the service, Tones, or the food?”

Tony’s already leading the way across the street so his best friend won’t see his reaction. Obviously he didn’t mention what happened that Saturday night at the Tower, but if anybody would be able to infer this is about more than this cute waiter he met at the career fair yesterday, it’s Rhodey.

Sucks that Peter left before the talk was over, or else Tony wouldn’t have to hunt him down… What? Peter’s interesting – and actually capable of holding a conversation with Tony, and able withstand extended periods of time under Lehnsherr’s scrutiny.

Damn, Tony doesn’t even know what he wants, but he’s too curious about the kid to leave this alone.

So he roped his best friend into coming to No Bones with him on Sunday night.

The Maître, Dan, barely misses a beat before asking them to wait at the bar with a drink on the house while a table is set up for them.
“You didn’t call ahead? Of course you didn’t,” Rhodey sighs, “why would you, it’d be the non-douchebag thing to do…”

Tony ignores him and greets Bucky instead. The barkeeper has been watching them approach, trying – and failing – to keep the corners of his mouth from twitching.

“Oh, shut up, Barnes.”

“Of course, sir,” Bucky says. “Another Stark Gimlet for you?”

“A what?” Rhodey laughs.

“Make it two,” Tony says, “and add a dash of lime and some ginger, alright?”

Bucky freezes. “Did you mess with my drink?”

“I thought it’s mine? And I improved it, it’s what I do – seriously, it’s even on my LinkedIn profile.”

Bucky slips off, probably to fetch cold drip, muttering something under his breath that sounds like “Meddling idjit.”

Note to self: never let Bucky and Lehnsherr be in the same room together.

By now, Rhodey’s negative attitude towards this place has given way to grudging amusement, which Tony counts as a win.

“Well, where’s this Peter, then?”

“Good question.”

Cause the answer is: not here.

He vaguely remembers the other service staff milling about but not the guy currently delivering an entrée in what’s supposed to be Peter’s section.

Tony aims an accusing stare at Bucky once he’s back. If he thought Bucky was losing the fight against the grin before, he’s way past saying uncle now.

“It’s Sunday, Barnes.”

“Hey, I didn’t know. I don’t make the roster, okay? Chill, man. He’s off helping the boss with some private event.”

“Again,” Tony mutters. At Bucky’s quizzical gaze, he continues, “I ran into him at this career fair yesterday; he had to leave before the end of my talk – which is a shame cause my talks are epic – so I figured I’d grab dinner tonight.”

“And since he’s not here,” Rhodey cuts in, “can we go have steak instead?”

“Now who’s being a douchebag? Look, our table’s almost ready. You wanna make all that hard work for nothing?”

Rhodey rolls his eyes at Bucky, all ‘You see what I have to deal with?’, which Bucky answers by putting their drinks on the counter.

“You got pen and paper, barkeep?”
Bucky pauses, but only for a moment. Tony accepts the items and scribbles down a note to Peter – cause there’s no way he’s gonna come back on Thursday, a person can only stomach so many greens – then fishes another fifty out of his breast pocket, folds both notes together and holds them out.

“Give this to Peter.”

Bucky reaches for it, but Tony doesn’t let go immediately.

“If you show this to anyone else, copy it, or sell it... I will ruin you.”

Tony knows he can be a scary son of a bitch if he wants to be, yet Bucky doesn’t bat an eye. All he does is nod, say, “Yes, sir,” and wait for Tony to let go of the notes.

Problem solved.

Now he only has to get Rhodey to stop laughing at him before their table’s ready.

*

Peter gapes at the piece of paper while the campus coffee shop bustles on around them.

Across the table, Bucky’s cradling his chin on steepled hands and is fluttering his eyelashes in a way that would be comical if Peter weren’t so shocked.

“Anything you wanna share? C’mon, man, reward the messenger here.”

Peter re-reads the note instead. It’s written in an elegant scrawl with one of the pens from the restaurant. Peter would recognize the ink anywhere.

*Why don’t we start over? Call me.*
- TS

There’s a cell phone number underneath. From what Bucky said, it’s a very secret one, too.

“I guess I, uh… I left an impression?” Peter volunteers.

“Ha, you don’t say. You playing hard to get, or something? Believe me, ain’t gonna work as you planned –”

“No, no, I’m not... playing anything.”

“Why not? Don’t tell me you never had a crush on that guy; everyone’s been there. Damn, he’s on my list – he’s even on Steve’s list.”

“List?” Peter echoes, not sure he really wants to know.

Bucky leers. “You know, that list... the list of people you’d be allowed to cheat on your partner with.”

“Would it still be cheating, then, if you’re both okay with it?”

“Huh, I dunno – wait, no, not happening, no changing the subject, Parker.”

Peter huffs and grabs his cappuccino instead. It’s the biggest one he could order with an extra two shots of espresso or else he’s never going to manage six hours with Nara on their project followed by
another ominous ‘private event’. All Rumlow told him was to expect a long night.

His staring match with Bucky lasts about twenty seconds before the other man admits defeat and picks the chocolate sprinkles off his mocha. Individually.

“So, mate... When are you gonna call him?”

Peter shrugs.

“You... are gonna call him, right?”

Peter takes a sip from his coffee.

“What the fuck is wrong with you, man?” Bucky points a finger at him. “When a hot billionaire gives you his number, you call! That’s, like, a law of physics.”

“Actually, the laws of physics are –”

“Shut it, man, I’m not that dumb. But I honestly thought you weren’t either. Call him, ASAP.”

Peter’s gut reaction is: \textit{I can’t.}

His second thought is: \textit{I really really want to.}

But... then what? Unless Tony has changed his attitude towards sex workers – not very likely – Peter doesn’t get what the point of starting over would be.

Besides, he doesn’t have the time. Spring Break only lasts a week and Peter desperately needs to make the most of it. Their lawyer’s PI has uncovered a new lead but pursuing it is racking up bills faster than May and he can pay them.

Fortunately, Bucky has even less time for coffee than he does, cause technically he’s on an errand run for Steve’s baking job of the day, and Peter gets away soon thereafter without further interrogation.

In his dorm, he almost pins the note to the whiteboard above his desk. Instead, Peter shifts the old pile of clothes in his closet to unearth an innocuous box with three locks, which is where he stashes cash in between bank runs.

He places the note inside, hides the box again, and tries not to think about Tony’s words for the rest of the day.

* 

By the end of the week, the only thing keeping Peter’s eyes open is energy drinks and the thought of Nara Yuki kicking him off their project if he falls asleep at the table again.

When Rumlow said to expect a long night, he wasn’t kidding.

Monday found Peter serving drinks made by an ancient barkeeper to a room full of powerful and wealthy people, clearing away empty plates and telling Rumlow when the buffet was running low on falafel.

As the crowd began to thin and Peter still hadn’t made a single dollar in tips, he’d been worried that was it, but then they all moved on to another room with a poker table manned by a thirty-something dealer. Peter remained the only waiter until the game ended at around 7:30 am yet Rumlow had
ushered in two women at some point who treated anyone who had to fold to a chat and a drink on one of the sofas.

Sometimes they left with the player, other times players bought back in.

It’s a test, Peter realized eventually.

A test he passed with flying colors, apparently, cause there’s been a game every night of the week at different locations and with dazzlingly high stakes. Peter still can’t comprehend how you can lose $100,000 and not bat an eye.

“Okay if we go ahead?” Neil asks from the doorway to the changing rooms. It’s Saturday and everyone’s eager to get home.

Peter waves them off. Once he’s alone, he can finally grab another sugar-free Red Bull from Rumlow’s stash. The man himself is waiting at the back door so he can lock up and they can get into Rumlow’s car.

“So, uh, where are we going tonight?”

“We, nowhere,” Rumlow says. “I’m dropping you off in Brooklyn. Gotta fetch some girls for a game at Berger’s, then check on the party at Whitmore’s. Seatbelt.”

Peter puts it on as quickly as he can. “But, um, what’s the, I mean I’ve never been there, I don’t know anyone –”

“You know the dealer. It’s the same as anywhere else, just shut up and do your job, fucking hell.”

Peter swallows his questions. If this past week has confirmed anything, it’s that Rumlow isn’t a man to cross.

It’s also proven that No Bones and its catering business truly are Rumlow’s passion projects. His main source of income, meanwhile, seem to be the strip clubs and establishments where he pulls Peter’s colleagues from for certain events, but Peter still hasn’t figured out whether Rumlow is in charge or part of a bigger organization.

They arrive at a hotel in Williamsburg where Rumlow hands Peter over to a janitor out on his smoke break and speeds off again. Peter follows the stoic janitor to the elevator, up to the tenth floor, around a corner and into a hallway where two armed men in suits pat him down.

Peter doesn’t even twitch anymore; no guns at the table and all. The guards wave him ahead.

“Hey Peter,” Diego greets him. The dealer’s warming up his hands, shuffling cards. “You can dump your stuff here. Yasmine, Nici and Casey are already in the suite. Sam’s with a player. You ready to dive in?”

“Um… Anything I need to know?”

Diego’s brow furrows. “What did your boss tell you?”

“That it’s the same as the other nights?”

“Ha, well, basically yeah. Just instead of celebrities and politicians, you got the FBI’s most wanted. Same rules, though – keep their glasses full, console the losers and make them buy back in. Easy. You’re good at reading people from what I’ve seen, you’ll have no trouble.”
To Peter’s surprise, Diego proves correct.

Once Peter gets his pulse under control, the men playing a few hands are just that: men. Some get distracted by Yasmine’s curves, some by Nici’s androgynous looks. Others prefer Casey’s dark skin over Sam’s blonde hair.

And then there’re those like Mathys Rousseau who tear off Peter’s clothes in a private room one floor below the suite.

Rousseau has scars, a lot of them. Peter identifies at least three bullet wounds when the man steps out of his pants as well as several healed gashes peppering his front.

The pants land on an armchair on top of the man’s empty shoulder holster and are quickly followed by a pair of designer underwear.

“There’s lube in the drawer,” Rousseau says. His accent’s Canadian. “I want to watch. I’m sure you’re beautiful when you finger yourself.”

Peter doesn’t fight the blush and gets to work. Rousseau strokes himself to hardness like that, telling Peter how to angle his body, how to touch himself, how to tilt his head. Later, it’s how to slip on the condom, how to rock back into Rousseau’s thrusts, how not to come until he’s allowed.

Meaning he will have to come eventually, Peter realizes. His partner’s skill in bed are basic at best – or maybe being ordered around simply doesn’t do anything for Peter – but this isn’t the first time Peter had to rely on his own imagination to get himself to the edge and beyond.

He doesn’t decide to think of Tony… it just happens.

Tony would have a lot more finesse, would adjust his angle until he hit Peter’s prostate. He’d make it a challenge, too – take him to the edge but refuse to give him permission to cross it, allow him to calm down again before driving him insane with need and pleasure.

Coming on command has never been easier.

Rousseau watches him spill his release all over his stomach and chest, then licks it off with a contented hum before kissing Peter lazily.

“I was right,” Rousseau murmurs. “You’re exquisite. Do you have a number where I can reach you, next time I’m in town?”

Peter types it into Rousseau’s phone. He needs three tries to get it right in his post-coital stage of exhaustion but he remembers to smile up at Rousseau when he holds the phone out again.

The other man replaces it with something plastic and Peter has to do a double take.

“Sir, are you sure –”

A “Shhh” and a finger on his lips cut him off.

“You were a ray of sunshine at the end of a disappointing day, mon cher. Buy yourself something nice next week.”

Peter can only nod and hope he’ll find a way to swap the chip for $2,000 in cash.

*
“I thought you said this is a 1979 Chiraz, boy? This tastes nothing like a ‘79!”

“I’m so sorry, ma’am,” Peter stammers and admits to his error. He could swear the lady ordered the ‘99, but it’s not his first mistake of the evening.

At least Mr. and Mrs. Toomes are in another room and didn’t see. This soirée is important to them, and it’s not their fault Peter didn’t leave Brooklyn before eight in the morning.

He’s glad he cancelled his visit to Ben on Friday or he wouldn’t have gotten any sleep whatsoever today, and aquatinting himself with the Toomes’ wine cellar would have been an entirely hopeless feat.

Peter swaps the woman’s glass for the correct vintage, refills another guest’s whiskey and fetches a few more slices of the vegan chocolate cake from the kitchen. It’s a welcome break from the world of poker rooms and small talk yet exhausting in its own right.

Especially when Kirilenko is there, too, touching Peter’s arm whenever he brings another drink or collects an empty plate. Or when Kirilenko whispers into his ear to meet him upstairs in five minutes and Peter has to continue serving as he counts down in his head cause he can’t risk anyone catching him glance at a clock.

Kirilenko is waiting at the railing, sipping whiskey.

He offers some to Peter, tells him to “Drink up,” then holds the glass to Peter’s lips in what he guesses is intended as a gentle gesture.

Peter swallows without tasting it. Kirilenko caresses his cheeks with a mournful expression.

“I can’t take you back to my hotel, I’m afraid,” he murmurs, and Peter has to bite back a sigh of relief. “I’m needed across the country... but a talented young man such as yourself doesn’t need a bed, does he?”

Kirilenko brushes a drop of whiskey off Peter’s bottom lip and it clicks in Peter’s mind. He takes the tumbler out the man’s other hand, then crouches to set it on the floor.

He stays down, resigning himself to swollen lips and messed up hair for the rest of the night.

His level of exhaustion means he’s extremely pliant, though, something Kirilenko rewards handsomely after he’s made Peter swallow every last drop and tucked himself back in.

At least his face doesn’t look too bad and he can salvage his hair before he goes back out again. The only guests who pay him enough attention to notice are Mr. and Mrs. Toomes, thankfully, and it actually works out in Peter’s favor at the end of the night.

He makes it home at 2 am with a wad of cash, so exhausted he feels it in his bones.

Then why can’t he fall asleep?

Peter checks the clock but his eyes are drawn to his closet in the background. The note’s still in there. It’s late. He’d get Tony’s voicemail, and then he could finally stop thinking about calling him and get some rest.

Two minutes later, he’s sitting cross-legged on the bed, his thumb hovering over the call button.

*Voicemail. Alright... Here we go.*
The dial tone rings. Once, twice... a third time. Then –

“Hello?"

Shit.

“Uh, Tony, hi – this is, um, this is Peter. Parker.”

“Hi kid!”

“I was going to leave you a voicemail, it’s so late I thought – I’m sorry if I woke you,” Peter stammers but there’s a chuckle on the other end of the line.

“Nah, I’m in my workshop. You know, I’ve been wondering if the radio silence was your way of telling me to fuck off...”

“No, sorry, I was, um, busy. Busy week...” Peter flounders.

“Hey, you’re calling now,” Tony says. There’s a clonk and something that sounds like metal hitting metal, followed by a hiss and cut-off curse.

“I can, uh, call another time if this –”

“No, wait...” More clonking, then a sigh. “There. Now I’m all ears. What were you gonna say, in that voicemail?”

“Oh... that I’m sorry it took me so long and that I’m, well, confused? Yeah, confused that you wanna... I mean, why? You made yourself pretty clear and –”

“Yeah, I know, not my best moment. That’s why I suggest we start over, maybe over dinner, and see what happens.”

“But why?”

Peter winces as soon as he’s said it. But he’s honestly confused and his brain-to-mouth-filter’s in desperate need of a reset through sleep.

Tony chuckles, though. “Fishing, okay... be glad you’re hot. Plus, you’re smart and you obviously love engineering. I think we’d have a great time. Did I mention you’re hot? Oh, I also really wanna get you naked again, now that I got the full picture and all.”

“I...”

Peter blinks at his dorm wall, Tony’s ‘I don’t pay for sex’ echoing in his head along with too many other thoughts all falling into two categories – I can’t and Yes please.

“How about we grab dinner tomorrow and just go from there?” Tony suggests. “Wait, you’re not vegan, are you? That’s not a criterion for the job, or whatever?”

“No, um –”

“Great, how about –”

“I have a class,” Peter interrupts, “until 9:30.”

“But I’m sure you get a lunch break,” Tony says without missing a beat. “I know this great little
place off Amsterdam Avenue, they do authentic Mexican food and... Anyway, how ‘bout that, kid?"

“O-okay.”

Tony gives the address and they agree on a time.

“Looking forward to it, kid,” Tony says, and ends the call.

Peter drops his phone onto the bed and buries his face in his hands.

*Stupid.*

He doesn’t have time for this. He can’t afford to sleep with Tony again, no matter how much he
wants to.

But this is lunch, in-between classes – not dinner at the penthouse. Meaning Tony’s gonna realize the
real Peter is nothing like the one he met and took home with, lose interest, and Peter can return to his
life like nothing happened.

Peter clings to that thought as he finally drifts off to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 6 awaits you, barring further technological complications, on May 15 :)
OMG folks... First of all thank you so much for your continued support and enthusiasm for this fic! 400+ kudos?! That's so awesome!

Second of all, thank you for your wishes re: my dead computer. I'm posting this chapter from my new computer, who now bears the name JARVIS because... reasons^^ Still, as of this weekend I'll be off to do some work for relatives for pay, and I have no idea how this will affect my writing/posting schedule. We'll see, I guess?

**Special thanks** to one wonderful reader on Twitter who asked to contribute to my laptop fund last week – which actually became a thing bc I gushed about it on Facebook and a writer friend sent me a PM and also asked to contribute andasdfghjkl I can't even....?! The amount of support and love in fandom never ceases to amaze me and this gesture is too heartwarming not to share with you all. Thank you, Tessa <3

*clears throat*

Back to TTS. Slight warning for ch6 since... it's short? But I think the content makes up for it! Enjoy =)
The kid finally takes his seat across from where Tony’s lounging on the corner bench. He gets a bit restless whenever he’s got his back to a room, but Peter doesn’t seem to find it strange he doesn’t offer to swap in case Peter wants the more comfortable seat.

The place is small, quite busy with locals who appreciate that the cooks were all educated across the border and that every staff member is fluent in Spanish.

“That’s why the food here’s different,” Tony explains over the menu, “cause they refuse to Americanize it. Or cook stuff that was invented for American soldiers in the first place, like nachos.”

Fortunately, the waitress returns with their drinks before Tony can go into full-on sharing mode and flood the conversation with the staggering amount of useless trivia he’s accumulated over the years. He’s here to learn more about Peter, after all.

Once their food orders are out of the way, Tony reaches for his beer but stops to tilt his head at the glass of water in front of Peter as something occurs to him.

“Huh. Are you even twenty-one yet?”

Peter blinks, then connects the dots. “Yes, um… But I have class right after and I don’t want to get too sleepy?”

The kid is a bullshit liar.

At least in the eyes of someone like Tony, who’s got an honorary Ph.D. in spotting bullshit.

“You know, you could’ve just said you don’t like the stuff. More for the likes of me,” Tony adds, and takes a pointed gulp from his beer.

This time, Peter’s blush seems to be mostly due to embarrassment, but it’s still as adorable as it was one and a half weeks ago.

Tony’s beginning to suspect this happens a lot: Peter bending his preferences to accommodate others. Like he tried to convince Tony he enjoyed the drink back at the penthouse.

Or in the bedroom – before Peter realized Tony actually wanted him to enjoy it.

The kid is... fascinating. A puzzle, almost. And Tony has never been able to resist a good mystery, especially not when it comes with such an enticing exterior.

“So,” Tony says after a beat. “How’s year two of engineering treating you? If it’s anything like it was at MIT, I bet it’s busting your balls.”

Peter’s “Oh yeah,” comes quickly but then he pauses.

He’s wary, Tony realizes. Not that Tony can fault him considering how things ended in the penthouse.

“How’s the project coming? The one you mentioned to Lehnsherr?”

“You remember that?”

“Course I do! D’you know how few people can spell methacryloyl-substituted tropoelastin, let alone explain why MeTros suck?”

“They don’t suck, I never said that,” Peter protests, and before Tony knows it they’re arguing about
MeTro versus positively-charged polymers in hydrogels and Peter’s explaining how his lab partner and he are fairing with combining the two.

The goal is to create a superior surgical glue. Tony doubts the kid realizes how promising his project is, what kind of doors it could open for him.

“The initial results are really great even though we haven’t had that many rounds but I think we can, like, just keep going over the summer and continue next term if the professors let us, but I think they will. I mean, I’m more into mechanical and Nara’s technically chemical, but Columbia doesn’t have much of biomedical engineering going on, so...”

Peter’s entire body lights up when he talks about it and for the first time he’s giving Tony a genuine smile. The kid’s pretty good at feigning enthusiasm, but this level of passion and drive… no one could fake that, no way.

It’s an amazing sight.

Their discussion is cut off when their food arrives with a sweet “Provecho” from their waitress and Peter ducks his head.

“Sorry, uh, I didn’t mean to talk your ear off.”

“No need for that, kid. Science babble’s my favorite kind of conversation. Well, when it’s smart and doesn’t bore me to death. So keep at it.”

The compliment takes a moment to register with Peter, whose mouth falls open. “Wow, that’s – that means a lot… Tony.”

“I know,” he grins, mainly to make Peter laugh. “Hey, can I trade you some of my conchinita for a bite of your enchiladas?”

Whatever Peter’s first reaction is, Tony never finds out cause the kid’s quickly sliding his plate towards the center of the table to cover it. What did he think Tony was suggesting, feed him?

Tony takes some food off Peter’s plate, then mirrors him and offers his own. For some reason, the gesture loosens the last bit of tension in Peter’s shoulders. Tony’s burning to ask but even JARVIS, going on no data whatsoever, would be able to tell him it’s too early for that.

Which might be more due to how advanced the AI’s gotten than to how glaringly obvious it is that there’s still an elephant in the room – the lull stretching between them as they eat isn’t awkward, technically, but…

Okay, yeah, it’s awkward.

Better change that.

“So,” Tony says, reaching for his beer, “how long have you been working at the restaurant?”

“Hm, nineteen months? I applied for a summer job out of high school and, um, they kept me on after the semester started.”

Tony sets his glass down again. “And how long’ve you been having sex for money?”

Peter drops his fork. The sound of metal on ceramic earns a few glances from other tables but everyone’s back to their own food once Peter’s expression has hardened into something like spiteful
determination.

“Sixteen.”

Tony arches an eyebrow. “Correlation or causation?”

“None of your business,” Peter snaps, then immediately looks apologetic.

“Nah, you’re right. I get nosy sometimes; one of my many vices.”

Tony keeps his tone light cause damn, apparently the kid’s got spunk. Another thing he seems to be used to hiding.

“Is that why you asked me to call?” Peter asks. “You’re curious?”

“Who wouldn’t be?”

Peter makes a self-deprecating noise that conveys the ‘Literally anyone else’ better than the actual words could.

Tony’s not one for beating about the bush except when it awards him a tactical advantage, so he takes a deep breath and waits until Peter’s meeting his eyes again.

“I’m serious here, kid. And yeah, curious, cause this cute waiter I took home one night – which didn’t go as planned and I’d thought I’d put behind me – then turned up at this event impressing my chief engineer and is actually able to hold a conversation with me. Believe me, there’s less people out there who meet that criterion than you’d imagine… So yeah, I wanna get to know you better. No idea what’s beyond that, and if you wanna part ways after the bill comes, I’m gonna respect that. But if you want to do this again… then let me take you to dinner. Let’s see what happens, no strings attached. Just good company and some fun.”

Where other people would have been flattered and tripping over themselves to agree, according to his past experiences, Peter’s reluctant even while he’s processing Tony’s monolog.

He can’t even… who says no to that? Or spends this much time mulling it over?

“No strings?” the kid echoes. Of course that’s what he focuses on.

Tony nods.

Another moment of indecision… Then, “Dinner?”

Tony mentally high-fives himself.

“I figure you gotta have one night a week you can fit me in?”

“Um…”

“C’mon, kid. When’s your last class end Wednesday?”

“Nine thirty…”

“Tomorrow?”

“Eight… ish.”
“Perfect,” Tony smiles. “I should be getting back to the city around then; implementing some stuff at the Munroe Group tomorrow. How about I pick you up, treat you to dinner, and we can see what else we disagree on? What do ya say, kid?”

*

“I can’t, I gotta – I have a thing. Sorry, Ned.”

“But tomorrow? I’ve got to show you this, man,” Ned says in that tone that means he’s going to start telling Peter about it anyway if Peter doesn’t take emergency measures.

“Tomorrow, got it, I promise – bye, dude!”

Ned’s internalized Peter’s schedule so his phone sometimes rings the moment class has ended. A few students are still hanging back, waiting to talk to the TA or for their friends so they can head home. Usually, Peter would join them... but not tonight.

Tonight, he’s having dinner with Tony Stark.

What the hell was he thinking? All day Peter’s been beating himself up for agreeing to the dinner – his situation hasn’t changed. He doesn’t even have time for his best friends most days, how can he entertain the option of seeing Tony again? With the possibility for more?

Maybe the night will be awful.

Peter didn’t have time to change and he refused to blur the lines of his wardrobe and wear a button down or something to his classes, so he’s off to a good start regarding the whole ‘awful’ thing in the jeans from yesterday and the only plain sweater he owns... but MJ said the blue brings out his eyes, shit, why didn’t he go with his old Midtown hoodie after all?

The roar of a car engine puts a stop to Peter’s inner turmoil.

It’s an Audi TT, sleek and unobtrusive. Also not yet equipped with one of SI’s mysterious prototype engines, or else it wouldn’t have made a sound and there’d be a blue glow spilling from underneath the hood. Rumor has it SI has developed a whole new kind of engine that will revolutionize the automobile industry, but Peter’s never found details on any of the tech blogs.

Tony steps out... in grey jeans, a burgundy shirt, and a charcoal vest. Peter’s pulse spikes, not only because the shirt’s top two buttons are open, but also because his own outfit apparently isn’t as inappropriate as he hoped it would be.

“I know, fashionably late. Not my fault, there was this machine that wouldn’t start. But they always do in the end, when I get my hands on them,” Tony says with a smirk and wiggling his fingers at Peter, who can’t hold back a chuckle.

“Where are we going?” Peter asks once he’s in the passenger seat.

They spent so long continuing their MeTro versus polymer discussion yesterday that Peter had to rush to his next class and forgot to ask where Tony was planning on taking him. When he asked via text to know what to wear, all he got was an ominous “whatever is fine, it’s not too fancy” in response.

Peter still can’t believe he texted with Tony Stark.

And that he’s about to have dinner with the man. Just because. For fun.
It feels like Peter’s committing a crime, somehow. And as uncomfortable as the thought of a pointless few hours when he could be studying or earning money makes him, Peter can’t deny that lunch with Tony was the best time he’s had in, well… longer than he can remember.

“You’ll see.”

Peter huffs, much to Tony’s amusement, then asks about his day. He’s curious, too – despite how often Tony’s face is in the tabloids, there’s surprisingly little information out there about what he does all day.

“Ugh, discover new depths to human stupidity – or hey, if you had a genius consultant at your firm right now, would you go ahead with a system upgrade only cause your bosses didn’t explicitly tell you to wait?”

“Uh…”

“Of course you wouldn’t, you got more common sense than a socket wrench. Seriously, if anyone ever complains about my fees, I’ll just say that eighty percent’s the compensation I’d get if I sued for damages.”

Tony drives them southward, complaining about the useless employees at the Munroe Group without actually giving away any details about the corporation or their set-up yet still managing to paint a vivid picture.

“Yeah, laugh, kid, you don’t have to suffer through it…”

They end up on the border between the Lower East Side and Alphabet City after Tony found somewhere to park, ambling down East Houston Street until Tony pulls Peter into a huge deli at the corner to Ludlow with a big sign above the front doors reading “Katz’s”.

Peter makes a noise of protest cause there’s a line spanning around the block but Tony grins. “I called ahead.”

Inside, it’s neon lighting and seat-yourself tables, with old-school-looking counter staff and pictures of famous guests covering the walls. It’s no-frills but cozy and totally not what Peter pictured.

“They do the best pastrami I ever had,” Tony says, leading the way to a spot in the back while waving at a few of the cranky-looking staff members.

There’s condiments on the table and napkin dispensers and a menu on cheap paper and Peter loves it. Within two minutes, a waiter appears and greets them with a dismayed “Oy vey, Tony… Your usual?” that Tony doesn’t bristle at so maybe the gruffness is part of the place’s charm. Either way, it makes Peter trust Tony’s recommendations about the food.

“Come here often?” Peter asks with a grin once the waiter has hurried off.

“What gave it away?” Tony winks. “Just doing my due diligence, given that I own the building.”

“What?”

“Yeah, it’s even on Wikipedia. Wasn’t my idea, though, this is back from when my old man still invested in real estate.”

Peter’s met countless of people who own more than one property but they’ve all made a pretty big
deal out of it and wouldn’t be checking up in person, either.

Tony, meanwhile, is nice to the staff even when it takes ages for first their drinks and then their food to arrive, seems truly glad Peter’s enjoying his sandwich, and takes just about every stereotype Peter’s formed of billionaire CEOs and deconstructs it.

What’s worse – Peter doesn’t notice how much time passes cause Tony’s so easy to talk to.

Sure, some of his rapid-fire responses are a challenge to follow and more than once he mentions something Peter has little to no clue about...

“How do you know so much about astrophysics?”

“What can I say, I’m a T-shaped person – okay, and I quizzed Bruce one night when I got bored, but he needed a break anyway.”

“T-shaped person?”

“Ha, it’s supposed to be someone with both a deep understanding of a skill and broad expertise in many others, but frankly it’s just another ridiculous category made up by hiring consultants so they can charge more money…”

“Why T, though? Why not X, or something?”

“You’re asking the right questions, kid.”

... but it’s never patronizing or condescending. Peter’s read enough interviews with SI employees and people from companies Tony’s consulted for to know he’s a good teacher underneath the arrogance and demanding attitude, but experiencing it first-hand is another thing entirely.

Before Peter knows it, they’re the only ones left and it’s way past eleven. He turns around and oh shit, the front doors are closed –

“Relax, kid. They’re gonna kick us out when they’re done with the clean-up.”

“Which is now.”

Their waiter waves a damp rag at them with an exaggerated scowl that has Peter stammering an apology until he notices that Tony’s laughing and the gruff expression doesn’t reach the waiter’s eyes.

*

Tony stops the car a bit down the road from the residential brownstone and gets out of the car with him.

“I’ve got a roommate, but, uh, you could –”

“Nah, I just wanna make sure you get home alright.”

Peter has no idea what to say to that so he just keeps walking until he’s fumbling with his keys on the steps to the front door. Most windows are dark but the low light from the porch is enough to see Tony’s smiling at him.

This is the part where they’re supposed to see what happens, Peter remembers – or rather, the moment Peter should thank Tony for a nice evening but tell him that’s all it’s going to be.
Before he can voice any of that, however, Tony closes the distance between them.

Peter has every chance to stop the kiss. He could even bring a hand up and there’s still room to take a step back, but he does none of these things.

Instead he closes his eyes and leans in the rest of the way until he feels soft lips on his. Tony smells like machine oil and deli food and Peter’s heart is beating in his throat when they pull apart again.

“We should do this again,” Tony murmurs and Peter steals another kiss, just because he can.

Then Tony’s walking back to his car, turning around with a soft smile before he’s out of sight and any hope Peter had of saying no fades with the sound of Tony’s footsteps.

This was not the plan. Not at all.

Chapter End Notes

Peter’s T-shirt

EDIT May 31: Chapter 7 was supposed to follow May 29, but since RL has been a mess, my writing schedule is off and my beta is also being swamped with RL stuff.... Tuesday came and went and I didn't realise it's that Tuesday. I am SO EMBARRASSED and above all sorry. My sincerest apologies, dears! I hope to remedy this as soon as I can and provide chapter 7.
seven

Chapter Notes

So... I’ve spent 62 hours in the past eight days doing manual labour in my sister’s garden and her basement (for my new laptop) and was so exhausted and caught up in the whole shebang that May 29 came and went without me noticing. Big thanks to the concerned reader whose comment made me realise my error today!

Anyway... I’M SO SORRY, FOLKS! I hope this chapter makes up for the wait :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“A week! A week, JARVIS! That kid’s busier than I am!”

“Indeed, sir.”

Tony glares at the nearest sensor in the workshop. “How about you say that once more with feeling, buddy?”

Too bad JARVIS doesn’t deign rhetorical questions worthy of a reply.

At least Peter texts back.

From: Peter

“So one day less than a week…”

[10:50] Or lunch/coffee on Friday? My break’s 1-2pm.

“J, what’s my schedule on Friday look like?”

“It is your final day at the Munroe Group, sir, implementing changes at the factory.”

“Nah, those’re gonna be done by Thursday night. Friday’s just monitoring the shit’s working like it’s supposed to. And I designed it, it’s gonna go off without a hitch.”

“Is this what one might call ‘jinxing it’, sir?”

“Don’t say that! I knew the second the words were out of my – never mind.”

Tony goes back to composing his response.

[10:52] Friday it is! Coffee shop on campus? What’s good?

*  

Apparently ‘everything’ cause Peter doesn’t have that fine a pallet as Tony does when it comes to coffee.

“They make all drinks by pushing a fucking button, Peter – that’s not coffee, that’s sludge.”
Bless college students and their dependence on legal performance-enhancing substances, however, since it makes finding another coffee shop a piece of cake. The third one they try even has a real coffee maker and competent-looking baristas, plus a neat selection of bagels and sandwiches.

Peter pays, to Tony’s surprise.

He doesn’t make a big deal out of it either; he simply happens to be first in line, then asks for Tony’s order, too, and just pays the seventeen bucks or whatever. Tony can’t think of anyone he’s been out with in the past who wouldn’t have turned to him and expected him to pay simply because his networth’s larger than the GDP of several countries.

Yet no matter how hot he finds Peter asserting some autonomy, Tony can’t shake the sense that it’s got something to do with the five hundred dollars he remembers tossing onto his mattress… but he knows better than to mention his hypothesis, so he keeps quiet until they’ve found a semi-secluded table near the back.

It’s right next to the bathroom.

Both of them take one look at the door, then at each other…

And burst out laughing.

A few students glance their way but Tony has layered a Black Sabbath T-shirt over a long-sleeve and found an ancient spring coat that might have been pristine once upon a time in the depths of his closet, so… yup, his disguise is holding up.

“F-y-i, I get hard every time I’m in an accessible toilet thanks to you,” Tony says, making Peter choke on his coffee.

“Uh, sorry not sorry? I mean... I really enjoyed that. And… and the next day.”

It seems like Peter’s been wanting to say this for a while. The more Tony gets to know the kid, the more he believes it, too, regardless of that layer of doubt that’ll probably always be there given the misunderstanding that led to their first night.

Time to create new memories, and soon.

“Good to know,” Tony says, hoping Peter catches the sincerity in his tone. After another beat, Tony breaks the moment and picks up his bagel. “By the way, what’s the deal with Bucky? The guy makes a mean drink.”

“Bucky’s great!” Peter leaps at the topic change but then runs out of steam immediately. “I, uh… I dunno. I’ve never really…”

“But you’re working together.”

“Yeah, uh… I know he’s a veteran? Steve, too. They grew up together, actually. Bucky has a lot of stories about how Steve got in trouble when they were kids. Oh, Steve’s our –”

“Pastry chef, you might’ve heard about his pop-up cupcake shop, yeah, I got your tour,” Tony says with a wink.

Peter grins back. “They want to have their own shop one day. I was over at their place last week cause their oven wasn’t working – just some broken heater elements – and they told me Steve’s freelance baking, too.”
“Now that sounds delightfully dirty,” Tony quips and Peter throws a napkin at him.

The hour they have (well, half hour due to their quest for decent coffee) is over much too quickly.

Tony’s walking Peter to his next class so the kid can finish complaining about aerodynamics with Tony interjecting rebuttals to each of his arguments, which also provides the perfect chance for something Tony’s been thinking about all throughout their coffee date.

Yes. Coffee date.

There, he said it.

“Oh, you’d sing another tune if you saw that stuff actually applied to something in the real world. You ever been up close to a plane, or heck, even a jet engine?”

Peter shakes his head, brow furrowing.

“You know… If you get off work early one night between now and next Wednesday, you can always swing by the Tower. I’m usually in the workshop till one or two anyway and something tells me giving you a tour would work wonders in my grand plan to seduce you…”

He imagined the reaction to his suggestion to fall more on the positive side, but the kind of sheer, unadulterated joy on Peter’s face…

Oh yeah. This was definitely a date.

And if the way Peter’s eyes light up and he’s stumbling over his words is any indication, Tony’s on the best path to ensure Peter shares his opinion soon.

*

The workshop.

Tony’s workshop.

There aren’t even rumors about it on the internet, that’s how exclusive it is. Or rather, the few rumors that’re out there are too vague to paint much of a picture. But everyone and their grandmother knows it’s where Tony comes up with all his greatest inventions and develops most his prototypes and gawd, just the history of the place has Peter drool at the prospect of being allowed inside.

Peter would have taken Tony up on his offer that very same night but Toomes had another potential business partner to ply with Rumlow’s food and Peter’s services.

At least the client doesn’t ask him to stay the night – though when Peter leaves the Upper East Side hotel at 3:30 am, he wishes he had cause then he might get more than three hours of sleep for a change. He’s used to short nights, but he’s pretty sure the last time he felt rested was… before he started cramming for midterms, probably?

Saturday’s another long one cause George calls as Peter’s walking up to No Bones at noon, meaning he’ll either have to finish his reading before May picks him up for their visit to Ben or risk another worried comment about his work load. He goes for the former so of course they spend an hour waiting to be let into the visitation room that Peter could have put to better use. Ben’s not in the best mood either once May admits the PI’s latest lead brought up nothing they can use in their appeal.

Peter has no chance to change before his shift starts, which prompts a sneer from Rumlow and a
snide “Laundry day?” as everyone but Steve and Bucky chuckles during meal break.

Peter flees for the changing room the moment he’s done eating, but Rumlow follows him.

“You got backup clothes here?”

Peter pauses, hands on his belt. “Uh, yeah.”

“You’ll need them,” Rumlow says. “Mr. Silverstein is at table three. He asked for you.”

Peter feigns enthusiasm even as his stomach sinks in disappointment and he wonders if pretending he has a bug or something might get him out of – wait.

**What the hell are you thinking, Parker?**

If he doesn’t cement his relationship with Silverstein, then the banker’s going to find someone else and Peter’s gonna miss out on thousands and thousands of dollars over the next few weeks or even months, depending on how long the man is staying put this time.

Blowing off this chance for Sunday night in Tony’s workshop that’s going to be just as awesome tomorrow, or on Tuesday, is, well...

**Stupid.**

So Peter caters to Silverstein and his guests’ every wish, stands close enough for the man to squeeze his ass when he tops off his wine, and heads to the address Rumlow provides him with at the end of his shift.

Silverstein’s sexual prowess is still as uninspired as it was at Whitmore’s party during Spring Break, which was fine for a quickie in a bathroom but really tests the limits of Peter’s acting abilities when it’s drawn out over the course of a night. Apparently, Silverstein’s got to keep an eye on something in Tokyo until the markets close there and Peter seriously wonders whether asking for ice to soothe his jaw will turn the guy on or not.

“How can I tempt you to stay the night, pretty boy?” Silverstein murmurs with a hand stroking his hair after finally closing his laptop once the clock has struck 3 pm in Japan.

Which is 6 am in Manhattan.

“I, uh… I’d love nothing more, sir,” Peter manages, biting his bruised lip for good measure and looking up through his lashes from his position on the floor. “But I, um… You see, I have class at eight. I’m really sorry.”

“A pity,” Silverstein says.

His gaze drops to Peter’s mouth again and he spreads his legs wider. He’s still wearing a shirt and tie since he’s been popping in and out of video conferences after ordering Peter to keep blowing him, and Peter feels really bad for the member of housekeeping who’s going to have to clean that chair.

“Guess we’ll have to make the most of our last hour together.”

* 

Sprinting to the subway is a lot easier with a grand in his pocket. He has three texts and a missed call from MJ cause he didn’t show up to their session, so he tells her he overslept.
Oh, the irony.

He’s five minutes late to his first lecture because the frozen peas on his jaw felt so damn good and he got so caught up in replying to Tony’s latest message that he forgot the time.

The texting… It’s nothing, really.

Tony mostly complains about the incompetence of everyone around him, his PR department forcing him into talk show appearances, and provides reasons why aerodynamics are awesome at regular intervals.

Peter knows he shouldn’t text back as often as he does.

He’s letting Tony distract him way too much as it is; trading his reading time during Friday’s lunch break for coffee and bagels has set a precedent Peter’s going to have a hard time to keep from becoming a norm, especially in light of his impulse to cancel on Silverstein. The sooner Peter stops jumping every time his phone vibrates in his pocket, the better.

It won’t last anyway.

Even the romance with the Middle Eastern princess was over within a few months and Peter’s under no delusion that it’s only a matter of time before Tony will have satisfied his curiosity and latched onto the next unsuspecting person.

For now, Peter has decided to allow himself to enjoy this – at least as long as it doesn’t get in the way of helping Ben and May.

Which is why he’s in front of Stark Tower on Monday shortly before 10 pm, re-reading Tony’s latest text.

From: Tony
[09:54] Private elevator again, it’s gonna take you where you need to go

[09:55] I’ve been meaning to ask about that…

[09:55] ;-)

The same night guard’s at the door and smiles in surprise when Peter greets him, and like before, the elevator opens and closes without any action required. This time, however, it descends to the lowest sublevel.

Peter feels his palms growing clammy so he wipes them on his jeans. He’s in a graphic tee and zip hoodie again and a quick check in the mirror confirms that the concealer is doing its job. Nothing about his appearance is going to invite any questions, as long as Tony doesn’t spend too long looking at his knees or –

The ding of the opening doors pull Peter out of his thoughts.

He steps into… an anteroom of some kind. The walls are obviously reinforced and the only window into what lies beyond is embedded in a door but Peter can’t see Tony anywhere.

With a soft click, the door’s lock disengages.

Peter glances around – whatever system is running these things, Tony’s placing a lot of trust in them – and takes a few tentative steps forward.
The room is huge, with high ceilings and so many work stations that Peter has no idea what to focus on first.

This must be the lowest level, the foundation of Stark Tower. No windows, the subterranean feel and *holy shit*, is that a plane?

A small one, sure, but… there’s a plane.

“It’s a jet.”

Peter whips around to find Tony, wearing the kind of ripped jeans that aren’t bought that way and a black tank top that shows off his arms, which are stained with grime and grease from whatever he’s been working on. He’s wiping his hands on a rag that’s seen better days and grinning from ear to ear.

“A StarkJet, actually. Which reminds me… Ah, not now, ugh, come on…”

Peter blinks at a tall robot with one arm rolling up to him.

“Well, alright, fine. Peter, meet Dum-E. Don’t accept any kind of food from him, he’s useless with a smoothie maker. But quite efficient with a broom, so if he wants to help with that, it’s okay.”

“Hello, there, “ Peter say, shaking the robot’s makeshift hand.

Dum-E gives a happy chirp in response and rolls off with a purposeful air.

When Peter looks back at Tony, he’s regarding him with an expression Peter’s never seen before.

He’s sprinting away a moment later though, cause apparently Dum-E’s not supposed to pick up fragile StarkPads. Tony rescues it before it can get damaged in any way and walks back to Peter.

“Sorry that I gotta bug you about signing an NDA before I’ve even said hello, but,” Tony waves a hand at the rest of the room, “company secrets, all that jazz.”

“No, it’s fine,” Peter says. “Were do I sign?”

Tony seems surprised by how easy Peter’s taking this but well, it’s not the first NDA he’s agreed to in his life.

Peter signs on the StarkPad with the provided pen after skimming the document and holds it out to Tony but Dum-E is faster. This time, though, Tony merely rolls his eyes and sighs before pulling Peter towards him. He stops right before their lips would have touched, waiting for Peter, who’s already meeting him halfway.

Tony tastes of fruit juice and smells of welded metals. It’s a heady combination that Peter doubts he’ll ever forget, much like this kiss. Tony’s beard scrapes against his jaw and the utility belt’s pushing into Peter’s hip while he maps the strength of Tony’s arms and shoulders with his fingertips.

He keeps expecting Tony’s hands to go for either of their belts or for him to maneuver them to one of the work tables in the vicinity, but there’s no urgency to Tony’s movements.

“Hi kid,” he whispers when he pulls back enough to look Peter in the eye. “You want a tour?”

It takes a second for Peter’s mind to switch gears but once it has, he’s nodding and more than happy to let Tony pull him along with a hand on his wrist.

Tony’s normal talking speed is fast, yet somehow in the workshop he’s doing double-time. Peter
understands maybe half of the projects strewn around the room, can infer the relevance of others and is completely stumped by some, like the nanotech body armor that’s as soft as cotton.

They spend ages inside the prototype of the StarkJet until Peter grudgingly concedes that okay, aerodynamics are pretty cool.

Even cooler, however, is the engine powering the aircraft.

“Had this idea about ten years ago and combined it with something my Dad was toying with back when science hadn’t caught up with his genius yet,” Tony explains. “I’m calling it an arc reactor cause it’s arched and ‘donut-shaped thingy’ would’ve sounded ridiculous. Basically a fusion reactor. The first prototype ran on palladium but…”

“The decay rate?” Peter guesses and Tony beams at him.

“Exactly!”

“So, uh, what’s the core now?”

He’s never seen Tony look so smug. “An element I created.”

Peter feels his expression go slack cause, “That’s awesome!”

“Right reaction there, kid. You wanna see? Hang on, what time is it, I was gonna offer you something to drink at some point…”

Without warning – or prompting – a hologram appears near them, displaying “12:39 am” in a bluish hue similar to that of the arc reactor.

“Alright, change of plans,” Tony says, hooking a finger through the loops of Peter’s belt and pulling him closer. He’s shed the utility belt between the nanotech and the jet, so nothing keeps Peter from winding his arms around Tony and pressing their bodies together. “How about I grab a quick shower and we leave the rest for another day? I think I owe you breakfast.”

Peter swallows down his initial response, which would either have been ‘Only if I can join you’ or a variation of ‘Don’t wash it off, there’s a couch in the corner’, and instead merely nods.

“Be right back.” Tony murmurs and slips off towards the workshop bathroom.

Peter noticed the shower in there when his bladder had been impossible to ignore and has been wondering ever since whether Tony’s gonna want to make a use of it tonight.

Peter’s not particularly fond of shower sex – he has so little privacy in his life that showers have become special to him – something he thankfully remembered just in time to stifle his suggestion.

Tony’s not a client; he’s allowed to say no to things he dislikes, Peter reminds himself and begins to amble about the workshop until Tony returns.

He doesn’t touch anything, though. He’s a guest here, after all, and now that he grows more and more at ease in this space, the adrenaline in his system’s starting to recede. He’s still very clumsy in that state and the last thing he wants is screw up a prototype or an experiment because he couldn’t rein in his curiosity and for Tony to kick him out or something.

He has no idea what awaits him once they’re back in the penthouse but he doesn’t want to lose it before finding out what it is.
Tony can’t shake the worry that it’s been so long since Peter’s spent any time with someone just for fun that he’s reverting to how he’d act with a client without even noticing it.

First the odd reaction to Tony’s shower comment, then the timid way he found the kid exploring the workshop upon his return, and now the insecure air about him in the elevator.

Not to mention what seems like a pound of concealer under his eyes, but it’s way too early in their acquaintance for Tony to reveal how overprotective he can get.

He’ll get Peter to relax and be himself eventually, bags under his eyes and everything.

First things first, though.

“Alright, now I’m asking: drink?” he offers, leading the way to the bar. “I do have water, for the record.”

“Oh, yeah, I’ll, I’ll take that,” Peter says, fighting a blush.

Tony pours them both a glass from the carafe sitting on the counter, then downs the first one like a shot cause he’s parched. Peter’s pacing himself, either because he’s had some manners drilled into him or he’s a lot more hydrated than Tony.

Either way, their positions are eerily similar to the ones during their first night here, and like back then, Peter’s eyes are drawn to the images on the fridge.

Most people Tony’s brought back over the years didn’t pay them any attention. Peter, though… Peter regards them with suppressed curiosity.

“That was after TechCrunch in the VIP lounge,” Tony explains, pointing to a picture of himself with Pepper and Bruce, then goes through all of them for good measure. “And these two are Natasha and Clint. Former special ops… or wait, maybe Navy Seals? I always get them confused.”

“How did you find them?”

“They stopped a kidnapping. My kidnapping – well, one of the many attempted kidnappings in my life. Note to self,” Tony says, leading the way to the sofa. “Midnight runs to the nearest Seven-Eleven cause you’re out of chestnuts… bad idea. Anyway, nine-point-five times outta ten, the kidnappers are wannabes and I can fight them off myself – Rhodey’s been training me since that one time in college that – never mind. Point is… what was my point? Ah, right, Clint and Natasha.”

Tony pauses for a moment to make sure Peter’s still listening – which he is, eyes wide – and to hand him another pillow cause Tony has a tendency to hoard them all on one side of the couch.

“Some goon and his fellow clowns spotted me at that Seven-Eleven, followed me out, were about to knock me out or something and bam, in swoops this red-haired angel and her sidekick. But don’t tell Clint I called him that to his face, he gets prissy cause he’s the better shot and he contends he can break someone’s neck with his thighs just as easily as Natasha can but I’ve yet to see any evidence of that… Well, I wanted to write them a cheque to thank them, but Clint said he’d rather have a job and Natasha said, ‘You need better bodyguards, sir’ and that was the end of that discussion.”

“Good. Uh, I mean… they seem like awesome bodyguards.”

“Oh, they are. Pain in my ass with all their rules, though, so I’m afraid if we run out of chestnuts
tonight we’ll have to wait until tomorrow to restock.”

Peter blinks. “Why would we – oh, are you hungry?”

“What, no, it was a…”

That’s when Tony notices the upward curl of Peter’s lips and damn it, that kid totally pulled his leg right now.

Peter ducks his head and gives him a sheepish look, mirth sparkling in his eyes, and Tony can’t help laughing at himself cause he fell for it.

He raises the carafe he brought with them in silent question when Peter empties his glass but the kid shakes his head, which Tony takes as his opening to shuffle closer.

There’s still a respectable distance between them cause he wants to get to know the kid better, not just tear his clothes off… although Peter keeping up with him in the workshop really tested the limits of Tony’s self-control.

“So, what do you do for fun?”

“Huh?”

“In your free time,” Tony says. “You know, that time when you’re not at work, or at class…”

Cause he’s been wondering. The kid must have something in his life to keep him going besides a hatred for aerodynamics and the need for cash.

“Sleep.”

Tony waits for the punch line, but none is forthcoming. “What about your friends?”

“Oh, right, I meet up with MJ, she’s a friend from high school – well, actually my ex, from before I knew I was gay, and, uh, we work out together.”

“Working out’s not fun kid. That’s why it’s called ‘work out’, not ‘fun out’.”

A beat.

“Yeah, I admit, not my best pun.”

Peter is kind enough to at least give him a pity chuckle before adding, “And I skype with Ned; he’s my best friend. He’s at MIT.”

The fact that the kid’s mind goes first to work out sessions and then to what Tony assumes are rare conversations with his best friend from high school rings some alarm bells in Tony’s mind but he figures it’s too early in their relationship for him to butt into Peter’s business with his worries.

And yes, he’s aware he switched from acquaintance to relationship just then, thank you very much.

Instead he asks, “What about your parents?”

…but regrets it immediately when Peter’s face clouds with grief.

“They died when I was four,” he says in that monotone voice Tony’s used countless of times himself once he was done processing. “I’ve been living with my… with my aunt and uncle since then.”
“That sucks. Guess four sucks more than nineteen, though. But if I play the ‘my uncle stabbed me in
the back and tried to steal my company’ card, I might get some bonus points,” Tony quips in an
attempt to lighten the mood that was doomed to fail from the start.

Peter shrugs. “It’s not a competition.”

Tony throws his head back with a groan cause, “How can you be so much more mature when I’m
twice your age?” before getting up and grabbing the empty carafe.

“Um,” Peter says immediately and Tony schools his features since he knows what’s coming. There’s
no way a mind like Peter’s doesn’t immediately do the math and realize…

“I thought you’re turning forty-eight in May?”

“Lies and slander,” Tony says, “The leaked birth certificate online is totally fake.”

And just like that they’re laughing again.

Tony leans down for a quick kiss once it’s subsided but stops Peter’s hand when the kid tries to pull
him onto the sofa. Not only cause he fears it’s one of Peter’s trained reactions, but also cause he
won’t let the kid believe he’s a bad host for letting his glass sit empty.

Of course he only has one carafe in the penthouse and the fridge holds everything except bottled
water since “Do you have any idea how bad they are for the environment, Tony?”

He’s all for green living, sure, but Pepper’s policy to use crystals instead of the high-tech filtering
system Tony designed – and which they’re selling, for fuck’s sake – means getting a gallon of water
takes acute time management skills nowadays.

Peter’s leaning back on the sofa and watching him with an amused expression.

Tony doesn’t let that faze him. “I’ll be right back,” he says, and checks the floor below.

Tony designed it for parties and gatherings, meaning it’s got a well-stocked bar and a full carafe…
somewhere.

“Sir,” JARVIS interrupts his search, “another beverage might not be necessary tonight.”

“What, why? Oh, hold that thought, I think I got the perfect segue: ‘Speaking of family, Peter, say hi
to my AI.’ What d’ya think, buddy? Or is the rhyme too much?”

“I’m afraid Mr. Parker will be unable to oblige tonight, sir. My scans indicate he has fallen asleep.”

Indeed he has, Tony finds out a minute later.

Peter’s lying on his side, feet pulled close and face mashed against the cushion Tony gave him, out
like a light.

How tired was the kid? Tony should have said something after all, apparently.

Well, the least thing he can do is let Peter get some rest. He contemplates carrying him to the
bedroom but he doesn’t want to risk the kid waking up halfway through and getting the wrong
impression. Plus, the sofa’s comfortable enough that Peter won’t have a crick in his neck in the
morning.

So all Tony does is take off Peter’s sneakers and grab a blanket from the drawer in his bedroom.
Peter settles more deeply into the couch once Tony’s draped it over him and the remaining tension leaves his face.

Like this, he looks more his age than with whatever weight that’s pulling him down during his waking hours. Not for the first time Tony wonders if he should just probe until Peter tells him what’s wrong and he knows what’s necessary to fix this.

Tony’s good at fixing problems, if people let him.

Somehow he doubts Peter will – but that’s a whole other problem entirely.

For now, Tony just watches the kid sleep, something warm unfurling in his chest.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact: this chapter took A LOT of rewriting, mainly because the original plan simply didn’t read right to merlenhiver and myself. But I’m very happy with how it turned out eventually, and I hope you enjoyed this as well :)

Chapter 8 will follow June 12.
I know, another slightly longer wait, but I wasn’t able to write TTS at all during my work trip to Bavaria and I need to catch up with both my normal writing schedule and a lot of other stuff.

PS: My post-Infinity-War fic will be completed soon, in case you'd like to take a look in the meantime.
Peter startles awake at the sound of something hitting the floor but forgets all about it when he realizes he has no idea where he is.

“Good morning, Mr. Parker,” a smooth, male voice with a British accent says, and Peter’s suddenly on high alert, looking around for whoever’s addressing him.

“It is March 26th, 06:32 am. You are at Stark Tower. My name is JARVIS and Mr. Stark is, based on my initial analysis of his endeavors, attempting to prepare breakfast in the kitchen behind you.”

Which does absolutely nothing to calm Peter down cause shit, he fell asleep on Tony before they even made it to the bedroom, which Tony’s probably not going to be thrilled about, and he still has no idea where the voice is coming from.

“I resent that tone, J, I totally got this!”

Peter chances a peek towards the kitchen since Tony sounds muffled. He finds the man crouching down and picking up coffee beans – which explains the sound that woke Peter in the first place.

When Tony looks up, he spots Peter... and smiles widely.

“Morning, kid! Coffee’s coming, I promise. Breakfast, too. I nipped down to the kitchens so this bread’s right outta the oven and I remembered your ode to scrambled eggs the other day so there’ll be some of that, too.”

“Kitchens?” is what Peter’s sleep-addled brain’s still stuck on.

“For the staff cafeteria? Gotta feed my army of employees somehow, you know.”

Tony’s gathered the last of the coffee beans and gets to his feet. A horrid thought dawns on Peter...

God no, Tony is a morning person.

“Ha, your face, kid… Bathroom’s through the bedroom. Just ask JARVIS in case you can’t find a spare toothbrush on your own, that’s what he’s here for.”

Peter doubts that’s the only thing the voice does but he can’t quite verbalize his thoughts, not when his brain’s still shaking off sleep and he’s panicking about falling asleep on Tony, or when losing his morning wood to the shock revealed a pressing need to pee.

He grabs his satchel and passes through the bedroom, noting the rumpled sheets, before he steps into the ensuite.
Peter’s seen many luxury bathrooms in his time, some two or three times larger than this one, but none ever had this futuristic look to them. All faucets are motion-activated – he discovers when he tries to switch on the handle to wash his face and nothing happens – and there are sensors everywhere, like the ones he saw in the workshop that projected holograms.

He doesn’t find a spare toothbrush, though.

Peter looks around. Now that his mind’s a little clearer, he’s starting to put together what that voice was.

He clears his throat. “Um, Mr. JARVIS? Tony said to ask you about a spare toothbrush, so, um… Can you help me?”

“Of course, Mr. Parker. You will find all that you require in the second cabinet to your left.”

Indeed, he does. Apparently staying over at Casa Stark includes high-end, single-serving toiletries in addition to breakfast. Even if you fall asleep before the main event.

“Thank you, uh, sir,” he stammers when he remembers his manners, moving back to the sink.

“You are most welcome, Mr. Parker. You are also welcome to refer to me as simply JARVIS, seeing as I am a computer program and require no such formal form of address.”

“Oh, okay… Are you – you’re an AI, though, right?”

“Your assumption is correct.”

“Do you run the elevator?”

“Yes, sir. I am also in charge of all major operations within the Tower.”

Peter lowers the tube of toothpaste he was about to uncap and eyes the sensor above the mirror. “So, um, you can see and hear everything?

“For security purposes, audio monitoring is active at all times. In case of emergencies, biosensors will be switched on to provide essential details to first responders. All areas with active video monitoring are clearly marked throughout the Tower, Mr. Parker.”

Peter relaxes at that. He’s made it this far without being taped in compromising positions and he doesn’t want to start any time soon.

But if JARVIS has biosensors and communicates with first responders – and can identify emergencies in the first place…

“JARVIS, uh… just how advanced are you?”

“I apologize, Mr. Parker. My protocols do not allow me to answer your question.”

Peter blinks at his reflection. That’s not eerie at all.

But also, “Awesome.”

“Thank you, Mr. Parker.”

The AI even sounds pleased. Peter can’t wait to quiz Tony about this, so he hurries through getting ready, exchanging the clothes he slept in for fresh ones from his bag, and returns to the penthouse
kitchen where Tony’s scrambling eggs with surprising skill.

He puts down the skillet when Peter approaches and presents a big mug with a flourish.

“Best beans this side of the Atlantic! Hope you also take it with sugar in the mornings; otherwise I can –”

“No, it’s, it’s great.” He takes a huge gulp and gasps in surprise at how delicious it tastes.

Tony smirks. “See, that’s why you don’t just push a button. There’s more where that came from,” he adds with a wink.

Peter ducks his head. “Thanks… and, um. I’m sorry, Tony.”

“What for?”

“For falling asleep on you before we… before we could do anything.”

“But we did plenty,” Tony says, snatching the pot and topping up Peter’s mug. “Or weren’t you there in the workshop? I’m ninety-nine-point-nine percent sure I didn’t imagine you.”

“No, I was, it’s just –”

Tony cuts him off with a kiss. Peter tries to chase after his lips but Tony steps back, out of his reach. His eyes are warm, though, so why won’t he just let Peter –

“Last night was perfect.”

Oh.

“I mean it,” Tony says. Peter can hear the sincerity in his voice and feel it when Tony brings up a hand to cup his jaw. “I had a great time.”

“But all we did was….”

Tony gives him a prompting look.

“… talk,” Peter finishes weakly.

Tony nods, so pointedly casual that Peter’s certain he’s doing it on purpose, but even though he’s starting to understand what Tony’s trying to say by not saying it… the implications are just too staggering to process.

Tony seems to sense his doubts for he slides his hands to Peter’s elbows and effectively keeps him from bolting – which he’s actively considering. There are way too many warning bells going off in his head and a persistent mantra of stupid stupid stupid that’s –

“I like talking. With you, in case that wasn’t obvious. We should do it again, soon. Tonight, in fact,” Tony says, as though this weren’t a huge deal. “Or tomorrow. Sometime before I lose you to the restaurant again for the rest of the week.”

“Uh.”

Tony’s easy-going expression doesn’t waver.

“I, I like talking with you, too,” Peter admits, which might be the understatement of the century, and
decidedly not the right thing to say at this moment.

But he’s still waiting for the caffeine to kick in and Tony’s hands are warm on his arms and no one has ever been interested in Peter like this. It’s like there’s a bubble around them whenever he’s with Tony, and he never wants to leave.

“Sir,” JARVIS speaks up, “your eggs have reached perfect texture.”

“Oh, they always have perfect texture,” Tony says, then aims a wink at Peter. “Right?”

It’s an awful pun, but Peter has to laugh regardless. He follows Tony to the hearth to help but Tony ushers him onto a bar stool instead.

“You’re off the clock, for Christ’s sake,” he says, preparing a plate. “I got this.”

When Peter takes the first bite, he startles. “You really do.”

Tony groans. “What’s with that tone of surprise, everyone’s always so surprised – how’d you think I made it past thirty? Seriously, back in college I once made steak on the hot plate in our dorm – I had a craving, okay, and a lotta pocket money – anyway. I made steak, even deigned to share it and Rhodey starts acting like I’m trying to poison him or something. But then he tries it and suddenly it’s all, ‘Why ain’t you ever mentioned you can cook, man,’ and trying to bribe me into making him dinner all the time.”

Peter hums around his last bite of scrambled eggs (hey, they’re awesome) and tries not to let it show too much how intriguing he finds this side of Tony.

The prevailing opinion in the media seems to be that neither Tony nor his family ever ate anything that wasn’t prepared by paid professionals… but maybe Tony going out himself to stock up on chestnuts wasn’t as out-of-character as Peter assumed at first?

“And the one time I brought Pepper lunch in her office,” Tony continues, and Peter figures he’s onto something, “she’s all, ‘So nice of you to order something for me, too’, like it’s so absurd that I – oh, right, speaking of Pepper…”

Tony pauses long enough to eat another fork-full himself before barging on. How anyone can be this alert so soon after waking up is baffling to Peter.

“You mentioned something about Steve and freelance baking.”

It takes a moment for Peter to follow that non-sequitur. “Yeah?”

“You got a way to contact him? In a totally PG-rated, cake-related way, for the record.”

“I can ask Bucky, I have his number from exchanging the broken heating elements.”

“Is that what we’re calling it these days?” Tony sniggers, since apparently the greatest scientific mind of this century has a thing for puns and innuendo. Well, Peter can work with that.

He meets Tony’s gaze over the rim of his coffee mug. “What kind of baking do you need?”

“Oh god, how can you pull that off with a straight face, seriously…”

“Well,” Peter shrugs, “I spent last week recommending vegan ‘coq au vin’. Pretty hard to top that.”

“You’re lying.”
He’s not, actually, but he simply smirks and takes another sip from his coffee. The look Tony gives him in return does weird things to Peter’s heartbeat.

Tony’s expression turns calculating then. “Don’t tell Bucky it’s me. Just say someone wants to order a birthday cake and to talk it through in person. I wanna see his face when he realizes it’s me, ha!”

Peter pulls out his phone and texts Bucky immediately while Tony puts their empty plates away and refills their coffees.

“Who’s it for?” he can’t help wondering. “If you, um, don’t mind me asking?”

“Why would I?” Tony slides up to where he’s still perched on the bar stool and winds an arm around his back, holding onto the mug with the other. “It’s for Pepper. Usually we’d get a party planner for these kinds of things but apparently I can’t be trusted to select, how’d she put it? ‘Appropriate gifts’, so she put me in charge this year and decided that’s all I’m allowed to give her.”

Peter’s hesitant to ask but his curiosity gets the better of him. “What did you…?”

“A balloon ride into space. Come on, that’s awesome, as you’d say, right? What’s wrong about that?”

Peter can think of several things off the top of his head but makes sure the only thing he projects is understanding.

He tends to forget the great guy he’s been spending time with is also a billionaire who can afford to drop several hundred thousand dollars – if not more – on birthday presents. Peter’s not exactly poor either but, well, he can’t forget about his priorities just to spring for something more than a voucher for ComputerWorld for Ned or an Oxfam gift card for MJ.

Tony’s grown quiet, he suddenly notices, and when he looks up he finds Tony considering him with an air of hesitation Peter’s never seen on him.

“You wanna come with me? To the party, I mean?”

Peter stares.

“It’s in two weeks and I know you work on Saturdays but maybe you could, you know, take a day off? I could introduce you to Rhody and you can meet Clint and Natasha and oh gawd, Bruce is gonna want to drag you off to the lab the second you mention you’re working on surgical adhesives, it’s gonna be great!”

“That’s, uh… wow,” Peter manages. “Can I, um, can I think about it?”

Tony seems relieved for some reason (did he expect Peter to say no outright?) and kisses the corner of his lips with a smile. “Sure. You can even sleep on it, if Steve and Bucky wanna talk cake tonight. How about we continue the workshop tour tomorrow? I could bring the quarterly check on the building’s arc reactor forward, that’s always a tedious hour or two but something tells me having you there would make it more fun.”

Wednesday would mean some time to process, which is exactly what Peter needs cause if he makes a decision about the party now it’s not gonna be an a well-reasoned one, given the turmoil inside his head.

On the counter, his phone buzzes with a text.
It’s Bucky’s reply with Steve’s number, which he forwards to Tony just as JARVIS pipes up again to remind them of the time.

“Shit, I gotta go,” Peter realizes, and Tony lets him leap off the stool and grab his stuff before pulling him closer again.

The kiss that follows is quick but somehow more intimate than anything they’ve shared so far. It leaves Peter with a warmth in his chest and a tingling in the pit of his stomach that he refuses to think about as he steps into the elevator JARVIS got for him.

It’s only when he’s in his dorm exchanging clothes for textbooks and his laptop that the extent of what happened catches up to him.

Last night was perfect.

Because Tony’s not just after sex. Peter gets that now. The thought boggles his mind but it’s not a daydream, he has to remind himself. It actually happened.

And then, oh shit – Pepper Pott’s birthday party.

Introducing him to Rhodey, Tony’s best friend for longer than Peter’s been alive. And to the infamously antisocial Dr. Banner, who hasn’t given as much as a phone interview despite the fact that he’s a prominent figure thanks to his groundbreaking research – not to mention that it was Dr. Banner’s papers that sparked Peter’s interest in medical engineering in the first place.

Peter takes a deep breath.

It’s doable. He’s switched shifts before when Ned came to visit so they’d have the evenings for Lego marathons and pizza nights. He simply has to adjust for the missing Saturday morning, and maybe add some lab hours tonight to make up for Wednesday spent with Tony, and double down on his reading if Tony suggests lunch on Friday again…

Yeah, he realizes. He can make this work.

He can let himself have this.

*

Tony glares at the hologram, waiting for the explosion of ideas that discovering a problem usually inspires, but all he gets tonight is a small-scale detonation that’s nothing to write home about.

“JARVIS... Just this once?” he pleads. Again.

“Apologies, sir. Only Dr. Banner is allowed to override Protocol ‘Remember Snowden’. Do you wish me to wake him?”

“No!”

The last thing Tony needs is Bruce’s patented Stare Of Disappointment – closely related to his I’m Giving Up Sigh – cause he’s too impatient to simply wait until Peter is ready to open up to him more than superficially.

If anything’s become obvious last night and this morning, then it’s that Peter’s not one for sharing. Don’t get him wrong, the cutesy stories from classes and memories from performing illicit experiments with Ned when their teachers weren’t looking are great and all… but whenever Peter
brought up his aunt or uncle he immediately segued into something else.

Not to mention the anguished look on Peter’s face when he actually apologized for falling asleep before they could have sex – like it’s a foregone conclusion, or worse, like he still believes it’s the main reason Tony invited him over.

He thinks his behavior at breakfast managed to clarify that nope, it’s not, yet Tony doubts the kid got the ‘I’m serious about this’ scope of the party invite yet.

“If I may point out, sir,” JARVIS says.

Wait, was he talking out loud again?

“Yes, sir. And may I point out that the circumstances of how your liaison with Mr. Parker began might give him a somewhat distorted idea of what motivates your interest in him.”

“You mean he’s still thinking I’m just after another quickie in the bathroom? Why the hell would I take him to Katz’s then, or drive up to the Upper West Side for horrible coffee?”

“Mr. Parker’s opinion of your dating habits is heavily reliant on your reputation in the press, sir. According to my data, there is little distinction online between your short-term sexual partners and more serious endeavors on your part.”

Great. That’s what he gets for valuing his privacy.

At least now he knows what the underlying problem is.

Or, well, one of several, but Tony needs to win Peter’s trust a bit more first before he dives into the whole ‘Do you have a scholarship and if yes then why the hell are you sleeping with people for money and on that note, I have a lot of disposable income’ shtick.

Another reason to hack Peter’s financial records.

But he won’t.

Nope.

His tendency to check up on his partners was what pushed Pepper over the edge eight years ago and he vowed to never again ruin his chances with anyone only to satisfy his curiosity.

Hence the ‘Remember Snowden’ protocol. If Bruce signs off on his hacking, he’s allowed, but something tells him Bruce would do that thing where he closes his eyes and takes off his glasses to rub the bridge of his nose if Tony presented his case this time.

Besides, he’d have to explain the thing about Peter being a sex worker for it to make sense… and that’s not his story to tell.

Heaving a sigh, Tony collapses the hologram and checks his tablet. Everything’s there, and his guests should be arriving at any –

“Sir, Messrs. Barnes and Rogers are approaching the Tower.”

“Thanks, J.”

It’s 10:15 pm on the dot when the security cameras show the two men entering the lobby. Tony likes punctuality – in other people.
He’s got a reputation to uphold, though, so he waits a couple of minutes before taking the elevator downstairs and sauntering up to the barkeeper and the baker.

Off duty, Bucky looks just as Tony expected: still with that messy man bun, but he swapped his uniform for jeans and a Henley. The battered boots and his stubble give him a bad boy air rather than that of a hipster, especially compared to the blond, kind-faced man who must be Steve Rogers.

Tall, stacked with muscle and tugging at the sleeves of his white shirt in a way that suggests he’s more of a T-shirt person. Also clocking Tony’s arrival immediately – right, Peter mentioned they’re ex-military – and nervous as hell, judging by Steve’s smile.

“Mr. Stark, hello, I’m Steve Rogers, this is –”

“Bucky the bartender, how could I forget,” Tony cuts in before this gets any more stilted.

Bucky gives his boyfriend a smirk as he shakes Tony’s hand, which Steve answers with a pointed look that screams ‘I told you to behave’ and Bucky ignores.

“No one forgets my drinks,” he says, still grinning. “We gonna stay in the lobby for this, or you gonna let us sit down at some point?”

“Bucky!” Steve hisses, but Tony’s already laughing.

“Right, right, twelve hour shift, was it? Least I can do is offer you a drink, I’m sure you’d rather be cozied up at home by now.”

He leads the way back into the elevator while Bucky’s doing some non-verbal version of ‘I told you so’ to a frazzled Steve who’s clinging to his professionalism like it’s a shield, and shows them the party floor.

“Okay, floors – plural,” he amends as he cuts across the room towards the bar. “But this is where I’m storing the good stuff. What’s your poison?”

“You sure you wanna mix a drink for a guy who does it for a living, mate?”

“Oh, I’ve been stirring martinis since before you were born, buddy,” Tony says, and throws a bottle of vermouth into the air to prove his point, catching it after it spins twice over his head. “Allergies? Preferences?”

“Stevie here’s lactose intolerant and he’s got a sweet tooth.”

“A pastry chef with a sweet tooth? You don’t say,” Tony teases, which finally draws a smile from the man in question.

“And I’m a snob,” Bucky adds, eyeing the top shelf. “But I guess so’re you.”

“You ain’t seen nothing yet,” Tony says. “Why don’t you take a seat, get out that portfolio you mentioned on the phone.”

Steve’s off immediately with a formal, “Of course, Mr. Stark,” that has Bucky roll his eyes and Tony chuckle as he grabs some fresh lemons from the fridge.

Bucky blinks when he brings them their drinks. “Amaretto Sour?”

“Try it,” Tony dares and sure enough, the next few minutes are spent making the guy guess why Tony’s version tastes so much better than everyone else’s.
“Good that I made four right away, eh?” Tony grins as he returns with his own glass, another short tumbler and a StarkPad stuck under his arm.

Steve seems to have resigned himself to embarrassment and merely sighs when his boyfriend accepts the second drink and leaps at the chance to talk business once Tony gives them the NDA spiel.

“It’s supposed to be a surprise and I can’t have Pepper finding out about her birthday cake from Perez Hilton.”

“Of course, sir.” Steve signs first, then hands it back so Tony can pull up the other document and give it to Bucky. “What did you have in mind for the cake, Mr. Stark? How many servings, what kind of theme?”

“I want the most impressive birthday cake she’s ever seen, for real. I don’t care how much it costs, I want it to be jaw-dropping, alright? Gonna be about sixty guests, so, I dunno… Hundred-fifty servings at least? A few different parts cause I think we got a few nut allergies and at least one of her BFFs is some vegan hater of gluten. You’ll get as much space as you need, of course, and I’ll show you the kitchen later.”

It’s amazing how Steve goes from tense to taking over the coffee table with his pictures and sketches over the course of the next half hour. His passion for his craft is contagious and Bucky’s dry commentary and suggestions keep him from going overboard with some of his ideas.

The sight of the kitchen renders Steve speechless, however, even more so when Tony tells him to explore and see where he’ll be able to work best.

“I’ll put your names on file so you’ll be able to do any preparations you need next week whenever you want. Doors close at eight but there’s always a guard to let you in if you’re on the list, so you’ll be able to work around your schedule.”

They already agreed to take that Saturday off work since whatever Steve comes up with is gonna take ages to execute. Speaking of which...

“You wanna earn some more money?” Tony asks Bucky while Steve’s jotting down notes as he inspects the appliances and tools available.

“What, you need a bartender?”

“Well, our caterer provides staff, too, but they don’t have your sparkling personality.”

“Aww, you’re making me blush, Mr. Stark,” Bucky says. “And hell yes. What’re you offering?”

“Double what you’d make at the restaurant plus fifty percent to compensate for the lack of tips.”

“That’d be, like, four hundred and fifty bucks.”

Tony pauses. “Seriously?”

“You realize we make minimum wage, right?”

“Well, not under my roof,” Tony says, and something about Bucky’s smile suggests this has been the guy’s plan all along. Tony can appreciate a little scheming. Besides, “Even our interns get fifteen bucks an hour. How about nine hundred for the party as a baseline and depending on how good you turn out to be I’ll add a bonus?”
“Deal.” Bucky grins and extends his hand.

Tony shakes it, but when he wants to pull back Bucky won’t let go.

_Ugh, great._ Protective co-worker speech starting in three, two, one…

“Peter coming to that party, too?”

“If he decides he wants to.”

Bucky narrows his eyes. “So it’s up to him?”

“With me? Always.”

Tony holds Bucky’s gaze until the barkeeper’s satisfied Tony’s telling the truth and releases his hand.

That’s not the end of the conversation, though. Bucky even takes a step towards him, eyes never once leaving Tony’s.

“You better make sure Peter’s clear on that, too.”

_Interesting…_

Tony’s been in the spotlight long enough to know when someone’s fishing. So either Bucky is fully aware about Peter’s side job or he suspects enough to be wary, but he’s not clear on what Tony and Peter are to each other. Or maybe even if Tony’s aware of what’s going on in the first place.

“All ready on it,” Tony says, infusing his tone with enough meaning that Bucky hopefully understands what he’s getting at.

By the looks of it, he does.

The line of his shoulders relaxes again and he withdraws from Tony’s personal space, just in time for Steve’s return to the land of the coherent.

“This is great, we’ll barely need to bring anything, sir. Are you sure the other cooks will be fine with ceding their space?”

“Oh, they adore Pepper,” Tony says. “Don’t worry. How about I make us another round and we can negotiate cost?”

Bucky agrees with a, “Hell yeah” before Steve has a chance to react and off they are.

The extent of negotiations boils down to Tony saying, “I’ll cover all material costs. How many hours do you think you’ll spend on this?” and Steve giving a number that Tony multiplies by a reasonable hourly wage, which leaves Steve gaping and Bucky nodding. They still have, like, ten minutes of Amaretto Sours left, though, so Tony seizes the chance and asks about Rumlow and the restaurant.

“He’s a dick.”

“Bucky –”

“Well, he is.”

“He hired us with no professional training,” Steve says, turning to Tony with ‘I apologize for my
boyfriend’ written all over his face. “I never went to culinary school or did anything other than bake for friends and family before Stars and Stripes. Everyone loved it, but no one was willing to give me a chance. Bucky’s not, uh, he’s not the ideal candidate either—”

“Seriously? He’s the born bartender,” Tony says, not even bullshitting.

Bucky shrugs. “Ain’t many people who’re willing to hire someone with a record.”

For some reason that makes Steve look guilty. With a smile, Bucky places a gentle hand on his knee and Steve visibly swallows whatever feelings he’s harboring on that—damn, it was hard enough not to get jealous of these two before this.

Hashtag relationship goals right there… not that Tony would admit to ever thinking that.

“Also means Rumlow can pay us the minimum he’s allowed, legally,” Bucky continues, “cause he’s a greedy dick. But we ain’t gonna work for him forever.”

He clinks his glass against Steve’s with a determined expression and Tony leans back into the sofa cushions with a grin that draws both their attention.

“Then you better bring business cards. Everybody’s gonna want a piece of you, Mr. Rogers. Your baking, I mean,” he adds with a smirk. “I’ll make sure of that.”

He’d be lying if he said he’s doing this out of the goodness of his heart instead of ingratiating himself with Peter’s co-workers, but hell, these two deserve it. Tony’s enabled more than one career to take off in the past few decades; why not add pastries to the list of industries he’s revolutionized?

Bucky sees right through him, obviously, but he doesn’t seem to mind in the slightest.

Now the only thing that’s missing is Peter accepting his invitation.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 9 might follow either next Tuesday (June 19) or the week after (June 26). It’s written but not yet beta’d, though what’s more is that it ends on a cliffhanger. I’m currently in the third draft of chapter 10 and I’d be loath to update ch9 without being certain of how ch10 is going to play out… Who’d have thought it’s so damn hard to write a simple hooker fic? Not me...

Anyway, I hope you enjoyed ch8! More is on the way :)}
Chapter Notes

Thank you for your patience :) I have an extra long chapter for you, though!

**Content warning** for Very VERY Bad BDSM etiquette. If you’re new(ish) to the world of kink and fetishes and curious, here’s a short [Buzzfeed listicle](https://www.buzzfeed.com) to get you started.

**ADDITIONAL WARNING** since this chapter really makes good on the “dark” tag and a lot of the horrible things associated with the hooker fic genre. Read with caution, and maybe have someone to cuddle near you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Peter does his best not to think about the party invitation since that would only turn into obsessing about how to act or what to wear and he really needs to keep his head on straight until then.

Otherwise, his fragile hold on his schedule’s going to slip and he’ll fall behind for real. So far, only Professor Donovan has noticed his dwindling contributions and she’d better remain the only one. One stern lecture about his work ethic is enough.

Unfortunately for him, Blindfold Brad is back – the ambitious businessman who’s so unapologetically ruthless he could be the antagonist in a summer blockbuster and likes to finish up his work for the day with Peter kneeling in his line of sight.

Tonight, he’s next to the plush sofa of a suite (Brad must have gotten the promotion he’s been going after), naked except for the tie covering his eyes. Peter has developed a routine to cope with the sensory deprivation, this lack of control that affects him more than any form of restraint ever has.

In… out… in… out.

**Steady breaths.**

**Focus on the sounds. No need to panic,** he assures himself. **You don’t need to see him, just listen.**

After a few minutes, Peter feels the anxiety recede as more and more sounds stand out to paint a vivid picture of the scene around him. The creak of the desk chair when Brad rises, the shuffling of papers, the low thump of a glass being set down.

Ben taught him that, back when he and May tried to wean Peter off sleeping with his night light on. Their neighborhood was noisy at night and offered a lot of practice, but their apartment was truly great – homey and full of smiles and laughter. May clang to it until Peter moved out for college even though she’d been late with rent and bills for months before that.

Tony’s penthouse, with the pictures stuck to the fridge, reminds him of their old place and of the party and how Peter still has no idea how the hell he’s going to convince Rumlow to give him the night off –

The slap sends him reeling.
He manages to catch his fall before he face-plants onto the carpet, breaking the ‘Don’t move’ rule Brad’s so adamant about.

But that’s the least of his problems right now.

“I told you to crawl, boy,” he hears the man snarl and Peter obeys immediately, biting down his apologies for screwing up cause ‘Don’t talk’ is even more important.

For a breathless moment he fears he guessed wrong and that Brad doesn’t want him to crawl to the bed like on every other occasion before… but the man makes an appreciative sound somewhere behind him so Peter feels his way from the living room to the suite’s bedroom, swift but careful, Brad’s footsteps following in his wake.

Brad’s a fan of restraints and pain play, but his biggest kink is having Peter pretend to get off on what he does.

Peter didn’t use to – not at all – and he’d have turned Brad away after he showed his true side on their second night together if it hadn’t been for the three grand on the coffee table and the assurance of a safe word.

Turns out you can make yourself like anything for the right price.

At least Brad’s rarely in Manhattan, jetting across the globe for a big company, so Peter has plenty of time to recover in between scenes.

“I’m sorry, sir, please, I’ll do anything to make up for it,” Peter says, with just the right amount of alarm in his voice.

Brad’s hand on his cheek is surprisingly soft. Peter startles regardless but decides to use it.

“I don’t deserve your touch, sir,” he whispers, and he knows he’s just saved his tip at the end of the night cause Brad makes a pleased sound at the back of his throat.

“No, you don’t. Do you want to earn it back, boy?”

Peter nods frantically and then follows Brad’s directions. He’s used to being tied to the bed, wrists fastened to the head board, clamps attached to his nipples and ball gag in his mouth. Thankfully, the sturdy rope doesn’t chafe – he wouldn’t be able to explain the marks away to either MJ, May or Tony.

No, don’t think of him. The last thing Peter wants is to associate Tony with any of this.

What’s new this time around is the protective sheet of plastic underneath him.

And the sound of a lighter.

Brad notices him tense and coos. The mattress shifts and suddenly, there’s heat close to Peter’s cheek. “It’s a candle,” Brad says.

Peter’s never felt hot wax on his skin and it would be fine – he’s had worse in terms of pain – but it’s the unpredictability of it that gets to Peter the longer it goes on. One moment, a drip lands on his ribs, then his arms, then it’s back to the chest, no pattern or system to it.

A hiss escapes him when a drop lands on his nipple in a flare of heat and he barely manages to bite back another sound when Brad brings his flat palm down on his stomach in instant punishment for
making a noise.

He thinks about his safe word then, thinks about bucking against the restraints and tearing off the blindfold and finally being able to see again –

No.

Three grand, he needs those three grand.

It becomes a mantra, a constant stream of threegrandthreegrandthreegrand as Brad starts dripping wax closer and closer to his groin.

Just when Peter’s managed to calm down again and is wondering how the hell he’s going to get wax out of his pubic hair, Brad clamps his nose shut.

The ball gag restricts his breathing enough as is it, but with his nose blocked as well, pretending he’s still aroused gets much more difficult.

Peter hoped quelling the dread creeping up his spine would get easier with time – Brad loves reducing Peter to a powerless heap of held-back arousal, waiting longer every scene to give him permission to come – but his body’s natural responses still elude his control.

Especially when the next drop of wax lands on the inside of his thigh.

Peter’s gasp doesn’t make it past the ball in his mouth. Yet just as his vision’s beginning to fray, Brad removes his hand along with the gag.

“Hmm, did you like this, boy?”

Peter has to catch his breath before he’s able to reply. “I loved it, sir, thank you, thank you so much…”

He loses track of how often Brad repeats the spiel, his breathing growing more ragged every time, until he finally stubs the candle out on Peter’s hip.

Brad also answers the question of how he’ll get the wax off again – with a knife.

Now the wax on Peter’s throat makes more sense.

He breathes through feeling the scrape of the blade against his skin, focuses on the sting of the clamps which is almost soothing in comparison, and tries to remember if he’s still got enough iodine at home… but it’s impossible to form a coherent thought with his heart beating a staccato against his ribs.

When Brad’s finally had enough of playing around, he removes the gag for good and fucks Peter’s mouth like that, knees on either side of his head and probably bracing himself against the wall. Peter relaxes his throat and desperately clings to his erection even as a new spark of panic flares up in his chest that he simply can’t seem to quench cause he can’t see he can’t breathe he –

He almost chokes when Brad comes though he has no choice but to swallow since Brad isn’t pulling out. Peter feels his body revolt and it takes every last ounce of determination he has left to keep still, to breathe through his nose and simply take it all.

“I don’t think you deserve to come today,” Brad says later, still massaging Peter’s cock. “Your first priority is my needs, boy, and you failed. Do you think you deserve anything after that?”
“N-no, sir, I don’t.”

It comes out raspy since his throat is still sore, which hopefully hides the relief Peter feels. He’s not sure he could have made himself come tonight, not after that.

Brad doesn’t stop, though. The stimulation feels good, fuck, so good after everything that it makes tears well up in his eyes. Peter can barely stop the sounds he’s making even as he resists approaching the edge with every fiber of his being cause Brad said no, he’s not allowed, he mustn’t –

Brad’s hand stops and Peter has to swallow the sob that almost escaped him.

“Good boy,” Brad whispers, placing a soft kiss on his cheek.

He removes the blindfold and makes shushing noises cause Peter’s still crying, can feel two, three tears spill from the corners of his eyes that Brad sweeps up with more kisses while he opens the restraints.

Peter’s shaking when Brad pulls him close in what the man deems sufficient aftercare, is still shaking when Brad pulls away and orders him to clean up and get going.

Peter’s talked to enough professionals in the scene to know what Brad’s doing to him is far from okay, but when Brad pats his cheek and adds another stack of bills to his payment, he knows it’s worth enduring it.

The three grand will go into his savings account; half the tip will go to May, the other half will be split between his clothing fund and whatever present he’ll get Miss Potts.

And thirty bucks go to a cab cause it’s close to three o’clock in the morning and he feels uneasy on his feet. All he wants is to curl up in bed and forget tonight ever happened.

No such luck, however, since there’s a voicemail waiting on his phone when he checks.

It’s Rousseau, all ‘mon cher’ and compliments. He’s in town for an entire week starting Thursday, meaning the only time Peter’s going to be able to visit Stark Tower is tomorrow – or would that be today, if he’s not going to bed?

Peter can’t remember why he shouldn’t, though, when he stumbles into his room. His sheets look as soft as clouds and Peter wants nothing more than – wait. Right, reading, that’s why.

Reading, not bed. So he can meet up with Tony after classes today. Tomorrow. Wednesday. Whatever.

Peter shakes his head, hoping to clear it enough to prepare it for the intricacies of mechatronics, and sits down at his desk.

*

The prospect of finally getting to tell Tony, “I’d love to come to the party” when he meets him in the lobby fuels Peter for the rest of the day.

For good reason, he discovers. The smile Tony gives him is blinding.

He doesn’t make a big deal out of it, though, for which Peter is grateful, simply chatters on excitedly about the cake Steve’s going to conjure up and Bucky’s face when he tried Tony’s special Amaretto Sour.
“You ready?” Tony asks when they reach the ominous double doors on the lowest level of Stark Tower that houses the arc reactor which powers the entire building.

“Yeah,” Peter nods and the doors open without further prompting to reveal one of the greatest feats of engineering Peter’s ever heard of.

To be in the same room with it, to be able to walk around the device that’s paving the path to a more sustainable life…

“It’s…” Peter says but words are hard to come by. “It’s awesome.”

“Bet you say that to all the fusion reactors,” Tony quips.

By now Peter’s caught on to how Tony uses humor to deflect from how much genuine praise means to him, so he merely smiles. The more time he spends with Tony, the more layers he discovers.

As promised, Tony walks him through what tests and maintenance he’s got to do, starting check-up procedures as he explains. Peter manages to listen closely but watching Tony light up as he talks, or how assured and confident he tweaks things here and there, is more distracting than Peter expected.

Tony notices, of course.

He puts the scanner on the floor while the final diagnostics are running and steps up to Peter, not stopping until he’s crowded Peter against the reactor wall.

He can’t say what’s more erotic – the sight of Tony in front of him or feeling the fusion’s warmth seep through his T-shirt.

“Is it working?” Tony says. “Are you swooning yet?”

“Uh…”

Tony leans in to kiss Peter’s neck, dropping one hand on his hip as fingers close loosely around Peter’s arm.

It’s not the side where the candle burn’s still healing, fortunately, which is also the only mark left from last night, but a flash of memories still delays Peter’s response before he gets his body back under control.

“Doesn’t everyone?” Peter wonders then. He puts a hand on Tony’s lower back, tethering himself to the here and now.

Tony pulls back from his neck, his brow furrowed for a moment before his lips twist into a wry smile.

“I wouldn’t know. Lehnsherr isn’t one for swooning – not that I’d want him to, mind you – and Pep and Rhodey’ve known me so long that showing off doesn’t work anymore.” He tilts his head. “Okay, Bruce was pretty impressed… but I was trying to get him to take a job, not…”

He trails off, probably because he sees that Peter’s finally catching on to what it means to Tony that he’s showing this to him. Holy shit, and he thought the party invite was a huge step.

“I’m, uh…” He swallows. “I’m swooning, oh yeah. Definitely swooning,” he repeats, his grin growing so wide it almost hurts. “I could pretend to faint, if that would, you know…”

Tony chuckles, shaking his head. “Just keep smiling like that, kid.”
But smiling seems inadequate and Peter has no words for the way his heartbeat stutters when he sees the emotion in Tony’s eyes.

He doesn’t need words, though, he realizes, and goes in for a kiss. He starts it slow and sensual, then deepens it as he feels Tony’s length through the layers of fabric between them and rolls his hips.

“What’s your thoughts on,” Peter says between kisses, cause this isn’t enough either, they’ve been here, done that and it can’t possibly measure up to Tony’s gesture, “on blow jobs near heavy machinery?”

The resulting “Ngh…” from Tony is answer enough and Peter doesn’t give him any time to question this, just turns them around and slides to the floor with as much grace as he can muster.

He’s perfected removing belts and opening zippers at record speed long ago, but when he’s about to dive in and lay the basis for all the ‘blowing your mind’ puns Tony will undoubtedly think of…

Peter can’t.

His joints lock up and his body freezes. He’s never felt anything like it, can’t even take a breath for one long, scary moment before he manages to give himself the nudge he needs to wrap his lips around the tip of Tony’s hardening cock.

“Wait, wait, kid…”

Peter pulls off immediately.

Tony’s looking down in worry, not arousal. Peter’s stomach plummets.

“What’s wrong?”

“I should be asking you that,” Tony says. “Could you – please, just…”

Peter gets it when Tony starts tucking himself back in and rises to his feet, feeling cold all over.

“I’m sorry,” Peter says, cause he is, for whatever he did wrong.

“Hey, no, I’m not – Christ,” Tony curses, running a hand through his hair. “Look, I’m all for blow jobs near heavy machinery as long as everyone’s enjoying themselves.”

“I was!” Peter says.

“Were you?” Tony shoots back. “Cause it looked like you were running on autopilot down there.”

“I want this! I want to show you how much this means to me.”

“Not the same thing, buddy,” Tony snaps. “I don’t need you to thank me with sex, for fuck’s sake.”

“Then what do you want me to do?” Peter shouts back, surprised by the volume of his voice. “You’re so good to me and let me into your workshop and show me this and… I don’t…”

The words don’t come and Peter realizes with a start that his eyes are beginning to burn. He tries to swallow everything down, the tears and the frustration and confusion but it’s not working. His skin feels paper-thin and anxiety twists his stomach cause he’s ruining the best thing that’s ever happened to him, isn’t he, cause he can’t fucking keep it together.

He squeezes his eyes shut and takes several quick, deep breaths until he feels less likely to start
crying. This has been embarrassing enough as it is.

“Peter,” Tony says at length but Peter doesn’t dare look up. “You don’t… I didn’t show you the workshop for anything other than cause I figured you’d love it. Don’t know if you’ve noticed but I kinda like talking shop with you. So you don’t need to do anything, alright?”

When Peter lifts his head, he finds Tony hovering a few steps away, his expression void of pity or anything other than affection.

“I’m sorry,” he says again. “I should have – I don’t know what I was thinking.”

Tony smiles. “Nothing we can’t handle, kid. And I think we should handle this elsewhere, cause as great as the arc reactor is, the diagnostics are done and this room doesn’t even have a coffee maker – which is a horrible oversight, for the record. I really gotta have a stern word with the idiot who designed this.”

“You’d just be talking with yourself,” Peter says. It doesn’t come out as strong as he wants it to but he’s starting to feel more at ease again.

“JARVIS, in fact,” Tony says, leading the way towards the elevator. “He’s supposed to stop me from making stupid decisions.”

“Maybe he’s worried you’re drinking too much coffee?”

“Or he’s just messing with me,” Tony grins, adding “Take us upstairs, buddy” as the elevator doors close. “Now, kid, what’s your stance on hot chocolate?”

“Uh…”

“You can be an adult and like hot chocolate. That’s a thing. Just putting it out there.”

“No, I, uh… I like it.” Peter does but can’t remember the last time he had milk that didn’t have at least two shots of espresso in it.

“Great, then you’ll love my secret recipe. Well, it’s not mine, per se,” Tony continues. “I got it from our housekeeper back when I was a kid. I know everyone says the first thing I asked for when I got back from Afghanistan was a cheeseburger but that’s cause you could buy them. You can’t buy Gabriela’s hot chocolate. I think we could both need some right now, what d’ya think?”

Tony also suggests blankets and the sofa, giving Peter space to make himself comfortable while he goes to work in the kitchen. When Tony joins him, Peter almost feels like himself again, not like a stammering bundle of embarrassment.

“Wanna talk about it?” Tony asks, his tone neutral.

Peter doesn’t even need to think about it before shaking his head.

“Wanna tell me your favorite movie?”

“Huh?”

Tony smirks. “We’ve spent all this time talking about science that I don’t even know if I can mock you for your horrible taste in movies.”

He can, it turns out, but Peter doubts anything he could have said would have stopped Tony from teasing him. Okay, maybe calling Empire Strikes Back a “really old movie” wasn’t ideal but at least
he’s seen it.

“Wait, wait, wait, you haven’t – what do you mean, you haven’t seen Star Trek?”

Peter ducks his head.

“Alright, that’s it, I can’t let you live like this for another day,” Tony announces, and that’s how Peter ends up spending his second night at Stark Tower sleeping on the sofa.

Cause as fun as mocking 1960s special effects is, he’s warm and comfortable and at some point Tony puts an arm around his shoulders and Peter drifts off to the soothing sound of Tony’s heartbeat.

*

The memory of that night and waking up in Tony’s arms is the only reason Peter makes it through the next seven days.

Tony was visibly disappointed when Peter told him he wouldn’t be able to drop by after work for a week but quickly latched onto his suggestion to meet up for lunch again on Friday.

Organizing his stuff and scheduling his studies around Rousseau almost made Peter forget that he’s still got to tell Rumlow he needs Saturday after next off.

To his surprise, his boss already knows.

“Rogers said they’ll need a helping hand and Barnes told me Stark was pretty impressed with your service. Maybe your charm’s gonna work better on his own turf,” Rumlow adds with a pointed look.

“I’ll do my best, sir,” Peter says, and mentally sighs in relief.

Rousseau is even more boring than he remembers, but maybe that’s cause Peter’s been spending so much time with Tony Stark and everyone would pale in comparison.

He quickly catches on that Rousseau is aiming for the ‘boyfriend experience’ without explicitly saying so, probably cause it would go against the tough image he’s projecting, but Peter’s been doing this long enough to read between the lines.

Or to figure out that the business meetings he’s accompanying the man to as arm candy are nowhere near anything legal.

The other party’s bodyguard looks like he could crush someone’s head with his bare hands, which Peter’s only staring at cause they’re covered in tattoos. He’s seen the style before, back during Spring Break with some of the muscle at the place in Brooklyn.

Rousseau never talks to him about his dealings and Peter’s glad to feign ignorance. The last thing he needs is become complicit in illegal gun running across the Canadian border or know the details of how Rousseau facilitates the trafficking of tons of opioids every month.

It explains the man’s scars, though… Something else he doesn’t ask about.

Backroom deals and poker games don’t make for early nights, however, which sucks when Peter has to leave Rousseau’s hotel by 7:50 am if he wants to make his Monday morning classes.

A hand on his wrist stops him.

“Stay,” Rousseau murmurs, still half-asleep.
“I can’t, Matthys,” Peter says. “I’m sorry.”

He underscores it with a kiss and goes willingly when the man tugs him back onto the bed, right on top of him. He feels Rousseau’s morning wood against his ass and figures the earnings of this week will cover a cab if it means placating his client, so he rolls his hips.

“Hmmm, mon cher… I can’t let you go without breakfast,” Rousseau murmurs, pushing lazily at Peter’s shoulders.

The line is cheesy and makes Peter flash back to the best coffee in Manhattan and Tony’s awesome scrambled eggs, but Peter swallows the memories down along with Rousseau’s erection.

He’s ten minutes late to his lecture but makes up for it by participating as much as he can, then sets his alarm for a bit earlier on Tuesday and doesn’t let Rousseau even begin to complain before climbing into his lap.

He’s still wearing the butt plug Rousseau bought for him the day before, the one he’s been told to wear to class so he’ll be thinking of Rousseau even when they’re apart. Peter ignored the alarm bells the request made go off in his head and figures the discomfort will be worth it.

It also has the added bonus he can guide Rousseau’s hand to his stuffed hole that morning, make him pull it out and give him a show before sinking down on the man’s cock.

“I want you to fill me up,” Peter tells him between gasps, as sincerely as he can to make Rousseau think Peter’s genuinely enjoying their time together, “and then I want you to put it back so I can feel your come inside me all morning.”

It has the intended effect: Rousseau comes with a moan and Peter makes it to Aerodynamics with five minutes to spare that he uses to text Tony.

[08:25] Morning :-) I’ve been meaning to ask: what does Miss Potts like? Don’t wanna show up w/o present.

Tony’s reply comes moments later.

[8:26] Morning, kid! She’s asking for a contribution to a charity, just bring a card with a check or something. We still on for Thursday?

Of course they are – the prospect of continuing his Star Trek education with Tony is the one, bright light at the end of this packed week and Peter wouldn’t miss it for the world.

Only two more nights with Rousseau to get through, two days of classes, and his Thursday shift at No Bones.

At least, that’s the plan.

He didn’t account for Rousseau being done with whatever business he’s in town for a day early and wanting to celebrate by whisking Peter away to a party in the Hamptons at one of Rousseau’s buddies’ mansion.

“Um, how will we get back to the city?” Peter wonders as they’re waiting for the helicopter to take them away from the lights of Manhattan.

“The same way, mon cher.”
“I, uh, I have to be back by –”

“We’re celebrating,” Rousseau interrupts, pulling him closer. He slides his fingers down Peter’s chest, nuzzling his neck. “Please, mon cher. We only have two nights left together… Give me tomorrow. Any price, mon cher, I’ll pay it.”

Shit.

Peter has a split second to weigh the risks. He knows Rousseau’s plane leaves Thursday around noon, so if he agrees to spend all of Wednesday with him he doubts he’ll make it to his classes on Thursday either, but…

*Any price, mon cher.*

They could hire the PI again – or *he* could. The woman had found a new lead but May wasn’t able to keep up with the billable hours, so with the money from Rousseau, Peter would be able to reach out. May wouldn’t have to worry. And if the lead panned out…

What’s two days of classes in exchange for Ben’s freedom?

*Peter’s been to the Hamptons before – last year, at the height of summer, helping Rumlow cater pool parties and afternoon tea and exclusive charity dinners, or serving champagne and entertaining certain guests after hours.*

Those events were filled with executives and bankers, socialites and the kind of old money that bought elections and yachts alike.

*Tonight is… something else entirely.*

Peter doesn’t recognize any of his colleagues but several faces from the poker room in Brooklyn or Rousseau’s meetings, which explains the heavy presence of armed muscle and white powder left openly on coffee tables.

Their host is the same innocuous thirty-something Columbian who previously kept to the background, watching everything play out with concealed interest. Tonight, he’s at the center of attention, along with a slender, black man in his forties who seems to be his second-in-command at… whatever organization he represents.

Rousseau obviously knows both of them. He exchanges back-slapping hugs with the Columbian – Fabio, but everyone else addresses him as ‘Señor Ortiz’ – and congratulates the other man, Spencer, on his new position.

Peter wonders if anyone else notices how little space there is between Fabio and Spencer, or how, despite the many attractive women in the house, their eyes are drawn only to each other.

And Peter, for that matter.

“That the boy you mentioned, Matthy?” Fabio Ortiz asks, turning to Peter and taking in his chinos and tight polo shirt. “You weren’t lying.”

He doesn’t offer his hand. Peter doubts he could have moved, given the apprehension in his limbs.

“Why would I lie to my oldest friends?” Rousseau wonders, pulling Peter in front of him. An arm
across his chest keeps him in place while another comes to rest on his belt buckle.

“To brag?” Spencer says. “There’s been a lot of that, lately.”

Spencer exchanges a long-suffering glance with the closest guard, of all people. Peter’s mouth goes dry. There’s something dangerous about this man. About both of them, actually.

“Five years in business together, vraiment,” Rousseau tsks. Peter notices many of the onlookers tense at the tone he takes. “You should know me better by now, mon ami.”

It’s for show, Peter realizes. Rousseau’s asserting his rapport.

It works. When Rousseau looks for a seat, an armchair immediately frees up. Peter’s tasked with bringing drinks and he’s rarely been more willing to pour himself some of the hard stuff himself.

It’s difficult to relax with so many guns around, even harder to keep declining a variety of drugs.

There’s one thing he can’t decline, however.

“Tell me, Matthys,” Fabio says much later, when they’re outside smoking cigars on sleek deck chairs while Peter is leaning against Rousseau’s legs and lets the man play with his hair. “Are you still one to share?”

He’s not looking at Peter but it’s clear as his drink what exactly he’s referring to. Peter’s pulse stutters. He should have had another shot of tequila when he had the chance.

Fabio smiles, predator-like, meeting Peter’s eyes. “We’ll make it worth your while, cariño.”

Spencer puts his cigar down. “You should watch, Matthys. I know you like to watch.”

Above him Rousseau gives an intrigued hum and when Peter looks up, his expression is questioning. He strokes Peter’s cheek. “Up to you, mon cher.”

Peter doesn’t have to put on an act; his voice trembles without any effort on his part. “What, uh, what did you have in mind?”

A bed, for one. Huge with silk sheets in a large, modern room upstairs. Rousseau gives him one last kiss before he makes himself comfortable in the armchair in the corner, legs already splayed.

Spencer is behind Peter, Fabio in front. It’s Fabio who traces a path along his throat down to his collarbone.

“How about some white gold for your efforts? You won’t find purer product anywhere… except maybe right off the fields.”

“I, uh,” Peter begins, but strong hands on his hips give him pause for a moment. “I appreciate that, but…”

“Told you so,” Spencer chuckles, looking to Fabio, who smiles, to Peter’s great relief, and closes the distance so Peter’s sandwiched between the two.

Fabio pulls a clip of bills out of Spencer’s back pocket, counts out five hundred into Peter’s open hand. Peter doesn’t close it. His heart’s beating in his throat but if he’s gonna do this, it better be worth it.

Chuckling, Fabio adds another five hundred, slaps his cheek playfully and puts the rest of the cash
back in its place.

Peter quickly catches on to the fact that he’s just a means to an end – this isn’t about them wanting to fuck him, this is about Fabio and Spencer getting off together without risking their reputation for one of them taking it up the ass.

It would be romantic, in a twisted way, if it didn’t mean Peter ends up with two cocks inside of him.

They start off with him kneeling on the plush carpet, trying to coordinate scissoring himself open with sucking both their erections to full hardness while Rousseau fists himself at a lazy pace.

It’s Fabio who tells Peter to lean on the bed and fucks him open, slowly at first but with more and more abandon. His eyes never leave Spencer, who’s positioning himself against the headboard. After one last thrust that has Peter’s arms strain under the force, Fabio pulls out with a groan and a playful slap on his ass. Spencer’s looking at Peter, but it’s too far away for a blow job, so why –

“Ride him, cariño,” Fabio orders, yet bats his hands away when Peter wants to line up Spencer’s cock.

Spencer moans as he feels Fabio’s fingers guiding him into Peter, slick with lube and precome.

Peter mentioned condoms but then Spencer placed his gun on the nightstand with raised eyebrows and a calm, “We’re clean.” Peter figured asking to see test results like he did with Rousseau might cost him more than the $1,000 they paid him for this and let it go.

He gives them a great show, not for Spencer or Fabio but for Rousseau, who’s watching Peter’s cock rub against Spencer’s stomach with every thrust.

Usually Peter is capable of filtering the noises he makes, yet even he can’t pretend the stretch of a second erection against his rim is anything other than painful.

“Shhhh, cariño,” Fabio whispers, running a hand down his back, “relax.”

Peter tries his best, focuses on the palms massaging his cheeks but even then, the logistics are still precarious. They can’t move too much or else one of them slips out, so it’s up to Peter to shift his hips and clench and do everything he can think of to make this end as soon as possible.

Feeling two cocks inside him throb and swell, stretching him even further and having them come inside him… that’s not a sensation he’ll ever forget. Or want to repeat, for that matter. Rousseau’s still watching so Peter strokes himself through it, gulping in air and hoping this will remain a one-time event even though he still has more than twenty-four hours before there’s any chance of getting back to Manhattan.

But when he sees Rousseau’s lust-drunk expression, his cock spent and limp between his legs, Peter doubts there’ll be much time to relax.

*

Peter stumbles into his room on Thursday afternoon in Tuesday’s clothes, scratches on his chest and bruises on his hips he can’t remember how he got.

A look in the mirror makes him grab his concealer but he stops when the sudden movement makes him wince.

Shower.
He craves another shower, alone, without any helping hands.

He stands underneath the spray for ages. The hot water is awesome on his tense muscles but even lifting his arms to shampoo his hair requires a herculean effort – he’s never felt worse in his life.

Every movement reminds him of how sore he is, which would be fine if it weren’t for the mental images that go with the sensations. For a second he’s back in the mansion’s bathroom and another wave of nausea churns his stomach.

The tiles are cool against his forehead and clinging to the shower wall helps keep the dizziness at bay. He has to step out again eventually, though, has to look in the mirror and dry off, clean the scratches, style his hair. Apply more concealer.

It’s already past four and Peter’s gotta be at the restaurant by five, after all.

The first thing he does there is empty two cans of Red Bull before even looking at his uniform. The one he drank when he left his apartment has already kicked in but he knows it won’t last for his entire shift.

Carrying three plates puts more strain than his sore arms and shoulders should probably take but Bucky is watching Peter like a hawk and he can’t risk slipping up and prompting any worried questions.

He’s fine, and besides, there’s a Stark Trek marathon with Tony on the other side of his shift.

Peter slips out the back the second his tables are done rather than pass through the front where Bucky’s still preparing the bar for the following day, and twenty minutes later he’s slumping against the Tower’s elevator wall.

By this point he’s probably running on anticipation and sheer stubbornness, but not even sleep could beat finding Tony sprawled on the couch facing the television, working on a blueprint hologram only to collapse it the moment he hears footsteps. Yet Tony’s smile falters when he takes a closer look at Peter.

“Holy shit, did Midterms arrive early or something?”

“No, just, uh… bad shift,’” Peter says. Damn it, he knows he should have touched up his makeup in the elevator mirror. “This one table was running me ragged.” He drops his satchel by the bar, as per usual, and grins at Tony.

“You sure you’re fine, kid? I got a whole fridge of food, if you’re –”

“Please, no,” Peter blurts, then immediately blushes. “I’m sorry, I mean… Thanks, but, uh, I’m good.”

Well, the nausea is back but Tony doesn’t need to know that. The other man regards him for another drawn-out moment, worry furrowing his brow and shit, Peter better turn this conversation onto safer ground…

“Kiss it better?” he asks.

After a beat, Tony seems to decide to believe Peter, who would cheer if he had the energy.

“Oh, that I can do, kid.”
Tony’s lips are soft and gentle, his hands warm on Peter’s elbows and *oh gawd*, how Peter has missed the smell of him. Having Tony close again after an entire week apart is intoxicating in the best possible way, and Peter’s knees wobble when they pull apart.

“Easy there,” Tony says.

Peter can’t stop smiling. “I’m fine.”

Shit, there’s doubt flaring in Tony’s eyes again. For a second Peter fears Tony’s gonna go back on his decision but apparently the universe seems to think Peter deserves a break and Tony drops it.

There’s a water jug with two glasses already on the coffee table and the next episode is queued up on screen, so Tony pulls him towards the sofa after another kiss.

The pillows are softer than Peter remembers, or maybe that’s cause he’s half leaning into Tony, his head cushioned on his shoulder. He gives a contented sigh that Tony chuckles at, and Peter can feel the vibrations of it against his cheek.

He’d have been out like a light the moment the episode started if it weren’t for the forth – or fifth? – Red Bull he had an hour ago, yet this way he’s able to keep his eyes open and even debate the feasibility of food replicators before the queasy feeling in the pit of his stomach becomes impossible to ignore.

“I’ll be right back,” he promises.

“Great, gives me time to decide on the next episode. Oh, no, I got the perfect – you ever heard of Tribbles, kid?” Tony asks when Peter slips off the sofa.

“I,” he starts but his tongue won’t cooperate and his vision is fraying at the edges.

He thinks he hears Tony shout his name before the world goes black.

Chapter End Notes

... *hits post*... *hides*...

*whispers* Cliffhanger Hell will be over with the delivery of chapter 10 on July 3. (not June, as I’d mistakenly written upon posting... *facepalm*)
Chapter Notes

Allow me to deliver you from Cliffhanger Hell, dearest readers! This chapter includes the moment we've all been waiting for... I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I did writing it – when I wasn't pulling my hair out during the re-writes, that is.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Two hours earlier

“Stark.”

Tony glances up from the StarkPad prototype just so Lehnsherr won’t think he’s being ignored.

“ Heard this fascinating rumor today,” Lehnsherr cuts right to the chase and past the desks of the empty office. Even all on-going projects have been locked away cause apparently the R&D department actually manages to adhere to regulations.

Tony keeps testing the phone. There’s a bug or a glitch sometimes that makes the weather widget not process the GPS input correctly and no one’s been able to find the source so he’s sifting through code, changing stuff here and there and having JARVIS run random tests on a second model simultaneously.

“Colonel Rhodes told me you’re bringing a date on Saturday.”

Of course he did.

“Rhodey is a dirty snitch,” Tony mumbles. Denying it would work for all of about three seconds, if that, so he better brace for the inevitable –

“Said his name’s Peter.”

Yeah. That.

“Peter Parker,” Lehnsherr continues. “That wouldn’t happen to be the same Peter Parker I’m emailing with, would it? The one who won’t take a summer internship position no matter what I say?”

Tony doesn’t look up but he’s sure Lehnsherr notices how he’s only pretending to read the code anymore. It’s as much an admission as brandishing a big banner with ‘YES THAT PETER’ written on it in neon lettering would be.

“Verdammt, Stark, I swear if he’s not doing the internship because he’d rather be sleeping with you –”

“He’s got his reasons,” Tony interrupts before he can stop himself. That line of questioning cuts a bit too close to home.

Tony’s not stupid, you see. If Peter says he’s busy, it doesn’t take a genius to infer he’s busy with
another man. Who’s paying him. Who’s paying him more than one of the most sought-after
internship positions in the Western Hemisphere would, cause for some reason Peter values a
fuckload of money more than a slightly smaller load of money and a stellar career opportunity that
would set him up for life.

Tony has reached a stage where the curiosity physically hurts. It’s a pang in the chest, and no, nope,
it’s curiosity, nothing else. He’s got no right to be jealous. No strings, that’s what they said – that’s
what Tony said, even. They aren’t that serious yet… as much as Tony might wish they were.

“He’s twenty-one,” Lehnsherr points out. “It’s a bad idea.”

“Nonsense! All my ideas are good ideas.”

“Like the company-wide soccer tournament? Oh, or the flying car prototype? Hm, how about the
time at Morning Crescent when you decided to skip group so you could –”

“I get it, buddy, I get it.”

Tony finally abandons pretending to get any work done and fixes Lehnsherr with a glare.

“What else did Rhodey blab about, huh?”

Lehnsherr crosses his arms. He’s taller than Tony, meaning the gesture looks a tad more imposing on
him. Whatever. Lehnsherr’s scaring tactics stopped working on Tony long ago. Mostly.

“Shed some light on why you were spying on Mr. Parker’s interview at the fair,” is all he says but
it’s enough for Tony to know Lehnsherr has already connected the dots. “And now you’re bringing
him to the party… Are you dating him?”

Case in point.

“We haven’t talked about it yet.”

“Imagine my surprise.”

“Bite me, Lehnsherr.”

“Shouldn’t you be saying that to him?”

Tony groans. Great, now there’ll be at least two people at the party who’re gonna tease the hell out
of him.

“I’m still waiting for an explanation.”

“Of what?”

“Why he’s not taking the internship.”

“I don’t know.”

Lehnsherr makes to call bullshit but stops when he realizes… “You’re serious.”

“As this glitch, which I’d love to return to, or the next generation of StarkPhone users will have to do
something wild like, you know, look outside to see what the weather’s like.” Tony feigns a shudder.
“So if you’re about done…?”
There’s some more narrowing of eyes, some clenching of his jaw, but eventually Lehnsherr lets it go and leaves him to the task at hand. The man’s expression doesn’t bode well for the party, however, but Tony’s going to cross that bridge when he gets to it. He’s got enough to worry about, for instance the lack of text messages from Peter over the past forty-eight hours, and the forced cheer he thinks he spotted in the texts prior to that.

He’s got a weird feeling about this, he really does, but what he doesn’t have is a right to meddle (yet, a voice in his head adds).

Turns out he should have meddled.

One moment Peter’s getting up to use the bathroom while Tony’s imagining the kid’s reaction to Tribbles, the next his eyes are rolling back in his head and he’s hitting the floor.

Tony is at his side immediately, cursing himself for letting Peter deflect when he arrived. He looked like death warmed over, no matter how much concealer he’d applied. If Tony had known it was close-to-fainting, he wouldn’t have given in so quickly. Or at least have JARVIS run a surreptitious diagnostic scan.

As is, he barks at his AI to fetch Bruce and takes first aid measures, elevating Peter’s feet and ensuring he’s still breathing. At least the kid fell onto the carpet rather than the pointy coffee table, or else… Tony shudders at the thought.

Peter blinks his eyes open slowly.

“Wha…” he slurs.

“You fainted,” Tony says. He hates how panicked he sounds but screw it. “No, wait, stay down, don’t take your feet off, your blood flow needs to normalize a bit first.”

“Agreed.”

Bruce has arrived, a T-shirt haphazardly thrown over his pajama pants, and Tony makes room for him. He’s never been so glad to see him.

“I’m Dr. Banner, can you tell me your name and what happened?”

For some reason, Peter’s eyes widen and he blushes despite how pale he is. “Wow, hi, I’m, uh… I’m a huge fan of you – your work, I mean, uh, sir.”

Bruce definitely didn’t expect that (neither did Tony, for that matter) but he’s still in doctor mode so the usual ‘I have no idea how to take a compliment, please stop praising me’ dance doesn’t happen.

“Thank you. Can you tell me your name?”

“Uh, Peter. Peter Parker.”

“Nice to meet you, Peter, Peter Parker.”

Peter’s flush deepens. It would’ve been adorable if Tony weren’t silently freaking out, but everything gets worse when JARVIS presents the diagnostics results.

How the kid made it to the Tower will forever remain a mystery cause he’s so hypoglycemic he should’ve doubled over in the elevator at the latest.

That’s not the worst, though.
There’s soft tissue damage.

“Can you tell me what happened?” Bruce asks.

“It’s nothing, sir, really,” Peter says, sounding like he almost believes the bullshit himself. “I just didn’t eat enough and I didn’t get much sleep this past week. I’ll be fine.”

“Of course you’ll be fine, but….” Obviously Bruce notices the way Peter’s resolutely not looking at Tony. “Could you get Peter some juice and then maybe head to the kitchens, make a sandwich?”

Tony wants to protest but he knows Bruce is right. For one, Peter needs to get his blood sugar up, and as much as Tony hates being in the dark, he gets the necessity of patient-doctor confidentiality. Besides, Peter needs a doctor right now – as much as Tony wants to help, this is something he can’t provide.

So he pours a generous glass of orange juice which he hands to Peter who takes it without glancing up, gives Bruce a meaningful look that hopefully signals he won’t be listening in, and disappears into the elevator.

*

When Tony’s finally allowed back into the penthouse, he finds Peter on the sofa, wrapped in a blanket cradling his orange juice, while Bruce is packing up his supplies.

“You’re going to eat all of this and drink at least another glass; your body needs it,” Bruce tells Peter as Tony sets down the plate on the coffee table. “And then you need sleep. At least eight hours.”

Peter’s eyes dart to the clock on the wall, then widen a bit as he probably does the math in his head. It’s close to midnight and, if Tony remembers correctly, his classes start at 8.30 am.

“I can write you a note for your professors, Peter.”

“No, it’s fine, I don’t wanna be any trouble.”

Bruce manages a soft smile. “It won’t be. I’m sure JARVIS can forward it through the necessary channels.”

“I can’t miss any more –” Peter stops abruptly. Tony’s eyes narrow. “I mean…”

“You’re staying home tomorrow,” Bruce says with an edge of finality. “Doctor’s orders.”

Peter seems to have half a mind to protest but eventually acquiesces.

Tony sees Bruce to the door but all that gets him is stony silence of the ‘I’m not telling you anything’ variety before the doctor leaves.

At least Peter has started nibbling at the sandwich. Tony refills his glass before taking a seat across the kid who’s resolutely not meeting his eye. He has no idea how long they sit there in silence before Peter is done and Tony takes the empty plate to put it into the dishwasher.

Peter rises with him, still not meeting Tony’s eyes, and folds the blanket before setting it down.

“I’m sorry,” is the first thing he says and why is Tony not surprised? “I didn’t wanna ruin our night. I’ll get out of your hair.”

“You’re not going anywhere kid,” Tony says, pointing to the sofa.
“I don’t want to be in your way –”

“And you won’t be. Hell, you can even have a guest room. JARVIS, we got one made up?”

“Yes, sir.”

“See? And f-y-i, you didn’t ruin a thing. If anything, I should be the one apologizing cause I let you play this off.”

“It’s nothing, I’m –”

“If the next word out of your mouth is ‘fine’, I swear I’m gonna pour the rest of this juice over you,” he snaps, regretting his tone immediately when Peter flinches.

“I was just tired –”

“Bullshit. You got any idea how exhausted you gotta be to just keel over like that? Cause I do, and it ain’t pretty. So you’re gonna sit, you’re gonna drink your juice, and you’re gonna tell me what the hell is going on cause you scared the crap outta me, kid.”

Peter makes to protest but whatever he was about to do never happens cause he sways again.

Tony is at his side immediately, trying to steady him with a hand on his shoulder, and once again Peter flinches away from the touch. His eyes widen when he realizes how telling his reaction was, but it’s the wave of shame that flickers across his face when he resumes his place on the sofa that has Tony take a deep breath. He can’t fly off the rails now, as angry as he is at whatever scumbag did this to Peter.

“Sorry,” he says, sitting down on the edge of the coffee table. “But see, that’s why Bruce told you to rest. Come on, you don’t wanna disobey the good doc, right?”

A faint blush appears on Peter’s cheeks at that, which reminds Tony of Peter’s initial reaction. Maybe that’s a safer choice for how to kick off this particular conversation.

“So, you’re a fan of his work, huh? In case you couldn’t tell, Bruce was flattered – but yeah, he’s pretty shy and not really the best at meeting new people. This might’ve been good, actually, cause now it’s gonna be less awkward on Saturday. Silver lining, and all that.”

“You still want me to come on Saturday?”

“Why wouldn’t I?” Tony wonders, mentally cheering that he got Peter to speak, but just like that the kid’s averting his eyes again.

After a few silent moments, Tony sighs. “So… What’s going on?”

Peter gives a half shrug.

“How about you try that again with words?”

A beat.

“It’s nothing,” Peter says. “I’ve got it under control.”

“Then your definition of ‘under control’ is even more screwed up than mine.”

And they’re back to silence, damn it. Time for a different approach.
“Okay, so how about I walk you through my theories? Cause I’ve got a lot of them,” Tony says, keeping his tone neutral and free of judgement. “You’re obviously a brilliant kid so you shouldn’t have had any trouble finding a scholarship, but well, sometimes life screws you over and there’s nothing you can do. So at first, I figured that’s why you’re doing this but – and here’s where I’m going all Sherlock Holmes on you, so beware – anyway. If you were doing this to pay for school, you’d have jumped at some of the suggestions Lehnsherr made. He’s this close to just kidnapping you and spiking your food with a truth serum to figure out what he needs to offer to make you say yes, but he’s already pulled out all the stops, including the company paying for the rest of your studies, which makes me pretty sure it’s not that. Or is it?”

Tony leans back a bit and waits, just on the minuscule chance he’s got it all wrong.

But Peter mumbles, “I have a scholarship,” so Tony keeps going.

“That’s what I thought. Then what is it? I can’t really picture you with a drug habit, and besides, I’d have recognized the signs long before this… Or maybe it is, but just not yours?”

He keeps a close eye on Peter’s reaction, but the kid’s not giving an inch. No problem – Tony’s got a veritable backlog of theories stacked up.

“Loan shark? Someone you care about’s in debt, and you’re helping out? Or is it medical bills? Those can be a bitch. You always deflect when you mention your aunt and uncle, so I’m guessing it’s got something to do with them –”

Peter winces.

Bullseye.

The kid’s still not looking at him, though, so Tony slides off the coffee table and crouches down in front of the sofa, one hand propped up on the glass cover.

“I could do this all night, Peter,” he murmurs, his tone gentle. “I’m not gonna run out of theories any time soon.”

“Why do you even care?”

It comes out with a desperate edge to it, like Peter’s been holding it back for a while now. He’s finally meeting Tony’s eyes, his own steeped in exhaustion and something so sad Tony has to stop himself from reaching out and pulling the kid close.

Instead, he says, “You really need to ask that?” and waits for Peter to process the statement, Tony’s expression, his proximity.

It takes all of Tony’s willpower to keep quiet, to not push any further, cause he can feel he’s almost convinced Peter to start talking and the last thing Tony wants is ruin his chance for an explanation. He needs to know what the problem is; otherwise he won’t be able to get started on solving it.

After an eternity, Peter sighs, shoulders slumping. Tony doesn’t move from his position on the floor cause as much as his knees are protesting, putting Peter at ease is more important right now.

Peter makes to speak a few times before he finds his voice. His eyes are fixed on a spot on the carpet next to his socked feet and his hands are shaking.

“It’s for legal fees.” Peter swallows. “My uncle, he… He’s in prison – but he didn’t do it!” he adds hurriedly. “He was trying to help but they framed him –”
“Framed him for what?”

Peter exhales and meets his gaze somewhat defiantly. “Murder.”

“But he’s in jail? So they convicted him?”

“He didn’t do it –”

“Hey, I believe you, kid,” Tony says, holding up his hands. “I just wanna make sure I’m getting the full picture here.”

Peter visibly forces himself to calm down a little. Tony can’t fault him for being defensive – there’s a lot of stigma attached to being in prison, even if it’s not for a capital offense.

“We’re preparing an appeal, Aunt May and I… We’re so lucky cause we got the best defense attorney in the City, and their PI had a lead, too, but May wasn’t able to keep up with the bills and we couldn’t – but I got it covered now,” Peter says, suddenly a lot more confident. “I’m going to pay off what we owe the lawyer, I’ve been saving up, and once the PI finds proof, Ben’s gonna come free.”

So that’s it.

Peter’s reason for doing this, his driving force.

Tony’s struck speechless by how noble and selfless it is and for a moment all he can do is stare. There’re still too many questions buzzing around his head, however, to keep him frozen for long.

“How does Rumlow fit into this?”

“Causation,” Peter says after a beat, and it takes Tony a moment to realize he’s echoing Tony’s musings from their first date. “He saw the, uh, the effect I had on a few of his patrons. Helped me get started, nudged me in the right direction.”

_or the wrong one_, Tony doesn’t say.

“Where’ve you been this past week?”

It’s like a door slams shut inside Peter. His shoulders tense, as does his grip on his glass. “A regular was in town.”

Hearing the confirmation doesn’t make it any easier on Tony – but right now, it’s not about him, so he ignores the pangs in his chest Peter’s words brought back with a vengeance. They also draw Tony’s attention to Peter’s side and hips, where JARVIS’ scans identified extensive bruising, which is something Tony can’t ignore.

“Did he,” he begins, but stops cause his mouth is dry. “Was it him, who –”

“Don’t.”

Peter sets the glass down with a clonk and gets to his feet, shrugging off the blanket. Tony follows immediately.

“But you’re hurt –”

“So what? My uncle’s getting hurt a lot more than I am.”
“So what?” Tony parrots back. “You won’t be able to help your aunt at all when you’re dead in a ditch somewhere. Why’s it your job, huh? To get him off by getting others off?”

“Because I can,” Peter snaps, and boy, his blood sugar levels must be a hell of a lot better now cause he’s got enough energy to put several steps between himself and Tony. “If you can do the things I can, if you can help, and you don’t,” he says, “then you’d be no better than the guys who framed Ben in the first place.”

There are so many things wrong with that statement, Tony can’t even… but at least he knows what the problem is, now. And how to fix it.

“Good thing you got me on your team, kid.”

“What?”

Tony spreads his palms. “Billionaire here. Private investigator, you said? I can pay them, and I can take care of the legal bills, too. ’S not like I’m gonna miss a few hundred k.”

Peter stares… though not in a good way.

“Thanks,” he says at length, “but I’ve got it. “I’ve been doing just fine –”

“Really?”

“I don’t need your charity –”

“It’s not charity –”

“It’s my family,” Peter says, his tone so soft and caring that it shuts Tony right up. “After all they’ve done for me… It’s my responsibility. I owe it to them. They’ve been so good to me, this is the least I can do.”

“Do they know?” Tony doesn’t need to wait for verbal confirmation to see the answer to that is a resolute no. “Cause I sure as hell don’t think they’d support what you’re doing. Jesus, kid, you’re twenty-one, you’re in college, your responsibility is to be a student –”

“And I am!”

“Yeah, by killing yourself with your workload –”

“It’s fine, I’m fine –”

“You passed out from exhaustion, you’re lightyears away from ‘fine’!”

Tony would have expected Peter to have tired himself out by now, but apparently the kid’s only just getting started.

“Today was an outlier, it’s not usually like this,” he insists, sounding as though he genuinely believes the bullshit he’s spewing. “I won’t let it happen again in a school week, okay?”

“Oh, so it’s perfectly alright to do this to yourself when you don’t have to head into Aerodynamics one-oh-one in the morning? Jesus, kid, the scans showed you’ve got lacerations!”

“Yeah, cause they paid for them,” Peter snaps, like that makes it okay, like the fact that some scumbag handed him some cash is reason enough to ignore personal limits entirely if that’s what the customer wants.
It makes Tony wonder what else Peter would agree to forgo for the right incentive – or, he thinks as his stomach fills with lead, what Peter has already agreed to making optional.

Peter’s glaring at him, waiting for his response, but Tony doesn’t want this to escalate into an even louder shouting match so he takes a deep breath, deliberately slowing their roll.

“Were you at least safe?”

“I…” Peter’s gone impossibly pale.

“You weren’t? Or you don’t remember?”

Silence.

Guess Tony’s got to be more provocative to get a reaction this time.

“Well, what is it? Were you safe or were you stupid enough to actually –”

“I didn’t have a choice!” Peter bursts out, eyes flaring with something Tony’s never seen on him before. “I asked and they said they were clean and I knew what I was doing, so you don’t need to –”

“Did you? You just said you didn’t have a choice.”

“I… I did,” Peter insists, but his voice has lost most of its intensity despite his stubborn tone.

Tony wants nothing more than to pull him close and never let him go, but they need to talk about this or nothing’s ever gonna change.

“Who were ‘they’, Peter?”

No response.

“Were they the ones who left the bruises? And the cuts?”

Peter bites his lips, refusing to look up.

“Are you going back to them?”

A shrug. The ‘if they pay me’ goes unsaid.

Tony feels his hands ball into fists and forces them to unclench cause his anger’s not gonna help.

“So you’ll take their money,” Tony says, “but not mine? How does that make sense?”

“You’re not…” Peter swallows. “You’re not a client.”

“And I won’t be cause we’ll both know that’s not why I’m giving you money. We’d both know you’d be spending time with me just because. That this is a choice for you. Don’t you… don’t you see how that’s better?”

“It wouldn’t feel better,” Peter mutters.

From the way he’s standing stock-still, he appears calm, but Tony catches his eyes flicker to the door, spots the way he shifts his stance.

“Can’t we try?” he suggests, then moves forward cause he can’t go another split second without comforting –
– but Peter yanks his hand away.

“I said no.”

Tony makes to protest but Peter talks over him.

“You’re not listening,” he says, hand clenched into fists. “No one ever tells you no, do they, but I am, okay? I don’t want your help, I can’t just stop, and, and – and I don’t want to stop. So stop trying to force me into something I said no to.”

It sends Tony reeling, like a slap in the face but nope, that would’ve been kinder. The moment he needs to get his bearings and come up with a response is enough for Peter to snatch his satchel and bolt for the exit.

Cursing under his breath, Tony sprints after him and catches up with him just in time.

“JARVIS, hold the elevator.”

“I want to leave.”

“Peter –”

“I wanna go home.”

It’s Peter’s tone that pulls Tony up short. Shit, how long’s this kid been doing this on his own? After all that time, Tony should’ve considered he’d need some space to think it over, to process. Peter’s been fighting this battle alone for ages – of course he won’t jump at the first chance to divide the burden.

Tony swallows down his protests and objections. Peter must notice the change in his body language for he lets himself relax just the tiniest bit. He’s leaning against the elevator wall, probably the only thing keeping him upright at the moment.

“At least let me drive you. Bruce is gonna kill me if you collapse on public transport. I promise, I’m not gonna keep arguing with you,” Tony adds when Peter’s expression darkens again. “I’m listening, alright? Just one more thing – I swear, that’s my last words on the matter, seriously, then I’m gonna shut up for good, and we can spend the ride in total silence if you want.”

Peter neither protests nor encourages him, so Tony keeps going.

“This isn’t a one-time offer. I get that I kinda steamrolled you with this, and I should’ve probably just let you go to bed but I… I care about you and I want to help. So whenever you change your mind, or you got an idea for a compromise that works for you, I’m all ears. Just… think about it, okay?”

He tries not to read anything into the way he sees Peter’s expression soften, or in the way the hard line of his shoulders relaxes, but it’s difficult so Tony breaks eye contact and steps into the elevator.

“Alright, let’s get you home. JARVIS, the garage, please.”

Chapter End Notes

*hugs the boys*
There is a deleted scene between Peter and Bruce from this chapter that I'll add as a bonus once this is done. Since the question has come up: I can't say how long this fic is going to be and I know better than to give an estimate^^ Based on the outline I'd say we'll reach the halfway point in ch11/12.

Speaking of which: **ch11 will follow July 17, hopefully.** I'm still working on ch12 but my fanfic writing time is limited, I'm afraid, so I have to test your patience again.
eleven

Chapter Notes

Welcome to the Chapter of Doom! Yet after four different version, the fifth turned out to be the charm :)
… and then yesterday was a Bad Day and I was unable to get anything done, plus the chapter needed another pass, which is why I’m posting a day late.

Thanks to everyone who asked and reached out! I’m so grateful to be part of this community. You guys are awesome ♥

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Peter can’t sleep.

He figured he’d be out like a light the second he crawled under the sheets of his bed after a car ride spent in tense silence, but no such luck. All his mind’s able to do is running the events of the night on an endless loop and coming up with utopian visions of a future that leave Peter cold and queasy.

It’d be easy, too. Say yes and make all their problems disappear. A simple transaction: legal fees and PI salary against Peter’s time. Tony is rich enough that he won’t even notice the added expenses. Not any different from what Peter’s been doing for the past couple of years…

Any yet the mere thought makes him sick to his stomach.

Peter curls up under the covers, trying desperately to think of something else, but what pops up in his mind makes his pulse quicken.

“Were you at least safe?”

He’s going to have to make time to go to the clinic and get tested.

And Tony knows.

Of all the mortifying things that happened tonight, from meeting Dr. Banner after honest-to-god fainting in the Tower, to Tony learning about the marks that Fabio and Spencer left…

Peter presses his face harder against the pillow. He doesn’t know where they stand now, Tony and he. He’s sure that Tony won’t be around much longer if Peter keeps going like he has, but at the same time Peter knows it won’t be the same if he gets to spend time with Tony just cause the man’s dropped several hundred thousand dollars on him.

But…

It would help Ben faster. The appeal process isn’t going to last forever and Peter can’t guarantee he’ll manage to earn enough in the time they still have to cover all their expenses.

Could he live with the queasy feeling in his stomach every time he’s with Tony if it means Ben has the best chance of getting free?
He honestly can’t say.

*

Peter diverts into Rumlow’s office that day with a grim sense of foreboding.

He’s not proven wrong.

“You realize our guests come here for certain reasons,” his boss drawls while Peter fidgets in front of his desk. Rumlow isn’t sitting either, merely perched on the edge of his desk, arms crossed, a hard look in his eyes. “And it’s not to be served by some strung-out rentboy who’s seconds away from keeling over.”

“I – I’m sorry, sir, it won’t happen again,” Peter stammers in a rush, yet Rumlow cuts him off with a raised hand.

“You know,” he says, eye pinning Peter in place, “I heard you were a hit with Señor Ortiz.”

Oh.

“Guess they tipped you well, didn’t they?”

Peter gulps.

“And you know, Parker, I’m the last guy to complain about that, it’s great for business. But,” Rumlow continues, pushing off the desk to step closer to Peter than strictly necessary, “but that doesn’t mean you’re allowed to screw up at the restaurant.”

“Sir –”

“Shut it. I don’t need your apologies. I need you to do your goddamn job today, and every day after that. You ain’t the only pretty face with a great ass who knows how to use it, Parker.”

‘You’re replaceable’ echoes in the air between them, unsaid.

Peter clears his throat. “Yes, sir.”

“Good. Gentleman at table three tonight – congressman. Give him your fullest attention.”

Peter vows to do so and hurries out of the office. In the hallway, he takes a moment before he joins the rest of his colleagues for their communal meal, trying to get his reaction under control.

‘Fullest attention’ could mean anything, depending on what the guest wants. Which hasn’t been a problem before and shouldn’t be one now, but every cell in Peter’s body protests at the thought, right down to his core. He can still taste Fabio and Spencer on his tongue, can feel their hands on him, can’t even take a simple shower without their touches encroaching on his thoughts and –

“You alright there, mate?”

Peter looks up to find Bucky regarding him with dimly-veiled concern. He feigns a smile and nods.

“Nervous about tomorrow?” Bucky offers after a beat. “Cause I sure as fuck am.”

“Uh, yeah…nervous,” Peter says, even as his stomach fills with dread.

After their argument, will he still be welcome at Tony’s party? Beyond that, does he still want to go
and torture himself with something he can never have?

“You sure?” Bucky’s eyes narrow. “You don’t look so hot, Peter.”

“No, no, it’s, uh, I’m fine, really. Just need to eat,” he adds cause the suspicion still hasn’t bled from Bucky’s eyes and he better get out of there before the barkeeper probes any further.

As expected, Bucky’s watching Peter like a hawk throughout the rest of his shift, meaning Peter has to be a bit more discreet than usually when he goes to charm the politician at table three. The congressman is having dinner with a woman who Peter’s pretty certain is a reporter the guy should not be talking to. He’s painfully aware of Rumlow’s eyes on him every time the chef emerges from the kitchens yet doesn’t dare be more overt in his advances. He can face Rumlow’s questions, but he doubts he can hold his own against a suspicious Bucky today.

To his relief, his subtlety turns out to be enough – appreciated even. The congressman tells him as much when he seeks out Peter at the bottom of the stairs leading to the lavatories.

It’s never been this hard to play coy. Even something as simple as ducking his head and blushing takes herculean effort, and his hands are shaking when he types in the code to the accessible toilet, where he and Tony first…

Peter squashes that thought immediately.

He’s not with Tony now. He has a job to do, and do it well if he wants to keep it.

So he doesn’t resist when he’s pulled flush against the man’s body or when hands find their way down to his ass and squeeze.

“Oh yeah…” the man groans, and Peter can feel the vibrations of it against his chest.

Then there’s a finger pressing against his lips. Sucking on it has become a reflex for Peter, as natural to him as closing his eyes and feigning he enjoys it.

“How… Imagine how you’re going to love my dick, boy.”

Peter expects the hand on his shoulder nudging him down. He sinks to the cold tiles without hesitation before he opens the belt and the high-end dress pants to free the briefs underneath that hide the man’s erection.

As he fumbles with the condom he stowed in his pockets – no, focus, don’t think about the test – Peter looks up to gauge what the guy wants. His dining partner left before dessert, maybe to hit a deadline. Peter’s on his fifteen-minute break and no one will miss him if he takes his time, so he fits his lips over the head through the fabric of the underwear.

That’s when his control starts to break. He lost count how many blowjobs he’s given in the past two years – he should be able to perform them in his sleep – and yet he finds his heart hammering against his chest and his hands shaking.

He breathes through it, buries his face in the man’s groin to inhale the scent of him to cover it up, breathes until he manages to find that switch in his brain that’s allowed him to make it through much worse than this.

What happens next is a blur, though by the end of it, Peter has an aching jaw as well as a hundred dollars in his pockets.
“Good boy,” the politician says, patting his cheek.

Peter feels the touch long after the man has left the toilet.

It’s like his skin is crawling, the sensation pooling in the pitch of his stomach. He’s hot and cold at the same time and his eyes sting.

Peter splashes ice cold water on his face, blinks at his reflection in the mirror.

A sudden sound tears his attention away – someone’s putting in the keycode. Instead of staying locked, however, the door slides open, revealing Rumlow’s smirking face.

Peter wills himself to calm down. He’s the boss; of course he has an override code.

“Congratulations, Parker,” Rumlow says, crossing the space in three quick steps. “You just won us a fundraiser. Mr. Zimmerman asked for you specifically to be among the servers. Who knows, maybe Stark’s gonna be just as taken with your charms tomorrow night, eh?”

He pats Peter’s shoulder, too busy checking his reflection in the mirror to notice Peter’s wince.

“Take an extra five. You’ve earned it.”

With that, Rumlow leaves him alone. Peter’s knees buckle as soon as the door falls shut again. He ends up with his back to the wall, head between his legs, trying to get his breathing back under control.

*

After his shift, he wanders out of the restaurant. His intention is to walk home to get some time to think, but then Bucky’s calling his name and waving him across the parking space to the van he and Steve use.

“We’re heading to the tower,” Bucky says. “Need a ride?”

Peter finds himself nodding before he has any real time to consider.

From the driver’s seat, Steve chatters animatedly about the cake he has planned and how much there’s still to do. Peter curses himself for getting in right behind the baker, cause that means Bucky can watch him from the passenger seat. Peter keeps Steve talking with open-ended questions yet ends up alone with Bucky regardless, fetching the last batch of boxes from the van while Steve checks on the progress of the preparations in the Stark Tower kitchens.

The van is parked in the deserted delivery area. Peter figures it’s got to be a level or two above the workshop.

“So, Peter,” Bucky says once they’ve got all boxes out and the van’s locked up again. “What’s eating you?”

“Uh, nothing.”

“You’re adorable. Nice try. Stark giving you trouble?”

“Huh?”

“If he’s putting too much pressure on you, you gotta tell him to fuck off.”
“Wha– no, it’s not…” Peter adjusts his grip on the box he’s carrying. “It’s not like that.”

“Then why you lookin’ like someone who just realized Firefly only got one season?”

Peter’s not sure what Firefly is, but he still gets the metaphor. Kinda.

His first impulse is to lie but he stops himself. Maybe he can get some advice without giving away what’s going on.

So when they enter the staff elevator that’s going to take them to the kitchens, Peter speaks up.

“I don’t… I don’t have much free time. And, um, Tony wants me to make a change – help me make a change even, but…” Peter almost misses the way Bucky’s eyes widen ever so slightly as he takes a deep breath, and can’t even begin to fathom what that means. “I’ve been doing alright on my own, and I’m just wondering…”

“… if it’s worth it to keep the status quo?” Bucky fills in, one eyebrow arched.

Peter shrugs. The elevator doors open and he slips out first, but three steps later, Bucky is talking again.

“That’s easy. Ask yourself, what would you rather be doing: spend time with him, or… work?”

Bucky’s inflection gives Peter pause, enough so that his steps first falter, then stop when Bucky also comes to a halt next to him.

“Steve and me, we almost broke up when he started Stars ‘n Stripes. Took me ages to get my head outta my ass and into an apron to help that stupid punk, but I couldn’t just quit my other job cause we needed capital to get him started. And he’s got more issues than National Geographic when it comes to accepting help, but we buckled up and found a compromise. Cause that’s what you do when you care about someone and don’t wanna lose them. You jump over your shadow, cause it is worth it.”

Bucky shifts the boxes he’s carrying from one hip to the other with an air of, ‘So there,’ but Peter can only shake his head.

“You sure, mate? Yeah, he’s got that ‘my way or the highway’ thing going, I get it, but he can be reasoned with, too. You never know if you don’t try, right?”

They’re silent on the last leg of their journey until they reach the doors to the kitchen. Yet before Bucky can open them, Peter says, “How did you know that… that your thing with Steve was real?”

Bucky regards him for a moment. “It’s real.” He’s obviously not talking about himself and Steve.

Peter swallows. “Yeah, but how –”

“I’m a barkeeper, mate, I know things. Trust me, Stark’s in this for real, and I think you are, too, if you’re honest with yourself. But then again, you’re pretty good at pretending, so what do I know?”

“Wha–”

“Sorry, below the belt, forget I said that,” Bucky interrupts, sending him a rueful smile. “Just… Relationships aren’t easy, Peter, but if you’re willing to communicate and work with each other, then
they aren’t exactly rocket science either. You’re an engineer, you can figure this out.”

Bucky gives him another smile, more chipper this time, and opens the kitchen door to reveal Steve in the midst of plates and bowls.

Peter leaves them to it. He has no idea where the private elevator is on this floor so he goes up to the lobby. Bucky’s words are still echoing in his head as he steps into the cubicle. The doors don’t close. Oh, right, he didn’t call ahead.

“Uh, hello, JARVIS,” Peter says. “I’d like to see Tony if, um… If he’d like to see me.”

“One moment, Mr. Parker.”

Peter uses it to inspect his reflection in the mirror. He notices for the first time that he’s mixed up his clothes: he’s wearing one of his work slacks and the fancy sneakers, but the printed tee is definitely one of his school outfits. His hair’s still slicked back, yet nowhere as neat as at the beginning of his shift, before proprietary fingers carded themselves through it and –

“Mr. Parker,” JARVIS’s voice interrupts his straying thoughts, “Sir is awaiting you in the workshop.”

Peter thanks him and then has to fight off a wave of anxiety. What was he thinking? He has no real plan, hasn’t even made up his mind, this was a bad idea, he shouldn’t have –

But then he’s face-to-face with the workshop door that’s held open by none other than Dum-E and Peter’s legs carry him forward despite the turmoil in his head.

“Hi there,” he says and pets the robot, who chirps happily. At least Peter thinks it’s a happy chirp.

Dum-E rolls towards the middle of the shop, where Tony is surrounded by what have to be hundreds of holograms, from blueprints to documents and schematics. It’s breathtaking and Peter can’t stop staring.

Tony, however, only has eyes for him. He must have been working on the simulations since he’s stain-free for a change, but he looks more tired than Peter remembers. Like he hasn’t slept after…

Peter swallows the guilt along with his panic. He’s here. It’s too late to back out now. Bucky was right – all he can do is try.

“Do I need a drink for this?” is the first thing Tony says. “Cause I really hope I don’t, except maybe to celebrate, but your face isn’t exactly spouting unicorns and rainbows.”

Peter feels his brow furrow at the comparison. The corners of Tony’s lips twitch but one moment later, his face is blank again.

Peter approaches, still not sure how to start, which is probably why he’s so susceptible to the shiny concepts expressed in blueprints, like…

“Is that a recycling plant?”

Tony blinks. “Yeah. Last big competitor of Toomes still standing. Decided they’d rather fight than be bought, so they came to me. I gotta say, cradle-to-cradle sounds a lot more exciting than what it actually means. But I don’t think you’re here to talk about waste management,” Tony adds with a wry smile that doesn’t reach his eyes.
A wave of his hand collapses all projections. Without the warm blue, the workshop suddenly feels much too big.

“No, I’m…” Peter stops.

He has no idea how to go on, how to explain – or if he even can. It was just a blow job, it shouldn’t have rattled him as it did, but his skin’s still itching and he really wants a shower but then he’d be alone in his room and not here with Tony who’s waiting so patiently, who’s been nothing but accommodating. And understanding, and kind, and who –

– who’s pulling him into a hug without another word.

Peter stiffens in his grip at first but when the gentle touch registers, his brain switches off the fight-or-flight instinct and he finds himself relaxing into the embrace. He buries his face in Tony’s shoulder as strong arms envelope him, a soothing pressure high on his back. He can feel Tony’s cheek against his temple, the scruff a wonderful sensation that reminds him of their first kiss, and of Tony walking him to his front door, of breakfast and perfect nights, of hot chocolate and the promise of more.

He doesn’t know how long they stand there before Peter musters up all his resolve and withdraws. Tony’s arms come to rest at his side, hands twitching as though he wants to reach out again, but Peter doesn’t know whether he could get through what he wants to say with Tony’s hands on him.

“I,” he begins but has to swallow since his mouth is dry. “I want to talk about your offer.”

*  

Tony takes a deep breath. “Alright,” he says, and waits for Peter to go on.

He didn’t know what to expect when JARVIS told him Peter was in the elevator, but part of him couldn’t help but hope. That hope is still there, blooming in his chest, though he can’t quite enjoy it given how skittish Peter is right now. He looks like a strong gust of wind might make him retreat again, and that’s the last thing Tony wants.

“I…” Peter stops. Starts again. “I can’t accept you simply paying off all the bills, it’s too much –”

“But –”

“I know it’s not much for you, but for me it’s a huge deal and I, I’d never really get past that, I think. But I don’t wanna… I know I can’t go on like this. I don’t want to go on like this. I want to spend time with you, as much as I can. I mean it.”

Tony could cry in relief, or flood the kid with one of the thousand alternatives he’s been coming up with since Peter got out of the car yesterday, but he manages to bite his tongue and simply ask, “What’s the plan?”

Peter takes a deep breath. “A compromise.”

Oh yeah, Tony can work with –

“We could pretend you’re a client.”

– what?

“Have you book me through Rumlow so he won’t be suspicious when I’m suddenly unavailable all the time. We get to be together in peace, you get to help and I don’t get to feel too much like…”
Like a kept boy, Tony fills in, which doesn’t make much sense to him cause how would this be different than him just paying all the bills at once?

“Rumlow said something today, about the party tomorrow,” Peter continues when Tony stays silent. “Said I should try and work my charm on you. He wouldn’t suspect anything if we started after tomorrow.”

The thought of funding Peter’s pimp leaves a bad taste in Tony’s mouth, and he says as much.

“It’s not – you wouldn’t be… I mean, in a way you would, but if it’s not you then it’s someone else. Rumlow, he – he’s angry, I think, at me,” he clarifies, and finally this starts to make sense.

Peter’s afraid.

“I think he feels stiffed cause I had so many outside clients lately and if I don’t – or if I just stop, I don’t know what he’ll… do,” Peter finishes, and damn, Tony can hear the worry in his voice.

It sends his blood boiling. Not for the first time he contemplates finding some Health and Safety violation at No Bones and siccing an inspector on them. He’s got the connections to make it work. Could buy the building and keep the staff, too.

But from what he can tell, Rumlow’s in too deep with the unsavory element of the City, so taking measures like that wouldn’t exactly be wise – not without thorough planning, and maybe better connections to the guys in charge of the witness protection program at the Bureau.

As is, the compromise Peter’s proposing… well. It’s a start. A step in the right direction.

And once Peter is more comfortable with dating Tony while he’s spending money on the kid, he’s bound to have better chances to get Peter to quit entirely and accept his initial offer. Maybe he can even work out a deal with Rumlow in the interim to ensure Peter’s exclusively his. Tracking the money could provide a way into the guy’s records, give him some hard proof to slip the necessary authorities.

Peter clears his throat. “Do you think… would that work? For you? As a compromise?”

It’s not enough, not nearly enough, if Tony’s being honest, but it’s all Tony can get for now, so it’s got to do.

“Allright,” he says, and he can feel the tension in Peter’s shoulders lessening immediately. “How does it work? Walk me through it, so I know what to do on Sunday.”

“Well, uh… You call my boss, ask about ‘full service’, I think, and he’ll get what you mean. I don’t really know how these talks go,” Peter admits, ducking his head. “I’m just there for the execution.”

The statement alone makes Tony want to hit somebody. Preferably Rumlow.

Patience, he tells himself. He’ll pay eventually.

“Okay. Looks like we got ourselves a compromise, kid. And hey, we made it through our first fight! Yay us, right?”

His cheer and probably the general relief punches a laugh out of Peter, but the lines around his mouth are still much too taut.

“Wanna tell me what happened today?” Tony asks, stepping a little closer.
Peter pales. “Uh…”

“You don’t need to,” Tony assures him. “But you can.”

Peter is silent for a long moment but eventually shakes his head. He looks ready to cry. He’s not showing any obvious signs of physical harm, so Tony figures whatever happened took more of a mental toll, which is bad enough.

It also breaks the little restraint Tony still had and he moves closer, opening his arms but making sure to give Peter long enough to stop him or move away, which doesn’t happen.

Tony can’t remember the last time he hugged someone before today. Well, not the quick kind of half-hug in greeting, but the real stuff, like this. Peter’s head buried in Tony’s shoulder, arms tight around each other’s backs, feeling the other person’s breathing pattern through the rise and fall of their chest against his.

It’s wonderful.

Even better is the bit shortly after they part and Tony brings up his hands to cup Peter’s face, pressing a soft kiss against his lips. The responding smile he gets isn’t quite the thousand-watt one he knows Peter’s capable of, but…

It’s a start.

Chapter End Notes

*cheers while melting into a puddle of goo*

**Edit 07.10.2018:**
After channeling Bucky and barkeeping for 18 days, then co-organising another even and then diving into the final stretch leading up to my short film festival (taking place September 28-30), while also finishing two screenplays.... I'M BACK TO FANFIC! So there's light at the end of this unexpectedly long hiatus. *sending hugs*
twelve

Chapter Notes

Sincere apologies for this unexpectedly long hiatus. I tended bar for three weeks, then co-organised two events including a movie premiere, followed by a short film festival, as well as finished the first drafts of two screenplays... and now I'M BACK with fanfic!

Thanks so much for your wishes and your patience ♥ And for more than 1,000 kudos! I'm slack-jawed, folks.

But anyway, I've kept you waiting long enough. Here comes chapter 12, beta'd as always by the awesome merlenhiver :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“You sure you’re alright there, slugger?”

Peter blinks out of his thoughts and back into the visitation room where Ben is giving him a worried look from across the table.

It’s less crowded on Saturdays than Sundays, which is just as well. Given how distracted Peter is today, he probably would have tripped over someone or broken something. It’s a miracle he only dropped his pen this morning at the lab, not any of their fragile experiments.

“You’re doing it again. You okay, Peter?”

He shakes himself and plasters on a smile he almost feels. He found that the best way to placate Ben is to take your time with responses, so Peter waits until Ben’s shoulders relax before promising, “I’m fine, really. It’s just… It’s been one of those weeks, you know?”

“Tell me about it…”

Ben sounds like there’s a story behind it and Peter leaps at the topic change.

“Anyone giving you trouble?”

“Yeah, the new guy they assigned to the workshop – two left thumbs, slugger, I’m telling you,” Ben grouses and it’s like old times, with his uncle complaining about how useless the high school interns are that he takes on at the garage. Peter lets it wash over him, soaks it in, cause he needs the reminder after everything that’s happened that it’s all worth it. Rousseau, putting up with Rumlow, the deal with Tony, everything.

“But look at me, yammering your ear off. What’s that party you mentioned?”

Upon his arrival, when it came to explaining why he showed up alone on Saturday instead of with May on Sunday, Peter went with the truth. For the most part, at least. Namely that he got the day off to attend a party and that May couldn’t join him since she’d picked up another shift.

“It’s, uh, it’s a birthday party. A friend’s best friend.”
“A friend?”

Peter doesn’t fight the blush working its way up his neck at Ben’s suggestive tone.

“Ah… a friend,” Ben confirms, smiling fully now. “I didn’t know you had those.”

“It’s, uh, it’s kind of recent?” Peter says. “I… Things are going to be better soon, Ben. I’ve been doing really well at work and we’re gonna be able to rehire the PI and you’ll see, you’ll be cursing at interns again in no time.”

The hopeful twist in Ben’s expression makes Peter’s eyes sting. He’s gotta make this work. Whatever happens, he has to get his uncle back.

Ben’s putting up a token protest like every time Peter contributes to their bills but Peter’s sure he’s secretly grateful that May doesn’t have to bear the full weight of their financial responsibilities.

“I’m proud of you, slugger,” Ben says when they part, his voice soft.

Peter wishes he could grab his uncle’s hand but the warden would kick him out sooner than he could say ‘thank you’.

He arrives back at his dorm in time to meet MJ, who’s still miffed he missed two workout dates this week, but more than happy to help him select an outfit for the party.

Not that she’d admit that out loud, mind you.

“Your wardrobe suggests you’re living with a split personality disorder, Parker,” she tells him but half an hour later, they’ve settled on a combination that will work perfectly.

When, after a quick shower, Peter slips into the high-quality chinos and throws on a fitting jacket over one of his favorite graphic tees, he can’t help the feeling that this… well, this blurring of the lines is going to be the new status quo.

*Stop it, Parker, it’s just clothes.*

Peter shakes his head and grabs the concealer.

* He offered Steve to help set up but was told in no uncertain terms to keep his hands off Steve’s creations.

“Besides, mate,” Bucky added, “you’re supposed to be a guest.”

Which is why Peter arrives only a little early to keep Tony company while he supervises the caterer and staff before the other guests show up. It puts him at ease, if he’s being honest. He’s never been a simple guest at one of these things before.

He finds Tony putting up sleek partitions on the upper party floor – the one with the best-stocked bar – while young men and women in unobtrusive uniforms hurry about the area, and Peter immediately latches onto the chance to help.

Tony smiles in response and Peter feels his pulse stutter.

“Thanks, kid. Don’t want Pepper to see the cake before it’s time, y’know? So we’re gonna hide it.”
As if on cue, a door in the corner slides open to reveal Steve and Bucky along with a large table holding what look like cake elements. Peter never realized there’s a staff elevator extending to the event floors, on top of the private one and the public one.

After twenty minutes of set-up, Peter almost feels calm.

“You look amazing, by the way,” Tony whispers, stepping closer and resting his hands on the counter of the bar where Peter’s leaning against, originally to see if Bucky needs anything before making a home for himself in between bottles and shakers.

“I love the hair,” Tony adds, playfully pushing at the curl falling into Peter’s forehead.

Mentally, Peter sighs in relief. He’s tried something different tonight: rather than going for either slicked back or completely messy, he attempted to give his hair an artful tousle to match the mixed-up clothes. Seems to have done the trick.

“And the T-shirt’s a winner, too,” Tony adds. “Bruce is gonna swoon, I’m telling you.”

Peter ducks his head. He might have hoped Dr. Banner will appreciate the print. It says, ‘The physics is theoretical but the fun is real’ inside a stylized drawing of an atom, and even though Dr. Banner is doing a lot more than physics these days, that’s still where he started.

“I like your outfit, too,” Peter says, eying the workshop clothes with a grin. “Very alternative.”

“Ha, you’re a riot today, kid. Come on, help me change into something presentable.”

Tony tugs at his sleeve and leads them up the stairs to the penthouse. Peter can feel several pairs of eyes follow their exit but it’s not even an excuse on Tony’s part to be alone with him. As hot as he looks in ripped jeans and a threadbare tank top, Peter doubts Miss Potts would approve.

If they end up kissing against the bedroom doorway, though, Peter is the last to complain.

* 

Peter meets Pepper first, given how she turns up fifteen minutes before the party’s supposed to start.

“Meaning it’ll be half an hour before the regular guests drop by,” Tony quips. “Pepper, meet Peter Parker, Peter, this is Pepper. Damn, try saying that five times fast…” which Tony of course tries immediately.

Pepper Potts is a vision in the white dress she’s wearing, reddish curls framing her face. Peter manages to splutter only a little as he wishes her a happy birthday and presents his gifts.

“Tony said you’re asking for donations and I’m sorry that it’s only a modest contribution but, uh…”

“Any donation is appreciated, Peter, thank you,” she says, sounding genuine.

She steers them towards the gift table holding an array of flowers and cards that had to have been delivered today. Miss Potts – no, Pepper, I’m supposed to call her Pepper – adds his present to the table as well cause, as Tony explains, you don’t open them during the party.

“Wow, I wouldn’t have the patience,” Peter blurts before he can stop himself.

Pepper chuckles. “Oh believe me, I’d prefer ripping them open immediately, too, but I’m afraid it’s either wait or don’t brag at all.”
“Brag?” Peter echoes.

“If you look real close, kid, you’ll see there’s even a card from the President’s office.” Tony grins.

Peter’s so immersed in inspecting the cards then that he misses Dr. Banner’s approach until he’s congratulating Miss Potts, who leaves them to it since her father just arrived.

“Hello, Mr. Parker”, Dr. Banner says. “How are you feeling?”

“Much better, thank you.”

“You look it, too.”

“He always looks great!” Tony cuts in but Dr. Banner remains unimpressed.

“You have to say that. You’re his boyfriend.”

Peter colors, which earns him a quizzical look from Tony.

“I, uh, I’ve never been anyone’s boyfriend before,” he admits once the doctor has excused himself to get a drink.

“Not even in high school?”

Peter shakes his head. “I was too busy building stuff with Ned, and then we graduated.”

“You never – I mean, before…”

Peter realizes with a start what he just admitted to. “Uh, I… It’s no big deal.”

Judging by the way Tony regards him, though, it is kind of a big deal, yet Peter’s made his peace with the fact long ago and he says as much.

Tony visibly swallows whatever protests were at the tip of his tongue and instead steps closer, placing a hand on Peter’s waist.

“You’re here now. You have a boyfriend now,” he says, brushing his lips against Peter’s temple. The gesture makes something warm unfurl in his chest.

“Damn, he’s young.”

Peter startles away from Tony, who shoots him an apologetic look and turns towards the tall, black man sporting some sort of military dress uniform.

“Told you.”

“Yeah, but not this young!” the guy says, regarding Peter with a stare that has the full authority of his profession behind it. “You even legal yet?”

“I’m twenty-one,” Peter manages, sounding a bit more snappish than intended to cause holy shit, this has to be Colonel Rhodes, Tony’s best friend, and he’s gotta leave a good impression.

By some miracle, however, his reply draws a grin from Rhodes. “Aw, he bites.”

“Only when provoked or asked nicely,” Tony says with a leer.

Peter feels his cheeks grow warm.
“And he blushes, too!” Tony smiles, pulling Peter close again. He introduces him to ‘his’ Rhodey, as he puts it, and then, before either of them can do more than nod at the other, Tony continues, “How’s Washington treating you, buddy?”

Rhodes’ eyes dart to Peter, who’s been around enough people discussing sensitive information that he takes this as his cue to get them all drinks and flee to the safety of Bucky’s bar.

Bucky’s busy pouring separate drinks in two mixing glasses simultaneously, but he still has time to raise a teasing eyebrow at Peter. “Escaping the best friend’s shovel talk?”

Peter ignores him, mostly because no matter how he’d have responded, Bucky would have picked up on his fear and mocked him for it. And it’s totally justified, alright? Colonel Rhodes has decades of military experience and probably a high enough security clearance to make anything that happens to Peter look like an accident. Not that Peter thinks Tony will ever care enough to be truly heartbroken, but… well, Peter can dream.

Only then does Peter notice the other man standing at the bar, nursing a top-shelf whiskey.

It’s Erik Lehnsherr.

“Uh,” Peter says, “hello, sir.”

Lehnsherr inclines his head. “Mr. Parker.”

When Lehnsherr doesn’t go on, Peter tries to catch Bucky’s eye again to place his orders, but the barkeeper is charming a middle-aged couple of obviously nouveau-rich snobs so Peter has no choice but to remain and let the awkward silence stretch.

“Have you, by any chance,” Lehnsherr says eventually, “given more thought to my proposals?”

Peter is about to reiterate his stance of ‘thanks, but no thanks’ and return to actively not dwelling on the possibilities that an internship at Stark Industries would offer, despite the stab of longing he always feels at that… only to realize with a sudden jolt that it’s different now.

He might actually have some leeway in this, by the time summer rolls around.

“I, uh, I have, sir.”

Lehnsherr’s eyes flash and Peter flails a bit more before eventually admitting that “Things are changing, for me, and, I, well – I’d have to see how things settle down, but…”

“Shall I hold that internship position for you, then?”

“Oh, wouldn’t that – wouldn’t that keep another candidate from getting a spot in the program? I haven’t actually agreed to anything, I still gotta see if…”

Lehnsherr gives him one of those shark-like grins. “I guarantee you, Mr. Parker, we have quite an extensive waiting list. Every single person on that list is ready to jump on this opportunity in a heartbeat.”

He doesn’t miss the implied criticism but swallows his replies. Ben is more important than a shiny internship, regardless of how awesome it would be or how it would set his career for life. To even be able to consider the possibility makes Peter dizzy with hope and –

“Mr. Parker, hello again.”
“Dr. Banner!” Peter blurts, apparently much to Mr. Lehnsherr’s amusement. In fact, Lehnsherr watches their entire exchange, from Peter blushing to finally getting to praise Dr. Banner’s latest publication and diving into about a hundred questions, “but, uh, I’m so sorry, you probably don’t want to discuss MeTros at a birthday party, I’m sorry, maybe I can –”

“No, no, it’s no problem,” Dr. Banner interrupts in a rather timid way even though the man could probably silence Peter with a look at this point. “Yet it’s rather difficult to explain without – oh, thank you, Erik.”

Banner accepts the StarkPad that Lehnsherr produced from who-knows-where and proceeds to use its holography program as a makeshift whiteboard.

It takes several incredible minutes before Peter registers that the Dr. Bruce Banner is engaging with him, on eye level, about medical adhesives and oh gawd, please don’t let this evening ever end –

As if on cue, the bright clink of a spoon against glass sounds throughout the party floor and every pair of eyes finds Tony, standing in front of Bucky, who lowers the utensil.

“Ladies and gentlemen, thank you all for coming!” Tony beams. The toast that follows is short and heartfelt, with a dash of self-deprecating humor that segues neatly into the cake reveal.

Peter already knows, both from the workshop tour he received and the many videos he watched, that Tony is an amazing showman. Actually witnessing the way he plays the crowd and builds up suspense as he places a hand on the partition is something else though.

The reveal renders everyone speechless – including Peter, who caught glimpses of the different elements during setup. Somehow, seeing it all put together makes it all the more impressive.

Pepper's an art buff, is what Tony said he told Steve, who took that information and ran with it. Peter remembers enough from high school to understand there are allusions to many different art periods within the cake. Some seem to be painted onto the frosting, like the starry night recreated on petites gateaux, others have been rebuilt using batter and custard, such as those wonky clocks Peter fails to remember the artist of. Still, it’s obvious Steve has pushed his already superior baking skills to the limits of what’s possible, leaving the entire room in awe.

“Oh my god,” Pepper keeps saying.

Steve is standing behind his creation, hands clasped behind his back and glowing with pride. Peter turns to look at Bucky but the barkeeper only has eyes for his boyfriend. He’s radiating joy and Peter can’t help thinking, I want someone to look at me like that one day.

He finds Tony in the crowd eventually, bearing a Stark Gimlet as well as a glass of orange juice made to look like a cocktail.

“She likes it, right? She’s not just pretending to be thrilled,” Tony says, watching Pepper listen to Steve explain a set of small seashells that hide several layers of cake and filling to a crowd of fascinated party guests.

“Best birthday cake ever,” Peter confirms and finds himself on the receiving end of another kiss against his temple.

“Yay me, then… Saw you talking with Lehnsherr. What did he want?”

“Oh, he… He sorta offered me a position on the internship program?” Peter says, ducking his head cause he never had the guts to mention this to Tony before. “I’ve been, I mean, I wasn’t in a position
to take the summer off before, but maybe… Well. We’ll see.”

When he finishes, Tony is regarding him with the kind of neutral blankness that’s carefully maintained, as far as Peter’s experience goes, meaning Tony is holding back whatever he has to say on the matter.

“In case I decide to, you know… Would this be a problem? Between us, I mean? I’m not familiar with the company’s bylaws yet, and, um…”

Tony’s lips curl. “Kid, my name’s still on the building. You don’t have to worry about bylaws. In case you, you know. But no pressure. Let’s see how it goes. Lehnsherr could hold your spot until the day it starts and still have fifty people willing to kill each other to take your place.”

“That’s what he said – well, without the killing.”

“Then he left out the best part!” Tony jeers, pulling Peter closer and clinking their glasses. “I gotta schmooze a few important people. You wanna suffer with me, or you wanna track down Bruce and finish your epic geek-out I was only able to watch with intense longing out of the corner of my eye cause I had to listen to Senator Briggs go on and on about urban development?”

Peter’s still laughing when he peels himself away from Tony and goes in search of the doctor.

He passes by the cake table to see if there’s still some gateaux left and check on how Steve is doing. One elderly lady decked in Chanel with diamonds dangling from her neck and ears arrives moments later in order to get a second helping, judging by the traces of cream on the plate she’s carrying.

“This is veritably stunning,” she tells Steve who’s hovering behind the table and posed to help. “And so delicious. Never tasted anything like it.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

“Where’s your shop, dear?” she asks then, prompting Steve to stumble through an explanation on how he’s still only doing this as a side job until he has the means to change it.

“Oh, then you have to talk with Harold, he’s been investing in quite a number of ventures in the gastro industry. Let me introduce you, dear.”

Peter can’t contain his grin as he watches the woman lead Steve off to a group of guests in tailored suits.

He doesn’t see Dr. Banner anywhere so he circles past the bar again – only to find Bucky scowling at a guest who’s walking away with a drink in hand after leaving a tip on the counter.

Another guy, probably the first one’s colleague, picks up the second drink Bucky placed on the bar. The way the movement shows off the Rolex prominent on his wrist can only be deliberate, Peter decides.

“Thanks, pal,” the guy drawls, and tosses a few bills on top of the one his colleague left without even looking at Bucky.

No surprise the barkeeper’s clenching his jaw.

Bucky spots Peter a moment later, pocketing the tips. “Hey, Parker. Would you mind? I need some air.”
“Sure, no problem,” Peter stammers but Bucky’s already storming past him.

He hopes any guests coming up to him until Bucky’s return are content with simple drinks cause that’s the extent of Peter’s barkeeping skills.

He gets his wish.

He also gets something much worse.

It starts with a prickling sensation at the base of his neck, like someone’s watching him. When he looks up, he finds the observer in a heartbeat.

The guy regards him over the rim of his champagne glass. He’s on the chubbier side with thick, dark hair and glasses. Peter thinks he’s seen the white suspenders he’s wearing with his black suit and red tie before, yet before he can place him, the guy steps up to the bar and orders a refill.

“Here you are, sir,” Peter says. “Is there anything else I can do for you?”

The man’s voice is scratchy, as though he’s spent the past few decades smoking like a chimney. His accent is British, which rings a faint bell in Peter’s head.

“Oh, I’d sure think so. But something tells me that would aggravate my host. Wouldn’t want that, would we?”

Peter blinks. Is this guy is referring to what Peter thinks he’s –

“I’d say this is a step up from the Hamptons,” the man says. “Impressive how easily the likes of you move up in the world.”

“Sir…”

“Oh, that was rather rude of me, wasn’t it? Apologies, young man.”

“It’s okay,” Peter says, but his heart is hammering against his ribcage as he finally recalls that he’s actually seen the guy three times before – in the company of Fabio Ortiz earlier this week, and at poker in Brooklyn, surrounded by tattooed muscle. The third time was outside the building on Peter’s way home, having his muscle beat up another player he lost to. The memory makes the hair on the back of Peter’s neck stand up.

Back in the present, the man leans forward, eyes never leaving Peter’s as he smiles and places a tip on the counter with a meaningful smile. Peter watches him slip back into the crowd, but the prickling sensation doesn’t vanish.

The fifty dollar bill seems to set his skin on fire where he’s holding it between his fingers. He doesn’t need to unfold it to see the business card with a hand-written note hidden inside it; it’s not the first time he’s received someone’s private number this way. Yet none of them ever made him feel this dirty.

“More money,” a voice suddenly comes from his left. “Hooray.”

It’s Bucky and Peter’s seriously tempted to hug him.

What he does instead is say, “Steve seems to be a hit.”

Bucky’s scowl mellows. “Punk deserves it. At least with him, these rich d-bags are genuine. With me it’s just… one-upmanship and pity, ya know?”
“Pity? I don’t think –”

“Mate, to them, I’m the baker’s assistant. I’m no chef de bar at one of them snotty places they grace with their patronage,” he says, and Peter has never heard his voice dripping with so much disdain. “I’m just a guy with an attitude problem who happens to mix a mean drink, that’s all.”

Peter doesn’t know how to react to that cause yeah, most of the guests don’t even seem to notice the waiters milling about. Like the champagne flutes and cake slices simply appear at their elbows, or the empty glasses all but vanish into thin air.

This is Tony’s world, though. How does Peter fit in?

How could the likes of him ever fit it in?

Suddenly everything is too much. Too much designer wear, too many pieces of jewelry that could pay off May’s debts tenfold, too many patronizing looks. Peter seeks refuge on the balcony and even that threatens to be overwhelming, with its incredible view from the seventy-sixth floor over Manhattan by night.

Did he honestly think it’d be this easy? Be Tony’s plus one to Pepper Potts’ birthday party, meet his friends, mingle… pretend he belongs?

“You know,” a voice says all of a sudden, making Peter whirl around, “I don’t think I’ve ever seen that look before.”

It’s Colonel Rhodes. His dress uniform is as imposing as it was when they were introduced but there’s still a trace of mirth in his expression.

“What, um, what look?” Peter says after a beat.

“Like you’d rather be anywhere else.” Colonel Rhodes steps closer and Peter barely manages to stay put. “Usually the gold diggers can’t keep their hands off Tones… but well, usually he doesn’t meet them serving rabbit food at a restaurant.”

Peter has no idea what to say, so what slips out is, “I’m not a gold digger.”

Rhodes smiles. “I got that. Why you hiding out here, then?”

Peter tries for an eloquent shrug, but Rhodes’ prompting gaze doesn’t waver. He probably knows every advanced interrogation technique in the book, so there’s no use trying to hide behind vague hums or evasive gestures.

“It’s weird,” he admits eventually. “You know, being on the other side of the tray.”

Something in the Colonel’s expression shifts. He makes a sound that’s not yet a laugh but his posture relaxes, so Peter feels it’s safe to go on.

“It’s fine when it’s just the two of us, even if we’re in the workshop and I’m gaping at everything – well, in my head, I mean, but, uh…”

“… the trouble starts when you throw other people into the mix?” Rhodes suggests. Peter nods. “Damn, if that don’t sound familiar…”

“Hm?”

That is definitely a laugh, Peter decides, and watches the Colonel lean forward to prop up his elbows
on the balcony railing.

“Tones tell you about us rooming together at MIT?”

Peter’s smiling before he realizes it. “He said he made you steak.”

“Ngh, that wasn’t steak, that was a revelation, man,” Rhodes says with a wistful sigh as his tone loses a lot of its formality. “But I guess he didn’t tell you about paying for my books and lying to me about it?”

“Uh, no.”

“Yeah, told me it was part of my scholarship, which tripped me up cause I knew it wasn’t. Been working all summer to be able to afford those books, so I was able to confront him about it right away. Turns out he was also lying about the utilities and the laundry bill, and he kept buying too much food cause he knew I’d never waste anything. Something you learn when you grow up with nothing, ya know?”

Peter does.

“Thing is, Parker,” Rhodes continues, “to him, it wasn’t a big deal. The money, I mean. Still isn’t. It’s about the gesture for him. Like I’d show he’s my friend by hanging out and tagging along to boring-ass lectures, he shows it by buying me a suit for my first job interview. Took me a long time to get comfortable with it, and I still gotta rein him in sometimes, but… Don’t let your bias ruin the potential you have. And yeah, you got potential. I’ve seen him with a lot of partners in the past, Parker, so trust me on this. And the other stuff. Get over yourself and give this a real chance.”

When Rhodes falls silent, Peter’s mind is already racing.

The way Rhodes explains it, Tony offering to cover the bills is like Ned offering to do Peter’s Spanish homework on a busy weekend – it’s a way to help cause they care about one another.

He's never looked at it from this point of view. Is Peter really so biased that he didn’t realize the meaning behind Tony's offers? That it’s not about buying him, it’s about appreciating him, helping him?

Rhodes is smiling when Peter’s mind clears.

“Now go back inside before I gotta make use of my right to concealed carry.”

Peter doesn’t need to be told twice.

*

The guests finally start filtering out at about one in the morning, leaving only people Tony actually wants to engage with.

Hypothetically, at least. In reality, Peter has long since gravitated back to Bruce. Tony guesses the only thing keeping Bruce from dragging Peter off to the labs is common courtesy and Lehnsherr observing from one table over.

The last thing Tony wants is to interrupt the science-bonding going on, cause science-bonding is sacred and it’s so rare that Bruce connects with anyone, so he seized the moment and steps up to Pepper after she finally led Senator Briggs to the elevator.
"See?" he says with an eye on the decimated cake display. "I can restrain myself. Without handcuffs," he adds, earning himself a playful slap on the arm before Pepper sores.

"Thank you. It was lovely."

"Just lovely? Why not, I don't know, extraordinary? Mind-blowing? The party that spoiled you for all parties to come?"

All he gets is a placating hand on his chest and a smile that means Pepper's trying really hard not to laugh.

"By the way, Pep, I saw Helen introduce Steve to Harold. If you wanna get in on that too, you should probably give him a call."

Pepper arches an eyebrow. "Do you want me to want to get in on that?"

Tony grins, abashed.

"Be glad I tasted his baking, or else I'd think the only reason you're willing to do this is to endear yourself to a certain aspiring engineer."

Damn, is he that obvious?

"Yes," Pepper agrees. Her eyes are twinkling, though, so she's in favor of his plan. She's also regarding Peter, who has picked up a tablet and is changing some of the specs or formulas on there from what Tony can tell with an intrigued air. "Polite young man. Smart. Diligent. Not your usual plus-one material. Wherever did you find him?"

Tony would rather sell his car collection than admit it was –

"At that vegan restaurant you made him go to."

That.

Tony glares at Rhodey, who has long since grown immune to Tony's death stares, meaning his shit-eating grin remains unaffected.

"You asked a waiter at a vegan restaurant to be your plus-one? How long has this been going on? Has he been to the workshop?"

Trust Pepper to get to the heart of the matter in seconds.

"Don't worry, I took him to dinner first."

"Did he at least sign a –"

"Course he did, jeezus, I learned my lesson, okay?"

Pepper and Rhodey are trying to be subtle with all the looks they're exchanging but Tony catches every last one of them. This is going to grow mushy very, very soon, and Tony really doesn't want to be in the vicinity when that happens.

So he stages a strategical retreat, meaning he lifts his empty glass and slips away, yet not towards Bucky but upstairs, to his private stash.

The phone call he has to make requires nothing less.
Tony thought long and hard about what he's going to do about Rumlow. He even went so far as to reach out to his contact at the Bureau to ensure everything's gonna hold up eventually, even though he doesn't have time to jump through the hoops Coulson wants him to jump through.

Well, technically he could have, but that would have meant waiting and risking Peter being whisked away for another few days and returning in an even worse state.

Which is why he dials Rumlow's number now.

The other man picks up immediately despite the late hour, offering a gruff "Hello."

"Mr. Rumlow? This is Tony Stark."

A beat.

"How wonderful to hear from you. I hope my staff are to your liking?"

"The cake was exquisite," Tony says, but figures he can't ignore the innuendo. Not considering what he has planned. "The service, too."

"That's what I like to hear. What else can I do for you, Mr. Stark? I doubt you're calling just to praise my employees."

"I'd like to talk to you about the full-service offers you provide."

"Who'd you have in mind?"

"Parker."

"And what kind of full-service were you looking for?"

Part of Tony, the part that isn't disgusted by the entire situation, can't help but be impressed with how smooth Rumlow is practically bartering a real person.

"An exclusive one."

"Sir, you have to understand –"

"I don't like sharing my toys, Mr. Rumlow," Tony interrupts. He doesn't even have to fake the growl in his voice. "And I have the means so I don't have to."

"I'm afraid that's not how we usually do this, Mr. Stark."

"I'm not a usual client, though, am I?"

A moment of silence on the other end. Time for the big guns.

"I propose a retainer agreement," Tony say. "We agree on a flat sum that guarantees me exclusive service, yours to keep, while Parker receives his pay on a job-by-job basis."

Another beat. Tony can practically hear the wheels in Rumlow's brain turning to determine whether this is a lucrative deal or not.

"What kind of flat sum? You realize Parker is my most popular waiter."

"And I can see why," Tony manages, even though the implications make his stomach churn.
"Tell you what, Mr. Stark. Let me be straight with you: Parker brings in about fourteen hundred a week, so you're gonna have to surpass that to make it worth my time."

"And you expect me to believe your estimate?"

"Take it or leave it."

Now it's Tony's turn to lapse into silence.

He's done his own calculations, of course, based on the two hundred that Peter asked for that night. Assuming the cut is heavily in Rumlow's favor, he might make anything around 300 bucks off whoring Peter out. On an average of three jobs a week, with some over-nighters thrown in... Well, fourteen hundred is a little steep, in Tony's opinion, but then again Rumlow is a businessman talking to a billionaire.

A businessman who seems to know exactly which buttons to push.

"I'm afraid I can't agree to a retainer for anything below fifteen hundred a week. You see, Parker has quite a few regulars who aren't gonna be happy when I tell them he's off the market. That's what you want, isn't it? Exclusive full-service, not for me to contract him out to other private events? Who knows what will happen there. You're not the biggest fish in the pond, Mr. Stark."

Well, not if the pond includes organized crime, is what Tony doesn't say. Instead, he feigns reluctance, draws some more information out of Rumlow about what other clients might be interested, and eventually settles on the proposed fifteen hundred a week.

"Pleasure doing business with you, Mr. Stark."

The dial tone rings out and Tony takes a moment to compose himself before clearing his throat. "You got all that, buddy?"

"Of course, sir," JARVIS says, projecting the folder holding the recording into the air between Tony and the window.

"Trace the money, too. Everything you gather goes into that folder. No one's allowed to access it except me, you hear me?"

"Yes, sir."

The projection vanishes, leaving only the penthouse view in front of Tony.

He did it. Peter's safe.

Then why doesn't this feel like a win?

Chapter End Notes

Peter's T-shirt is the second from the left [link].

Thank you for reading!

Chapter 13 is coming along nicely but I can't (won't) take my laptop with me on my trip to the UK. Expect it to be up before Halloween, I'd say?
Chapter Notes

I sincerely apologise for the delay on this! The reasons for it are twofold: for one, I’d reached a point in this story where I really needed to beat out the rest of the plot in detail, to ensure the pacing etc. is up to par, and… well, this is version four of this chapter^^ For another, to say my mental health wasn’t the best is putting it mildly. It still isn’t, but I’ve found a way to handle it that allows for regular writing time again.

Since I already have a completed first draft of ch14, I’m cautiously optimistic that the next chapters will follow at a quicker pace *fingers crossed*. Thank you all so much for your continued support and enthusiasm!

Now, without further ado… enjoy ♥

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"You did what?"

Tony shrugs from his side of the kitchen island. "Seemed like the best option."

"But Tony –" Peter says, then stops. He's gone pale, which worries Tony a little. Maybe he needs more coffee.

"Look," he says, fetching the pot, "I figured this would be the easiest way for both of us. No coordinating appointments, no feeling bad on your part for cancelling on me, no hard decisions. Just me, having you on retainer."

The kid's getting overwhelmed again, he can tell, but for now there's nothing Tony can do. He guesses it is overwhelming, right, to suddenly not need to follow the whims of Rumlow and have some room to breathe. Gawd, how Tony wants to hurt that guy.

"And how – I mean, how will you, um..."

"Depends. How about you get a flat sum, too? Guaranteed, no matter how often we see each other. We'll just put it out of our minds and relax into this."

At least that's Tony's plan. Make the kid forget there's money involved, get to know the real Peter Parker, not the waiter persona or the straight-A-student version of him. Once the layers are gone, Tony might feel confident in doing more than sleeping next to the kid, like he did tonight. Which was wonderful, don't get him wrong... but also a special form of torture.

Like the way Peter's biting his lip right now.

"What kind of sum?"

"Fifteen hundred a week?" He'd offer more but he doesn't want to scare Peter off.

"A week?!"
You'd think Tony suggested he burn all his graphic tees, *jeezus*.

"Take it, kid. And hey, this was your suggestion in the first place."

"I know, it's just... *Fifteen hundred.*"

Tony makes to speak but remembers Rhodey's advice from last night. 'Give him time to process, Tones', he said. 'Remember me at college.'

He does, vividly, so he waits and ends up glad for it. It takes a while, but Peter's expression goes from pinched to reluctant, then something must have occurred to him cause it morphs into grudging acceptance.

Peter clears his throat and lifts his eyes. "Fifteen hundred?"

Tony nods. "You want cash or transfer?"

A beat. "Transfer?"

"Thank god," Tony sighs. "Cash would've been awkward."

"Unlike this?" Peter quips, and that's a good sign, isn't it, that he's back to joking?

"Hey, you're the one who's putting up a fuss, kid. I'm perfectly chill about this." Okay, 'chill' might be pushing it, but that's due to Rumlow the criminal asshole, not Peter. "More coffee?" he adds, since he never got around to refilling Peter's cup.

"Um, yes, please."

Tony seizes the chance to brush up against Peter's back and is rewarded with a contented hum in return. He rests his chin on Peter's shoulder as he pours.

"So," he says, "you got to be anywhere before work today or can I lure you into the workshop for a bit?"

Peter shakes his head and Tony grins against his skin.

True, the circumstances might not be ideal, but Tony can't argue with the results.

* 

The money arrives on Monday. Peter stares at the neat number on his phone for a full minute or so before he feels certain he's not still asleep and dreaming.

With this amount of regular income, it's time to call Acacia.

She agrees to meet with him in the afternoon and he finds her at one of the computer booths in the Science and Engineering Library during his free period. No one passing would suspect the woman pretending to jot down notes from what she's reading on the screen to be anything other than a student, given the zip hoodie and jeans she's donned. The glasses are a nice touch, too, Peter thinks.

"Parker. I thought I'd seen the last of you," she says, her voice low.

"Sorry to disappoint."

"Don't be. It's a nice break from cheating scumbags and corrupt business people."
Pulling up a seat, Peter tries to smile but doubts he's very successful.

"So, I take it I get to continue where I left off? What's my budget?"

Peter spent half of his morning lectures on the calculations, but he doesn't realize the flaw in his plan until he states the number and Acacia's eyes narrow.

"How'd you get the money, kiddo?"

"Don't worry about that –"

"I kind of have to if you're doing something illegal."

"I'm not," Peter hisses. "I swear, okay? Can you just take the money and get to work? We don't have much longer."

Acacia is great at her job – otherwise one of the best lawyers in the city wouldn't have put her on the PI short list – and must recognize he's being sincere, but the wariness in her expression doesn't dissipate. Especially when Peter tells her to send the bill to him instead of May as she's packing up.

"And what will you do when I unearth new evidence and she learns about my involvement from Prather?"

*Good question.*

"You could say you're doing it pro bono."

Acacia obviously did not expect him to suggest that. "Pro bono?"

"Yes." Peter squares his shoulders, gaining confidence – it's perfect, actually. "I'll pay you, but if my aunt asks, you'll say you need to complete your pro bono hours for Deckert & Prather."

For a moment he thinks she's going to argue or take the moral high ground, but after too many torturous moments, Acacia simply zips her bag closed and logs out of the computer with a somber expression.

"Whatever you're doing, Parker... be careful, okay?"

"You, too."

She smiles, then leaves him at the work station.

Peter sags in relief. With Acacia back on the case, it's only a matter of time before she uncovers something that will help their defense. All the sleepless nights and the worrying, it all will pay off soon.

And until then, Peter can finally focus on what matters most: Tony.

*It's too easy.*

Peter can't shake the feeling that he's cheating, somehow, since life has never been this uncomplicated. No more tense anticipation when he enters *No Bones*, no more hoping for Rumlow to have a job for him, no more waiting for his phone to ring – just school, waiting tables, and Tony.

The Sunday after the party, Rumlow slapped him on the back and squeezed his shoulders with a
contented grin, and that was that. Rumlow's good mood has persisted since then, so much so that Peter can tell Bucky's growing suspicious, yet when Peter arrives at work on Friday after a long day of lectures broken up by a quick lunch with Tony, Bucky's distracted by the new guy.

"This is Drake," Rumlow says with a smirk. "Here to replace Neil. Let's see if you're as lazy as him, or if you got what it takes. Show him the ropes, Parker."

Drake is tall and lithe, similar enough to Peter in appearance that it leaves him with a sense of foreboding... which only intensifies when Rumlow assigns Drake to Mr. and Mrs. Jefferson's table with a meaningful look.

"What was that about?" Drake wonders in Peter's direction. The rest of the guys already dashed off to check on their tables.

"Mr. Jefferson's hands like to, well, stray," Peter settles on. "It's best if you don't acknowledge it, just, you know, stand a bit closer to him when you pour drinks or bring their plates. He's a good tipper."

Drake nods and handles the entrée well enough, but Peter can't stop watching his new colleague for the entirety of his shift. Drake doesn't drop or spill anything, though, and keeps up that boyish smile of his that probably made Rumlow hire him to begin with, which earns him a solid tip at the end of the evening.

"Don't pout, Parker," Rumlow tells him as they watch Drake skip out along with the rest of the staff. "You've got bigger fish to worry about now."

Peter wouldn't call making out against the prototype StarkJet engine something to worry about, exactly. It not only gives him a new appreciation for aerodynamics but also leaves him with a pretty persistent hard-on that he pushes against Tony in a way that lacks any sort of finesse.

Yet all Tony does is smile and slow down. When Peter tries – subtly – to sneak a hand between Tony's skin and his belt, Tony twists them in a smooth motion that dislodges his hand and also happens to put greater distance between their groins.

"There's no rush," Tony murmurs against his throat, beard dragging against his skin. "We got all the time in the world."

And while prolonged make-out sessions that leave Peter's knees weak and his pulse racing are awesome, they also, well – feel too easy.

Until Peter checks his calendar on Monday and sees the reminder. "Get tested" is flashing up at him – of course Tony doesn't want to touch him before he can be sure it's safe.

"Shit."

"What's up?"

MJ finishes her last thigh press and swings into a sitting position, brow furrowed.

"Uh, nothing."

"Sure. You always curse at your phone when it's nothing."

"I – I'll tell you later, okay?"
His hopes that the pain of fifty pull-ups would make MJ forget about his promise are quashed the moment he joins her outside the changing rooms.

"You have five minutes to fill me in before my need for caffeine outweighs my interest in your life."

"It's nothing, really, I just – I gotta get tested again."

MJ stops in her tracks. "You're not due for another two months."
Peter shrugs and doesn't meet her eye. She believes his check-ups are a requirement of his waitressing job, which isn't that far from the truth, actually, but it also means that any deviation from the routine has an obvious explanation.

"Well," MJ says. "I could do Wednesday. Miro's tied up with a project and Chelsea needs to go to office hours, so I'm without plans for lunch."

Peter considers declining her offer, but the thought of waiting at the free clinic all by himself doesn't sit well with him. He figures he could try a real hospital now, since he has the means, yet why spend two hundred bucks on something he can get for a fraction of that with a little more time invested?

Which is why they take up residence in the Riverside Sexual Health Clinic waiting area two days later. It's not where Peter usually goes – there's a clinic near the restaurant that gives out standing appointments by request, but he doesn't want today's test to show up on their files, and this place was closest to uni.

MJ must sense his nerves, cause she keeps up a steady stream of anecdotes from her acting classes and social events she attended, not requiring any input beyond a smile or a shake of his head since MJ hates active listeners.

It doesn't quite distract Peter from the endless variations of 'What if' that his brain is cycling through, has been cycling through since Monday in fact, but it's better than sitting here all by himself with nothing to do except wondering how fast Tony would drop him if he came back with an STD from... from that night.

Cause it's a real possibility, isn't it? Peter's certain he wasn't the first sex worker Fabio and Spencer pulled into their midst, and he saw Fabio sample his own product at least once during his stay in the Hamptons. Besides, would someone who's clean need to leverage a gun when attesting to it?

MJ's elbow nudges him out of his thoughts. When he looks up, he sees the intake nurse is looking at him expectantly, so he gets up and follows. He tries to return MJ's reassuring smile, but he doubts it worked.

Once in the exam room, Peter puts on his best hapless-student smile while Nurse Patel goes through the usual questions.

"How many partners have you had?"

"Uh, seventeen," Peter says, cause that's a safe number, isn't it? At least it strikes him as a better answer than, 'I lost count.'

"What genders were your partners?"

"All men."

"When did you begin having intercourse?"
"At, uh, at eighteen."

"Do you always use a condom?"

Peter drops his gaze. "Almost."

Nurse Patel doesn't bat an eye. "How often is almost always?"

"Like, uh, ninety-eight percent of the time?" he say, cheeks heating.

"So you're aware of the ways to protect yourself?"

Peter nods. "I also know how, and I have access to protection."

Her eyes narrow ever so slightly and Peter curses himself – he tipped his hand, showed he’s done this before. Enough times to know the questionnaire by now. *Stupid, Parker.*

"Have you had sexual intercourse while under the influence of any substances?"

Peter swallows. "No."

"Are you certain?"

Peter nods. "Yes."

It's the truth, and she must recognize it, too, but he doesn't relax until she asks him about the kinds of tests he wants, cause that means she skipped the section about consent. It's not that Peter has to lie, it's just that it never fails to make him uncomfortable.

A blood test, a urine sample, and a cheek swap later, Peter's sent back out into the waiting area. Both the blood and urine test will take a while to yield results, but the cheek swap will come back within twenty minutes.

"At least you'll know quickly," MJ says, then drags him outside for fresh air. "Now dish, Parker. Who's the guy?"

And a talking-to, apparently.

"What guy?"

"The guy you're getting tested for. You wouldn't be this nervous if it were just about your health, sad as that is."

"I totally would –"

"Dish. I'm not spending twenty minutes watching you beat yourself up for whatever stupid thing you did to require this. I wanna hear about whoever's making you smile with his texts."

Of course MJ noticed. Shit. Tony and he haven't talked about Peter telling anyone, so he has no idea what he's allowed to say. On the other hand, Tony told Pepper and Colonel Rhodes, so maybe it would be okay?

Well, he better play it safe, just in case.

"He's... I met him at the restaurant."
"A vegan?"

"Uh, no. But he agreed to for a business meeting, so he's not anti-vegan either, I guess?"

MJ motions for him to go on with a magnanimous sweep of her hand.

"He's... He's an engineer – he has this awesome workshop, like you wouldn't believe. We talk a lot about that stuff and..." Peter trails off. What else can he say that won't make her connect the dots immediately? "He's really busy, but he makes time for me and I... I really like him."

MJ regards him with an inscrutable expression. "How old is he?"

Peter flails. "Um... Older?"

"How much older?"

"None of your business."

MJ grins. "That much? Huh. Where does he live? I need to know where to send the police when you don't turn up to classes, Parker."

"Um, that's not gonna be – I don't know if I'm allowed to tell you."

Now that was the wrong thing to say.

"I mean, he's really private, and I haven't asked him yet if it's okay to tell you – or Ned! So, can you just..."

MJ crosses her arms. "Then ask him. I want to meet him. Leeds is going to have my head if I let this continue without making sure you're not dating a serial killer."

"What? Tony's not –" Peter stops.

MJ grins. "Tony? Tony who?"

"If I promise to ask him, will you drop it? Please?"

She does, but only after three torturous seconds as well as an exaggerated sigh, after which Peter has two blissful minutes to fret about how that conversation will go before he's called back into the clinic to for the results of the HIV test. He takes a seat in the exam room... and waits.

Does this mean it's positive? That they're preparing an emergency treatment? Or did something just come up, and they can't see him yet?

Both options seem equally likely. Or not. What's the chance of infection again? He curses himself – he really should have done more research, no matter that the mere thought made his pulse spike with panic. He can't even beat himself up for forgoing the condom that night, cause what would have been the alternative? Best case scenario, he'd have had to get back to Manhattan on his own. Worst case...

Peter shakes his head, but the image of Spencer handling the gun won't leave him.

He figures those memories are better than what came after.

"Mr. Parker? Are you alright?"
Peter blinks at Nurse Patel. When did she enter?
"Uh, sorry, just... Do you have my results?"

"I do." She pauses. Peter feels his throat constrict. Why doesn't she keep talking? "Your test was negative for HIV."

Negative.
He's negative.

"Good," he manages, his system flooding with relief.

"We'll call you once we have the rest of your results. Until we know what they say, practice safe sex only."

"Of course, ma'am."

Nurse Patel offers him the basket holding free condoms and he thanks her before taking a handful. He hopes he won't need them in the foreseeable future, but... well, he's not in the clear yet.

*  

With the weight of the HIV risk off his shoulders at least, Peter finds it a lot easier to relax into the new status quo.

Sure, some customers still flirt with him and Peter maintains his charm, but he won't follow anyone into the men's room or react to invites to someone's hotel. Tonight's interested party slumps back in his chair after Peter declined the chance to see the view of Manhattan by night from his Upper East Side apartment yet doesn't cause a fuss. It's going to happen at one point, Peter's quite certain, but he's been spared for another night.

"You're in a good mood," Drake comments in the changing room. "Hot date?"

Peter has to pull his T-shirt the rest of the way down before he can respond. "Uh, yes, actually."

"For real, bro?"

Peter was about to dash out of the room, but the tone of Drake’s voice gives him pause.

"Yeah."

"I thought you’re doing this for, you know?" At Peter’s nod, Drake’s brow furrows further. "So what, you enjoying this so much you look forward to playing house?"

"We’re not playing house."

"That’s not what Rumlow said. Said you’d hooked a big one. Wants you all to himself, the real boyfriend experience."

"He’s big on exclusivity," Peter hedges, but Drake frowns.

"Must be nice. Got any tips? Or your guy got any friends?"

Peter blinks. Rumlow did tell him to help Drake, though at the time Peter didn’t know what he could possibly teach the guy that wasn’t common sense.
"I'll keep an ear out? And... you're doing good. Stay that subtle. But be as courteous to whoever the potential clients are with – we’re a restaurant, after all. And maybe slick back your hair?"

Drake blinks. "Why?"

"So they can imagine messing it up."

"Huh. Will do. Thanks, bro."

"Sure."

"I gotta say you're a lot nicer than the others. Guess you don’t have anything to lose anymore?"

_Quite the contrary_, Peter thinks, but he really doesn’t want Drake to sense that. Nobody here knows about Ben, not even Rumlow, so Peter fakes a smile and wishes Drake a good night.

*  

He finds Tony on the floor of the workshop near the coffee machine amidst a pile of paperwork muttering to JARVIS. He flops onto his back when he catches sight of Peter with an exaggerated moan.

"Finally, my hero! Save me from the pains of quality management and risk assessments!"

Peter can't help but smile at Tony's antics. He's climbing to his feet even as Dum-E begins picking up pages. "Does he know how to file them?"

"Nope, but JARVIS does, don't you, buddy? Keep an eye on that, I'm off for the night."

The AI's responding "Yes, sir," sounds exasperated even to Peter's ears.

Once in the elevator, Tony pulls Peter close and drops his forehead on Peter's shoulder with a sigh. "They should've just sold to Toomes and saved me the trouble."

Peter knows Tony's just being dramatic so he says nothing. Instead, he winds his arms around Tony and relaxes into his warmth. He's itching to do something, maybe even drop to his knees, but he's self-aware enough by now to identify that as the reflex it is.

Tony's been very clear that he doesn't want him on autopilot, and Peter's glad for it, really, he is. It's just, well... It's difficult to distinguish most of the times. Peter can see that offering blow jobs without sufficient build-up isn't a thing when dating someone, but what if he keeps drawing circles into Tony's hip with his fingers or kissing down his neck? It's not like Peter minds blow jobs, and he'd bet half his pay that Tony enjoys them just as much as all the other men he's –

Oh.

Peter backs up, both mentally and in his actions. Tony twists a bit until he can see Peter's expression, so he does his best to keep his slip-up off his features and opts for a diversion.

"Star Trek?" he suggests.

Tony grins and drags him out of the elevator. "Hell yeah! Only got one episode to show you before I get to introduce you to the era of Picard. I can't wait for you to meet Data! Oh, and Wesley! And the Borg, but we gotta watch them when you're staying over cause you're so gonna have nightmares..."

Tony's giddiness is infectious and Peter's smiling again – for real – once they reach the kitchen where
he spies popcorn in the microwave. It *dings* just as Peter grabs the water carafe from the fridge and raises an eyebrow at Tony who nods, so he gets a beer as well. The domesticity of it all leaves Peter with a strange combination of feelings he can't quite name.

"What's up?"

Peter turns to Tony, who's tilting his head at him. The last thing he wants is to call attention to the dynamic – but fortunately, he still has something to discuss.

"It's just... Well, MJ asked about you. Not you you, but in the vague sense. Who I'm seeing. So I was wondering – could I tell her?" Peter asks slowly, discouraged by the frown on Tony's face and the fact that he puts the bowl of popcorn down to face Peter more fully.

"You mean you haven't?"

"I wasn't sure you wanted me to."

"But it's okay for me to tell Pep? And Rhodey?"

"That's different, they're..." Peter stops before he can say 'your friends' cause for some reason Tony's scowling in earnest now.

"Listen, kid," he says, stepping closer. "Your friends are just as valid as mine."

"Right." Peter notices he has clutched the carafe closer to his chest and forces himself to relax. Hopefully, Tony didn't notice.

"So go ahead and tell her."

"She also kinda wants to meet you? Vague you. Something about making sure you're not a serial killer?"

"Commendable." Tony grins, then pauses. "Wait, isn't she the one who opposes everything I stand for?"

"Not your medical research," Peter hedges, but yeah, he can see why a meeting between MJ and Tony might not be the best idea. Perhaps he shouldn't have mentioned her activism in the past, then Tony wouldn't be aware that MJ regularly joins the protests in front of Stark Tower.

"Ah, the things I do for you, kid," Tony sighs dramatically and picks up the popcorn bowl again.

"So you'll meet her?"

"In a public space – or wait, how likely is she to make a scene?"

"Um..."

"Scratch that, then." Tony walks them towards the sofa. "Somewhere secluded, but not empty warehouse secluded. Near campus, cause then I can wear my student disguise. Something tells me she wouldn't appreciate my suits."

Peter agrees with a laugh and settles into Tony's side. "Best take her to breakfast, then."

"Oh yes, bribe the penniless student with free food. I can work with that."

*
Peter's acting oddly and Tony can't for the life of him determine why.

Ever since that second Monday after the party, it's like a switch has been flipped. Before then, the kid let himself get carried away and only pulled back or took things down when he felt himself slipping into autopilot – unless he didn't notice and Tony had to stage evasive maneuvers – but now Peter doesn't even dare to be a tease, it seems. Not even in a natural way: things will heat up between them, be it on the sofa or the workshop bench and suddenly Peter will just... stop.

Tony has no idea what to do with that, no matter how long he tries to untangle this mystery. He's so distracted he even zones out during a meeting with the Elongine Group and forgets all about his date with the FBI.

"I'm not in the habit of tracking down witnesses," Agent Coulson says when he catches him on his way to talk Pepper into approving a new line of garbage disposal units for their buildings. They're not even that experimental, so it's practically safe and – oh, right, Coulson's still waiting for a reaction.

"I'm not your usual witness, am I? They don't tend to do your job for you guys, right?"

Coulson merely gives that bland smile of his.

"So my guy turned up something good?"

"The buildings your PI tracked Rumlow to are a suspected hub of organized crime. We'd like you to keep up this line of enquiry."

"You should put me on the payroll, you know. As a thank you." Contractor to the FBI would sound awesome on his resume.

"As a thank you, we'll ignore the fact that you had intel on Rumlow's machinations for quite a lot longer than you've been cooperating with us. Some might call this obstruction of justice."

Tony calls bullshit, cause it wouldn't be so easy, especially after his lawyer had a go with the Bureau, but then again, nowadays the FBI doesn't need probable cause to be all that probable. Not that Tony minds – he has his own security and nothing to hide.

Including Peter.

Too bad the kid hasn't gotten that memo yet.

"Go out?" Peter repeats.

"Yeah, venture out of the bubble of the Tower and those pathetic excuses for coffee shops you have on campus. We could go to Katz's again – or I could show you another of my favorite haunts. Or you got a favorite place? Ha, I know: dinner and a movie! A classic! What d'ya say, kid?"

Peter is gaping at him for another few seconds, cause he clearly didn't expect Tony to be okay with the risk of being seen with him. Tony wants to kick himself for not doing anything to prevent this before now but that's physically impossible. So he settles on throwing a bit more money his PI's way to speed things up a little more while Peter goes on a googling spree for movies they could go see.

Footloose is the kid's idea. It's playing at a tiny three-screen theater in some godforsaken corner of Queens but it's close to Peter's favorite Thai place. There are exactly five people in the audience, including them, cause Tuesday's not exactly a moviegoing day but it's the only time Peter could make it to the cinema in time with classes and work.
They sit in the middle, far enough away from the other three in the back to avoid undue attention, hold hands when they aren't feeding each other popcorn, and drool over 1980s Kevin Bacon for a couple of hours.

Peter's still singing the theme song when Tony drops him off at his dorm, cause he's meeting his lab partner at ass o'clock in the morning, so Tony spins him around in front of the door and dips him like they're at a dance competition.

It's a perfect evening, made even better with the goodnight kiss that follows.

*

They don't get to see each other until Friday. After three hours in the company of execs who hope they can ply him with enough wine so he'll turn a blind eye on their shady manufacturing processes and take the consulting job regardless, Tony craves nothing more than to see Peter.

So he pulls into the parking space at the back of No Bones and entertains himself on his phone until the employees emerge after closing time. None of whom give him a second glance until –

"Stark?"

"Guilty as charged," Tony grins, waving off Steve's apologetic look for his partner's impolite greeting. "Just wanting to surprise a certain waiter."

Bucky's expression doesn't lose his suspicious edge, yet Steve's mellows.

"How's life going for you? Moving up in the culinary world?" he asks, if only to pass the time.

Steve can't contain his smile. "We have a meeting with a possible investor in two weeks – Mr. Harold Jefferson, from your party. We've had a few jobs from them as well."

"Testing you, for sure," Tony winks and finally there's Peter, smart pants and graphic tee visible through his open jacket, smiling as soon as he checked the only ones in the lot beside him are Steve and Bucky.

"Hey, kid."

Tony smoothly places a soft kiss on Peter's lips, and whatever reservations the baker and the barkeeper had seem to evaporate in a heartbeat.

"I got your text," Peter says.

"Obviously."

Peter ducks his head, blushing faintly. Tony doubts he'll ever get a full-on crimson, ground-swallow-me-hole kind of blush out of him, but this is exquisite, in its own right.

"Ugh, get in the car before I get a cavity," Bucky grumbles, much to Steve's chagrin, but Tony is more than happy to obey.

Something about Peter is different – he's in a spectacular mood, for one, babbling away about classes and the current stage of his experiments and MJ's curiosity about breakfast tomorrow. Tony still contends that brunch would be a much more natural thing for a weekend, but the upside of having to get to the café so early is that Peter's staying the night, once again sharing a bed after cuddling on the couch if past sleepovers are any indication.
And yes, Tony's confident enough to use the word *cuddle*.

Peter, however, has different plans, for when they're on the sofa, he puts a hand on Tony's arm as he makes to tell JARVIS to cue the next episode, brushing his lips against the inside of Tony's wrist. Tony feels his mouth go dry at the heat in Peter's gaze. This is... unexpected. And not at all autopilot.

They kiss for a few blissful minutes before Peter goes even further and climbs into Tony's lap, knees on either side of him. Their groins are still decently apart but the distance disappears when Peter leans in for another kiss.

Tony's hands stroke Peter's side cause he's found the kid really likes it, deft fingers across his back and arm, waiting for those little contented sighs and gasps and trying to reign in his grin when he successfully teases them out.

Then Peter's fingers find the top button of his shirt and Tony's breath catches in his throat.

Peter's eyes are sure, almost pleading, or maybe that's just wishful thinking, Tony doesn't know. But he nods and Peter takes his time, following the newly exposed skin with his tongue. He doesn't shy way from the shrapnel scars on his chest, something Tony appreciates beyond the ability to verbalize it.

Once his chest is bare, Peter starts on his own shirt, moving quickly. Tony stops him as he's about to lift it past his chest.

"Let me," he says, and celebrates the movements, making sure the fabric drags ever-so-lightly over his skin, chasing the sensation with his hands until Peter's shirtless and covered in goosebumps. He can't lick due to the angle, but he can damn well trace his fingers along Peter's collarbone, his sternum, his ribs, feel his stomach flutter and watch the tell-tale bulge in his pants.

Tentatively, Tony runs his hand over it. Peter's even harder than he is right now, a firm length against the fabric of his pants.

Tony increases the pressure and the resulting moan sends a shiver down his spine. Peter's rolling his hips now in time with his rhythm, rubbing against Tony's palm and trying to be subtle about it, but when Tony sits up and starts stroking him in earnest, all restraint flies out the window.

This is new – Tony can't remember ever feeling so turned on from over-the-clothes action before, but he's not surprised it's Peter who prompted this. His own erection is so hard it's growing uncomfortable but who could care when Peter's seeking friction and gasping into his mouth and, ngh, sneaking a hand between their bodies.

Peter's hand on his length is firm from the start and Tony can't help but throw his head back against the couch on a sigh.

Peter kisses his neck, strong and wet with a hint of tongue, mouths at a nipple until Tony can feel both of them harden, which is probably why he doesn't notice Peter's sliding to the floor until it's too late.

Peter looks up at him from between his knees, lips open and eyes wide.

"Jeez," Tony manages, then takes a deep breath.

Peter must have read it as encouragement since he goes for the zipper. Through the haze of arousal, Tony watches closely. No sign of autopilot – yet.
He's down to his underwear, pants and socks a heap on the floor, when he gathers the brain function to ask, "Why now?"

Peter merely grins and noses along the outline of Tony's cock, hot breath ghosting along the damp fabric. It's like right out of a porno and he'd love nothing more than to give himself over to Peter's mouth and hands, but something about the image doesn't sit right with him. Or, well, the timing.

"Seriously, kid... Why now?"

Peter places his hands on Tony's hips, thumbs rubbing distracting circles into his skin. "I got the tests back today. I'm clean." He smiles and leans in to lick a path from Tony's navel to the hem of his underwear.

"And that's opened the floodgates?" Tony asks before his brain catches up fully with what Peter said. A shadow of insecurity flickers across Peter's face, there and gone again a second later, but it's enough for Tony's stomach to drop even while Peter's trying to gloss over it.

"I've been thinking about this for so long," he whispers, closing his eyes as he rubs a side of his face against Tony's wilting erection.

"Probably not in the 'I can't wait to get my mouth on you' kind of way, but more like 'let's get this over with,'" Tony says, shuffling back as far as he can to put some distance between them.

Peter looks shocked. "No, I – never. I want this, Tony."

As if to prove his point, Peter pulls at Tony's briefs and shuffles forward in a fluid motion that looks way too elegant for it to be anything but practiced, yet fortunately Tony manages to stop him with a hand on his shoulder.

"Say that once more with feeling, kid."

Peter sits back abruptly, mouth snapping shut.

Fuck, he looks close to tears suddenly. How did Tony screw this up so quickly?

"Hey, hey, come up here, I'm sorry, I...

But when Tony reaches for Peter to help him onto the couch, he flinches.

Flinches.

Shit.

Tony does the only sensible thing he can think of on the spot and joins Peter on the plush carpet. No way he's talking down to him now, either figuratively nor literally.

"Okay, clearly we're on totally different pages here, so walk me through your reasoning and I'll walk you through mine –"

"I'm not a child," Peter says and he's on his feet again.

Tony follows. "Believe me, I know, but what's that about the test results and the floodgates?"

"I... I thought that's why you were holding back. Or, part of the reason. The risk of, you know. But I got tested, I'm negative across the board, so you can let me touch you now, I swear."
It sounds almost like a plea and Tony has no idea what to say. Of-fucking-course the kid misinterprets his silence.

"If you don't believe me, I'll show you my results," he says. "I'll go right now, and when I'm back, we can pick up where we stopped. It'll be worth it, I swear."

"Oh, I don't doubt that. But I told you before, kid, I don't want you on autopilot."

"I'm not –"

"That just then looked an awful lot like –"

"Well, how the fuck do you know?" Peter shouts, and Tony's stunned into silence by the cursing first, then by the vehemence in his tone. "How can you tell? Cause I can't, and I think I'm okay and then I realize, and then I remembered the tests and figured that's why you've been so – but now you still don't want me and I..."

Peter cuts himself off, out of breath and squeezing his eyes shut in an attempt to keep the tears at bay that have been building up – tears of anger, or of frustration, Tony's not sure anymore.

All he's sure of is that he thinks he finally solved the mystery. Too bad that is only the beginning of the problem.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry not sorry about the slight cliffhanger ;)

**TIMELINE NOTE:** Thanks to Alluka, I've come to realise that I got my facts about HIV testing mixed up while writing this. While it's true that rapid tests only take 20 minutes to yield results, they will only be effective if enough time has passed between the possible infection and the test. It looks for antibodies to the virus, which don't develop until three months or so.

Peter gets tested one and a half months after his night with Fabio and Spencer, meaning a test wouldn't be conclusive. For some reason, my Muse thought we'd figured out how to test for HIV within weeks of infection by now... So, for the sake of this fic, let's pretend StarkMedical has made this a reality in this universe, okay?
fourteen

Chapter Notes

Happy 2019, y’all! I hope this chapter will bring you joy! It’s a little on the short side, but I’m optimistic the content will make up for it.

Special thanks to merlenhiver for beta’ing from the sick bed, and for being the best person with whom to spend New Year’s! ♥

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Peter wants the ground to swallow him, wants to just vanish and pretend this never happened.

Better yet, hop on a time machine so he can go back and stop himself before things get too out of hand, or go a different route... because it was awesome, it really was, so much so that Peter could feel himself heading towards the edge, and surely that was too much foreplay?

He wasn’t lying, he does want to taste Tony. But whenever he tries to imagine it, he’s back with Fabio, or Rousseau, or Blindfold Brad, and while he knows with every fiber of his being that Tony is nothing like them, he seems to have no control over how his body reacts.

But how is he supposed to explain that to Tony?

Tony, who’s giving him space and even retrieved his T-shirt and is steering him back to the sofa with a glass of water for both of them, even though Peter can tell Tony’s mind is straying to the collection of single malt whiskeys in the mini-bar.

“Alright. So you’re having trouble telling when you slip. Makes sense, really, what with how long you’ve... and from what I got, your clients weren’t always the most upstanding of gentlemen.”

Peter huffs. That’s one way of putting it.

A nerve in Tony’s jaw clenches at his reaction and Peter looks away.

“So I gotta ask. I know you said it was good but... that time in the bathroom. And here. Was it really okay?”

Peter’s reflex is to say yes, but he quells it. Instead, he truly thinks about it, about how all he remembers from the hand job is how good it felt, about how any memories of their second time are overshadowed by the gut-wrenching embarrassment in the face of Tony’s reaction.

“Yeah, that’s fair,” Tony says when Peter stammers through an explanation. “I can’t really separate it either, and I guess by this point I never will... Okay, how about this: new start. Clean slate. As far as we’re concerned, we’ve never gone farther than kissing.”

Peter blinks. It’s a wonderful thought, “But we have.”

“Yeah, but that was different. You thought I was a client, I thought you were a pretty gutsy waiter. We’re different people now, aren’t we?”
“But I’m still... I mean,” Peter takes a deep breath. “I still can’t really tell what’s okay and what’s not.”

“Cause you got no idea what you like!” Tony says with a flourish. “You never had to know, and I guess no one ever bothered to help you either, so we’re gonna figure it out.”

“But what about you?”

“Oh, kid,” Tony all but purrs, “I’ll get to mine eventually.”

“I don’t want you to compromise –“

“Nah, you ain’t hearing me,” Tony interrupts, waiting until all of Peter’s attention is with him before continuing. “I love making people feel good in bed. It’s sorta my thing. My kink, you could say. Ask any of my former partners if you’re dubious but I swear they’re all gonna say the same thing – they already have, come to thinking of it. Just google me. Sure, they’re all on about how I put work above everything and never got time and miss anniversaries and birthdays but they never complain about the sex.”

Peter makes to argue, cause surely Tony’s just saying that, only to realize he can’t in good conscience contradict him, not without consulting Google. From what he recalls about the tabloids and scandals, every partner was as complimenting regarding Tony’s sexual prowess as he contends. But… surely that’s too good to be true? On the other hand, what reason would Tony have to lie about this?

“O-okay,” Peter says. “If you’re sure...”

“Never been surer of anything in my life, kid.”

Tony sounds it too, sincerity and eagerness written all over his features. It’s the excited gleam to his eyes that decides it for Peter cause that’s the way Tony looks when he’s about to start a new experiment or a new stage with a prototype, and there’s no way he could fake it. Or, well, the chances are slim.

So Peter nods, which makes Tony grin.

“Great! I already got an idea – several, in fact, but even I have yet to figure out how to multitask that well.”

“What, uh, what’s the idea?”

“Have you ever had a massage? Didn’t think so,” Tony says when Peter shakes his head. “You want one?”

“I thought – I thought we were...”

“You saying massages can’t be sensual? Ohhh, you’re in for a treat! I dated this masseuse once, taught me a few tricks, been ages since I gave one, but it’s like riding a bike – at least when you’re a genius like me.”

That's how Peter finds himself, sans shirt, on his stomach on Tony's bed, with Tony kneeling to his left.

“Just close your eyes and enjoy, kid.”
Peter tries. It's weird, at first, Tony's hands roaming his back with such a different purpose. There's no teasing, no light strokes or scrapes of fingernails, just gentle pressure, targeting muscles and bones.

Tony must feel how tense he still is, for he begins talking a couple of minutes into the process.

“Hey, I ever tell you about how I came up with JARVIS? Bit of a long story. You see, one weekend at MIT I was bored out of my skull and started tinkering with our toaster – well, technically Rhodey's toaster cause he brought it with him when he moved in, but we're both using it and after that I bought him a new one so – anyway, I was tinkering with it and I kept expecting someone to walk in and tell me to stop, cause that's what Jarvis always did. The real Jarvis, you know, our old butler?”

Peter hums, hoping for Tony to continue. Both the story and the massage, if he's being honest – it feels a lot less strange now Tony’s talking. Peter can feel/sense his body relaxing into this.

“Great guy. Bit of a spoilsport when it came to some of my more adventurous upgrade endeavors. Well, I did make the TV blow up once, only once, but he never let me forget it. Did that when I was bored, too, so anytime I was bored afterwards I’d have to tell him so he could find some way to entertain me that didn't end with him having to replace household items. So there I was, trying to add a self-buttering option to our toaster – yeah, I get how ridiculous that sounds now, okay? I was bored, did I mention that?”

Peter chuckles into the mattress.

“Anyway, long story short, I decided to build an artificial intelligence that would stop me wrecking appliances and called it JARVIS.”

“Did it work?”

“Oh yeah – mostly cause I spent every minute I could working on the code, and on upgrades after that. You’re allowed to make sounds, you know,” Tony says before he really digs in and Peter couldn’t have kept quiet if he tried.

Tony’s found a particularly tense part of his back and is giving it all he got. It hurts, but in a good way, like Peter heard it’s supposed to in real massages. They always seemed like a pointless luxury to him, and he never had a reason to learn – the type of men that hire him have more than enough money to pay a professional, like the one who taught Tony.

And she taught him well. By the time Tony’s touches ease up, Peter feels like a puddle of contented goo.

Tony places a soft kiss on his shoulder blade and leans close. “I’m gonna try something. Just stay, that’s perfect.”

A moment later, Tony flings a leg over him and eases down so that he’s straddling the back if Peter’s thighs. They’re both still wearing their pants and, in Tony’s case, their shirt, but even through the layers of fabric Peter feels Tony’s interest.

He expects Tony to grind against his ass and is caught by complete surprise when fingertips start ghosting across his back.

This is nothing like the massage. Instead of purposeful and firm, Tony’s touch is light, like feathers at first but growing bolder. Tony’s tongue follows, tracing the outline of his spine and his ribs, before sucking gentle kisses into his shoulders.
“Hm...”

“You like that, kid?”

“Um, yeah.”

“Imagine me doing that lower,” Tony suggests, and Peter can feel him give the hem of his pants a small tug. “Nothing more, just my tongue...”

“You mean –” Peter turns as far as he can, cause surely Tony can’t mean... but he does.

“Anyone ever rimmed you before?”

“Uh... kind of? Maybe?”

“That’s a yes-or-no question, kid.” Tony sits back on his hunches. “Bet they thought a little bit of spit and some wiggling count as foreplay, right? Well, not in my bed. So whaddoya say, you wanna try?”

Peter nods, cause he does. It’s rare enough for a client to want to prep him themselves; he can count the times anyone got their lips anywhere near his hole on one hand.

“Should I – do you want me to wash?”

“If that would make you more comfortable?”

Oh, definitely. Peter agrees in a rush and skips into the ensuite. He leaves his underwear behind as well, and realizes with surprise he’s already half-hard in anticipation. A bit of guilt still clings to him, a sense of duty he hasn’t fulfilled, but he pushes it aside and exits the ensuite.

*

As a rule, Tony doesn’t get nervous. Not in the bedroom, not even that first time when their housekeeper’s daughter and he got drunk during one of Howard’s many parties and decided to finally resolve the tension that had been stirring between them for weeks.

And he isn’t nervous now, not at all. No sir.

His quicker pulse is just a side effect of the massage, that shit’s exhausting.

Peter, though, Peter’s definitely nervous. He’s also deliciously naked, and aroused.

“If we’re skipping the undressing part, lemme just...”

Tony strips off his shirt and jeans, but leaves the underwear on cause this is about Peter, not how hard he already is from the mere prospect of getting Peter off on his tongue.

They’re kissing before Tony can say anything else, slow and languid, like they have all the time in the world cause well, they do. As long as they make it to breakfast with MJ, any pace is okay.

It’s Peter who starts maneuvering them towards the bed, who folds his knees and pulls Tony on top of him. Tony goes with it, but keeps himself propped up on his elbows, until the strain in his muscles gets too much.

He sucks at Peter’s bottom lip one more time, then flops down on his side. With his hands free, he can finally reach out, stroke Peter’s chest and ribs and watch the shiver it chases through his body.
It’s obvious Peter wants to shuffle closer so there’s finally some pressure on his now fully hard cock, but he doesn’t let himself, for some reason.

Guilt, Tony muses. That’s his working theory at least – that Peter feels guilty as soon as he gets pleasure from anything sexual without having done something to ‘earn’ it. It’s probably what happens if all the sex you ever have is in service of someone else’s needs.

But right now is not the time to plunge Peter into a sea of self-reflection. Right now he wants to get his mouth on that ass until the kid sees stars.

“Lay on your stomach for me,” Tony whispers. “Grab a pillow, get comfy. I’m gonna take my time to enjoy this.”

“You don’t need to—”

“I want to, kid. Gawd, do I want to,” he groans, cause Peter has flipped around and there it is, pert and rounded and all Tony’s for the foreseeable future.

“If anything feels uncomfortable, tell me, okay? I wanna figure out what you like, and I can’t do that with you gritting your teeth, got it?”

It takes a moment, but then Peter nods.

“Good.”

With that, Tony slides up next to Peter’s body and goes to town.

Peter’s all lean muscle and defined lines, made all the more beautiful by the dim light of the master bedroom. JARVIS keeps the room at a wonderful temperature, so Tony can be reasonably sure he is the cause of the goosebumps rippling over Peter’s back. He started with his hands but now follows them with his tongue and relishes the surprised gasp it draws from Peter. He licks a stripe down his spine, pausing just above the cleft of his ass, then maps each cheek with his tongue and lips as thoroughly as he can.

Once the initial apprehension fades from Peter’s body, Tony adds his hands there, too, and, slowly... pulls his cheeks apart.

He can hear Peter swallow. A glance confirms the kid has buried his face in the pillow, the sudden shyness quite at odds with the flushed head of his cock that peeks out between his legs.

Tony makes an appreciative hum at the sight of Peter’s hole. He gives it a tentative lick. Peter goes tense again – and that just won’t do, so Tony does it again, massaging the rim with the tip of his tongue before eventually placing a wet kiss against it.

It’s a while before Peter grows comfortable with being touched like this, and even longer before he lets himself push back on Tony’s tongue once he finally breaches the muscle. The first roll of Peter’s hips feels like a victory and Tony groans against Peter’s skin, knowing fully well that the kid’s gonna feel the vibrations right there.

There’s only so far he’s going to get with reducing Peter to a blissed-out mess in their current position, however, so Tony shuffles back on the bed and takes Peter with him until he’s kneeling on the floor and Peter’s ass hangs slightly off the mattress.

“See, now you even got the edge to…” Tony says, pushing Peter against the side of the bed with his hands on his ass to create the friction he means and relishing the gasp it earns from the kid.
An added bonus is that Tony can see most of Peter’s flushed cock now and tell by the increasing drops of precome that Peter’s enjoying himself just as much as Tony is.

Who can finally add a finger alongside his tongue. Gently, at first, then on its own, way eased by copious amounts of saliva until –

“Argh…”

– he finds Peter’s prostate.

After that, Tony’s lost to the world. He suspects aliens could land and he wouldn’t notice, cause his world has narrowed to the way Peter reacts to different rhythms, different angles, different combinations, whether he prefers a hand on his cock and a tongue in his ass or for Tony to caress his testicles with a finger on his prostate.

He never adds a second, cause this isn’t about stretching Peter. It’s about figuring out what he likes, and oh gawd, it’s glorious. Tony can’t remember the last time he was this hard for so long without doing anything about it, but how can he put a hand on his own cock when Peter’s rubbing himself against the sheets and fucking himself on Tony’s tongue? Not at all, exactly, not until Peter bites his pillow and stills as he comes with a muffled moan.

Even then Tony can’t get his hands off Peter’s ass, softly kneading the muscles and flesh as Peter rides out his orgasm. The sight of Peter’s back tensing and relaxing is one Tony commits to memory, just like the unconscious smile tugging at the kid’s lips as he tries to catch his breath.

It takes all of five strokes of his cock for Tony to spill himself over the floor.

When the orgasmic fog clears after a moment or two, he finds Peter staring at him, like he’s genuinely surprised Tony was able to come from that.

He arches an eyebrow and Peter ducks his head.

“Hey, it’s fine, kid. I guess I wouldn’t’ve believe me either if I were you.”

“Sorry.”

“Not the first word I wanted to hear from you after that.”

“No, I – that was – I mean…”

“It’s robbed you of your capacity for coherent speech, I’ll take that any day,” Tony grins, then gets up with a wave to the bathroom and returns with a damp cloth. Once they’re both freed of bodily fluids, Tony climbs back onto the bed.

This time, Peter shuffles close without hesitation and Tony’s pulse stutters.

Yeah, he thinks. They’ll be fine.

* *

“It’s not fine!” Peter says, and damn is the kid hot when irritable. “It wasn’t fine the first time you said it but I thought you were pulling my leg.”

Tony has to bite his tongue to keep himself from actually cooing. He doubts Peter would forgive him. He doubts he would forgive himself – Tony Stark doesn’t coo. At least Peter’s keeping his voice down so he doesn’t draw attention to them from the other patrons of the trendy café that
JARVIS chose for their breakfast thing.

“Why’d I be joking about that? Have you heard my jokes, they’re a lot better than, ‘no, I didn’t like the LEGO movie’.”

“Not by much.”

“Bite me, Parker.”

“I can come back later if you’re not done with morning sex yet.”

Tony has had enough practice in life to not startle violently at the female voice, but Peter’s not so lucky. His head whips up and his blush changes from agitated to embarrassed.

This must be MJ.

“Even I’m not that much of an exhibitionist,” Tony says, kicking his chair back to get up and extending his hand. “I’m Tony. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

She shakes his hand with narrowed eyes fixed on his face, which can only mean one thing.

Recognition setting in in three, two, one…

“Fuck.”

“I didn’t lie,” is the first thing Peter says, which was definitely the wrong reaction cause the girl flops down and turns to glare at him with staggering speed. “… much?”

Thankfully, their waiter appears with a third menu before MJ can actually eviscerate her best friend, which to Tony looks like a distinct possibility, and he’s once again glad he got to choose their location. MJ and Peter both suggested some student-run order-at-the-counter café-slash-bistro thing but after thoroughly investigating the quality of coffee shops around campus on their previous dates, Tony vetoed that plan and had JARVIS reserve a table somewhere with actual waiters.

It’s nothing fancy by any stretch of the imagination cause according to Peter’s words of caution, that would’ve only pissed his best friend off, and now Tony thinks he gets why. The phone he glimpses as she pockets it is high-quality (yet none of his own design) as are her clothes. He spots a People Tree logo on her jacket and her backpack is one of those rectangular ones with the fox that Tony’s seen almost every ecologically-minded student own and surely mass production on this scale can’t be that ethical anymore, they all see that, right?

But yeah, he gets how MJ wouldn’t be his biggest fan.

He doesn’t expect her to be so unabashed about it, though.

“So, how’s that investigation going? Into the harsh working conditions of your suppliers in Taiwan?” is the first question she asks once they all have their coffees – or, in MJ’s case, their almond milk latte. Cause of course she’s a vegan.

“MJ,” Peter starts but Tony waves him off. He’s used to this, and his PR team keep him up-to-date on all fronts. He even bothered reading the memos this week.

“No, no please, if she wants to spend the only time she sees you without sweat and gym equipment around by quizzing me about stuff she could just as easily read up on our website in her free time, who are we to stop her?”
“What if I don’t believe your PR department?”

“Well, then you’re bang outta luck, young lady, cause I do and I’m gonna tell you exactly the same as they would. Only less politely.”

“Damn, you’re good.”

Tony smirks.

“How’s rehearsal going?” Peter asks, and quickly steers them away from further potential points of contention by quizzing MJ about her upcoming performance within her drama classes. When she mentions a profound hatred for Shakespeare, though, Tony can’t hold back the eye roll.

“What?”

“How can you study drama and hate Shakespeare? That’s like wanting to become an astronaut and hating space,” Tony explains, exchanging the tomatoes off Peter’s breakfast plate with the green peppers on his. “Granted, not all of his work is literary genius, but there’s a reason he’s still around after four hundred years – and you can flag down the waiter right away, Parker, cause don’t think I didn’t notice.”

Peter gives him his puppy-in-the-headlights look, as if that will get him out of anything. Well, it might, cause Tony’s still way too thrilled that Peter’s first impulse isn’t apologizing. It happened enough times during breakfast at the Tower when Peter finished off all of the cream cheese on his own.

“You started with the croissant,” Peter hedges, “I figured you wouldn’t want a bagel after that.”

“You figured wrong, kid. I gotta drive up to the Monroe headquarters; I’m gonna need all the energy I can get.”

“Guess we’ll need more coffee, too,” is all Peter says and excuses himself to track down a member of the staff and seek out the bathroom.

When Tony turns back from watching Peter go, he finds MJ regarding him with an almost soft expression. Yeah, she’s smart, she’s gotta see how fucking gone he is on Peter. And surely that means – yup, her jaw’s setting. She’s gearing up for a Talk.

“Listen, before you go all ‘you hurt him, I’ll hurt you’ on me,” Tony says, leaning in and looking her straight in the eye, “I’d like to let you in on a little statistic. You willing to guess how many people I’ve ever let into my workshop? Rough estimate? Go on, it’s not a trick question.”

MJ ponders it for a moment. “Twenty-seven.”

“Huh, interesting guess. Wanna share how you arrived at that number?”

“You don’t let just anyone in, but you’ve also had a lot of partners.” She doesn’t sound judgmental, which is nice, but he still detests the implication that he’s playing loose with company secrets.

“Nice try, but wrong. It’s five. Five people, including my chief engineer and head of StarkMedical. So you see, it’s not a cheap seduction technique. Does that soothe your worries?”

“Maybe,” she concedes after a stunned beat. “It doesn’t mean you won’t end up hurting him eventually. And once you do... I take fencing classes.”
“If I hurt the kid, I’ll tell security to let you in.”

He’s surprised to find he means it, too. MJ must be thinking along similar lines cause she just blinks at him until Peter returns and conversation resumes on a more jovial note. At least she stops giving him dark looks and subtly hinting at all his company’s ethical shortcomings (they’re working on it, okay?), so maybe the best friend’s seal of approval is in the cards for him after all.

It puts him in such a good mood, he doesn’t even mind when a group of tourists recognize him on the way back to the car.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 15 is in the works, but before then I’ll finally get to share an honest-to-the-gods oneshot (with only one chapter!) that I wrote for deaded-blush/blush-incarnate’s birthday!
If you’re into modern, human AU Stucky, keep an eye out for "Bake Me A Bullet" on January 5. There’s minor adult Starker, too *winks*. 
By popular demand – meaning one reader asked and I’m happy to oblige – here is the recipe for the Stark Gimlet:

**Stark Gilmet**
serves four martini glasses

20 cl Monkey 47 gin  
15 cl fresh lime juice  
5 cl orange blossom water  
2-4 twigs of fresh rosemary  
1 tsp dried cloves  
zest of half an orange

Several hours before serving, put the rosemary, cloves and orange zest into a filter (like a cold brew dripper) and drip the gin slowly over the ingredients. Alternatively mix all ingredients, let steep overnight, and strain before using.

When serving, divide lime juice, orange blossom water and the gin over four martini glasses. Decorate with an orange twirl and rosemary. [image]

Tony’s upgrade: use more lime juice and add fresh ginger to the rosemary, cloves and orange zest while dripping/steeping.

**Note:** This is based on a Friedrich’s Gimlet recipe found [here](#), adapted to fit Tony’s gin preferences in this AU. It should be said that I haven’t tried this, so I make no claims as to its taste outside of the fictional universe of this story xD Though I might make myself one once this story is complete, to celebrate...

If you decide to recreate this, please do share your experiences :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Watching Tony sign StarkPhones and pose for pictures drives home a startling fact: one day, someone will spot them on a date and their relationship will come out.

For half a minute, Peter can’t breathe. It shouldn’t hit him out of nowhere, really, he’s had some time to face up to the fact he’s dating a celebrity... but the implications haven’t truly hit him until today.

Because it will come out, there’s no ‘if’ about it. Tony has made it clear he doesn’t want Peter to be his dirty little secret and refuses to make more of a fuzz about staying incognito than he usually does – which is still an ample amount of fuzz, mind you, but not a bullet-proof strategy by a long shot.

Meaning Peter’s gonna have to tell his aunt at some point.

Or, well, sooner rather than later.

Sunday morning, he wakes with a sense of foreboding and an empty space where he’d hoped Tony would end up eventually once he was finished with the adjustments that his latest visit to the Monroe
group prompted. Peter finds him in the workshop, bent over what must be a prototype for the new waste processing units, cursing at Dum-E over a socket wrench.

Peter’s only had the pleasure of seeing Tony during an engineering bender once, and it’s no less glorious today: he’s keeping up a running commentary on everything he’s doing, filled with non-sequiturs and clearly not meant to be understood by anyone but himself and his bots. He’s certainly been mainlining coffee for the better part of the night and judging by the slight drag of his movements, Peter doubts he’s taken a break in hours.

It would be easy to make his presence known, to wrap his arms around Tony, to rub up against him until he’s aching for it and then take his mind off things for a handful of minutes… but Tony would protest and ask questions before Peter even got close enough to get some of the grime onto his outfit and it’s much too early in the day for the ‘I want to’ – ‘Are you sure’ dance that would follow.

So Peter contends himself with starting a fresh pot of coffee and topping off Tony’s mug once it’s done. Tony never startles out of his haze – that is, until he lifts his mug and something in his brain seems to remember that it wasn’t this full or this hot just minutes prior. Even then he gulps down half of it before turning a blinding smile on Peter.

“Good morning to you, too, kid.”

“I’m pretty sure it only counts as morning if you actually slept.”

“Blasphemy,” Tony says, and leans in to steal a kiss, which Peter tries to deepen but Tony holds him at arm’s length with a rueful smile. “I’ll get workshop all over you.”

“I can change.”

“Not before you gotta leave to get home on time, unless you wanna have your aunt pick you up here?”

Peter makes to argue, but a quick glance at the clock confirms that Tony’s right – and how come he’s more aware of the time when he’s all but blocked out the world for the past seven hours? Tony’s mind never ceases to amaze him.

Then Peter’s own catches up to what Tony said and he realizes he’s not getting a better segue.

“I’ve, uh, I’ve been thinking about telling her. About us, I mean.”

Tony blinks. “Oh, yeah, that’s great. But be sure to text me when she’s coming to hunt me down, okay, I’ll need a head start if I’m gonna outrun her.”

“Why? It’s not like I’ll tell her… about that. Just, you know, what I told MJ.”

“And you don’t think the woman who raised you and will forever think of you as a kid’s not gonna have a problem with said kid dating a guy who’s a little over twice your age?”

Oh.

“When you put it like that...”

Tony grins. It’s weird; there’s a trace of worry there but it’s overshadowed by something bright and infectious, and soon Peter can feel his own lips curling upwards.

*
Peter feels May’s suspicious glances on him from the moment he slips into the passenger seat.

It takes her until they’ve turned onto 12th Avenue to wonder, “Any particular reason I’m picking you up from Stark Tower at eight in the morning?”

There’s no need to draw this out, so Peter simply says, “I’m seeing someone.”

May’s eyes come to rest on him as long as traffic allows her. “And they work at Stark Industries? On a Sunday?”

“Technically, yeah....”

May waits. Peter takes a deep breath, and goes for it.

“It’s Tony Stark.”

Silence.

May seems to be expecting him to admit he was kidding, so when he doesn’t say anything to contradict his statement, she glances at him, first confused, then –

“What?!”

“He came to the restaurant one night and I guess he liked me, and afterwards he stuck around at the bar,” Peter explains in a rush, sticking as close to the truth as he dares, “and then he came back a couple o’ days later but I wasn’t on shift but we met again at the career fair – the one in March – and we exchanged numbers and, well…” He shrugs, hoping his aunt will infer the rest.

“You’ve been seeing him for two months and you’re only telling me now?”

Peter ducks his head. “It… I guess it was too good to be true.”

“What changed?”

“Um…”

It takes a moment to remember what prompted his decision in the first place over the sound of his pounding heart.

“We’ve been going out on dates more. He’s not afraid to be seen with me, and… I guess I didn’t want you to hear about this from the news.”

May’s lips thin, but she doesn’t speak again for several moments. He can’t pinpoint her mood for the life of him – usually he’s awesome at it, but for some reason, today she’s like a mystery to him.

“He’s quite old.”

Peter winces. “Not that old.”

“Old enough to be your father.”

“Good thing he isn’t, then.”

It’s out of his mouth before he can stop it, cause May’s tone wasn’t the least bit charitable. Yet when Peter dares to glance at her, she looks torn between scandalized and amused.
Best to wait, he decides, and see which of them wins out.

The silence stretched on for an eternity (which probably was only a few minutes, but that’s not how it feels) until May, finally, heaves a resigned sigh.

“He needs to come to dinner.”

Peter gulps. He has a sudden flash of May and Tony sitting across each other at May’s second-hand table, Tony in his best suit, trying to navigate the stilted conversation. Yeah, let’s not.

“I’ve got a right to meet him,” she continues when Peter doesn’t respond.

“How about – how about when Ben’s out? I could introduce him to both of you at the same time?”

“You don’t wanna tell him now?”

Peter hesitates. Does he? He doubts Ben is going to take issue with him dating a man, really, but if he finds out said man is also a millionaire and suddenly their PI is able to continue her investigation… Yeah, Ben’s gonna connect the dots and not keep quiet about it either.

So Peter shakes his head. “Not yet. I mean…”

May forces a smile. “I get it, sweetie. You’re on your own two feet now. You don’t need us anymore –”

“What? No, that’s not… I love you both,” Peter says, and his voice only stutters a little on the word. “I do need you in my life. It’s just… the thing with Tony, it’s, it’s early stages still. I don’t even know how long…”

May’s expression turns grim. “If he’s not treating you right, sweetie, you’ve gotta –”

“No! I mean, yes, he’s treating me right, he’s perfect,” Peter swears, his pulse suddenly racing. “He’s making time for me and he’s smart and funny and, and he’s generous, and…”

He realizes the moment the word is out of his mouth that it was the wrong thing to say. May’s eyes narrow even though she never takes them off the road and Peter waits with bated breath for her jaw to unclench. It doesn’t.

When she finally breaks the silence, Peter wishes she hadn’t.

“It was him, wasn’t it.”

Peters says nothing.

“I knew it sounded too good to be – they never declared it pro bono, did they?”

“What’re you talking about?” Peter tries, even though his stomach is already churning.

“Our debt. My debt,” May corrects, and only now does Peter see the wet gleam of her eyes in the morning sunlight. “Tony Stark paid it off, didn’t he?”

“What? Of course not!” Peter protests, ignoring the voice in his head that tries to argue the point, because Tony did not. “That was all their idea, I swear! How could you even think that?”

“I’m sorry, sweetie, it’s just…” May lets out a wet breath. “It’s a lot of money. What you’ve been pitching in, too. I can’t help but wonder… It’s not your responsibility, Peter.”
But it is, he wants to say, yet manages to bite his tongue. He’s part of the family, too, after all, and he’s an adult now, no longer an orphan without a single penny to his name cause his parents were still paying off their mortgage and left him nothing but a lack of.

“I’m only giving you what I can spare, Aunt May. Please, I swear. And it’s not like I’ll be wanting for job offers, you know, so why should I hoard it all when I could be helping? You and Ben raised me better than that.”

He knows the moment he says it that it’s not exactly playing fair, but he’s starting to panic. May has never come this close to questioning how he got the money and he has to nip this in the bud before even a sliver of doubt settles in his aunt’s mind.

“Oh, Peter,” she sighs, and she’s crying for real now, but she’s touched and all suspicion has gone from her face, so Peter simply digs out a tissue for her and smiles.

*

Crisis averted, Peter has eleven days filled with nothing but courses, lab time, reading, assignments and Tony. It’s an awesome new rhythm he has found himself in the middle of, so much better than the late nights at five-star hotels and trying to stay awake in class.

Or so he tries to tell himself.

If he’s being completely honest with himself, though, he can’t relax into it, try as he might. He’s perfectly fine when they’re in the workshop or end up on the couch like that one night after Tony blew up that prototype. Those times are… yeah, they’re perfect. No other word for it. Too bad that Tony making it his mission to figure out what Peter likes doesn’t change the fact that he himself doesn’t know when he’s allowed to initiate, or how to tell whether he wants to start something because it feels great or because he knows Tony always gets this happy sort of glow afterwards when he cuddles up to Peter’s sated body.

Don’t get him wrong – it’s awesome, it truly is, cause how could orgasms not be awesome, and he does find out a lot of stuff. Like how pushing him into the mattress makes his joints lock up, or how a hand over his eyes makes him flinch so hard he shoved Tony right off the bed.

“No obstructing your vision,” was all Tony commented, ignoring Peter’s string of apologies. “Got it. Won’t happen again.”

So yeah, they’re making headway and last night Peter was even allowed to touch Tony’s cock and make him come from the most wonderful hand job he ever performed… But the entire process left him so mentally drained that he almost calls in sick to work on Thursday cause he has no idea how he’s supposed to handle taking people’s orders when he’s constantly wondering whether or not he should speak up and tell Tony about this.

Not that he really knows what this is to begin with.

And every time he imagines the conversation, it ends either with Tony suggesting abstinence again until Peter’s mind is clearer – like that’s gonna happen any time soon – or with Tony trying to hide his disappointment because Peter didn’t speak up sooner.

So he’s going to wait it out. It’s not like this can go on forever, right? His body and mind are bound to catch up to the new reality at some point. All Peter has to do is wait for the switch to –

SMASH
Every head in the restaurant jerks around to where the sound came from, including Peter’s, who thankfully already set down the deserts on table four.

Bucky flushes from the attention but gives the room a smile and a wave.

“Enjoy,” Peter tells his table, an elderly lady, her daughter and daughter-in-law, then hurries to the bar.

Bucky is already picking up shards of wet glass and Peter’s stomach drops cause shit, that was the fresh bottle of Dom Pérignon Mr. Avruch ordered, and Rumlow’s gonna take those four-hundred bucks out of Bucky’s paycheck.

“What I can do?” Peter asks, voice low, and Bucky looks so grateful Peter does a double take.

“Yeah, there’s another one in the fridge. No reason to keep your table waiting.”

It takes Peter a moment to get moving since he’s too distracted by the tell-tale signs of exhaustion he notices on the barkeeper. He definitely went for a cheaper brand of concealer cause the shadows under his eyes still shine through, and his movements are slower than Peter is used to.

He has no time to dwell on it now, however, since Mr. Avruch is anything but patient so Peter gets a move on and has four flutes filled within minutes.

“Apologies for the delay, gentlemen,” Peter says smoothly as he reaches table two. “Is there anything else I can do for you?”

Three of the four business men smile and shake their heads. Only Mr. Avruch himself says, letting his eyes slide down Peter’s body, “I’d like to have a word with Mr. Rumlow before I leave. Is he available?”

Peter’s stomach drops. “Of course, sir.”

This is it. The moment he’s been dreading.

Mr. Avruch used to be a client until he met a twenty-something Instagram celebrity and Peter never heard from him again. When Peter saw Avruch’s name on the reservations list, he did a quick google and found out the two recently split up. He tried to switch tables with Drake, who refused since all his tables were great tippers. Not that Peter thinks not serving Mr. Avruch’s table would have gone down well.

Peter’s so caught up in his thoughts that he doesn’t notice Steve approach until he’s in front of him.

“What happened? I heard a crash.”

Peter blinks. Steve looks even worse than Bucky, who at least bothered with makeup to hide his exhaustion. Steve seems to be running on baking powder and iron will.

Before he can explain what happened, Bucky himself enters the back of the house and makes a beeline for the cleaning supplies.

Peter watches them talk in hushed tones until Steve pulls Bucky into a quick hug and he resolves to ask what’s wrong later. For now, it’s time to face the music.

Rumlow’s expression is grim when Peter tells him about Mr. Avruch.

“You think he’d settle for Drake?”
Peter tries not to bristle at the word choice. “I think so.”

He’s wrong.

Mr. Avruch is so vocal about his protests that Peter hears him through the closed office door while he’s gathering what he needs to restock his service station. It’s muffled enough that his colleagues won’t pick up on specifics, fortunately, and by the time Rumlow emerges to fetch Drake, everyone else is busy resetting tables.

Mr. Avruch strides out not two minutes later. Peter manages to duck behind a cupboard to avoid being seen, which also puts him in a prime position next to the open office door to overhear the conversation following the client’s departure.

“Mr. Rumlow –”

“Don’t worry, I’ll pay you outta my own pocket for this. He’s a good guy; you’ll be glad for the chance.”

“I…”

Drake sounds incredibly insecure right now. Peter remembers being this vulnerable, this afraid the first time Rumlow told him to visit a customer’s hotel room. Only he was the man’s first choice and could expect a tip. From the sound of it, Rumlow promised Avruch a free trial.

“Listen, boy,” Rumlow continues, “I’m gonna make it worth your while. There’s a big event coming up in Brooklyn. I’ll need an extra pair of hands. I was gonna ask Neil, but you’re showing promise. What d’you say, is that extra pair gonna be yours?”

Peter’s pulse stutters. He means poker. If it weren’t for Tony, Rumlow would be making him go. If it weren’t for Tony, Peter would be grateful for the opportunity. Now, he’s so relieved his knees grow weak.

“Brooklyn, sir?”

“Yeah. We got a deal, boy?”

Peter can hear the smirk in Rumlow’s voice at the excitement in Drake’s, then there’s the sound of a handshake. Drake comes out of the office with a nervous smile on his face. It turns into a sneer when he spots Peter, and for a stupid second Peter genuinely considers warning him off, but Drake’s out of the room before he can make up his mind.

“Aww, don’t be jealous, Parker.”

Peter startles at Rumlow’s tone. His boss is leaning against the door frame to his office with a smug expression on his face.

“Now stop dawdling.”

*

Peter usually rushes through getting changed, even if he’s not going to the Tower after his shift, cause he cherishes every minute of sleep now that he actually gets more of it. Tonight, however, he’s distracted by Drake taking extra care with his appearance.

He’s a bundle of nerves and Peter can’t help but feel responsible, so when Drake scowls at the
hoodie that’s clearly the only item of clothing he’s got on him, Peter snags one of his backup button downs and holds it out without a word.

Drake hesitates, eyes darting around the room but the others have long since escaped into the night. He accepts the shirt and fumbles with the collar.

“Do I…” Drake begins but starts again. “Do I need to bring stuff?”

Peter shrugs. “Maybe. Better do, just to be…”

He trails off, watches Drake throw lube and a pack of condoms into his backpack and head towards the door.

“Good luck,” he adds, softly enough that Drake can pretend he didn’t hear.

“Thanks.”

The door clicks shut behind him.

When Peter spills into the parking lot near the employee entrance, he’s glad to see Steve and Bucky’s van still in its usual spot. Last time he saw Steve was when he was wiping down his station at the end of his shift, but Bucky was still mixing drinks and raking up tips in a desperate attempt to compensate for the bottle he dropped.

Either Steve’s still inside the restaurant designing new cakes and deserts (off the clock, naturally) while he waits for his partner to finish, or he’s in the van reading. Today, it’s the latter. Peter wraps his knuckles against the driver side window but Steve doesn’t react. He takes a closer look. Is he… yeah, he’s asleep. Peter’s worry mounts. What’s going on with these two?

“You anglin’ for a ride, Parker?”

Bucky aims a tired smirk his way and pulls past him.

“Up and at ’em, punk,” he says, louder than necessary, after yanking the door open. “Shove over, you’re in no state to drive.”

Steve grumbles something unintelligible, probably pointing out that he’s too big to just maneuver himself over to the passenger seat, and instead climbs out of the vehicle.

“What’s wrong?” Peter asks before Steve can say hello. “What’s going on?”

“It’s nothing –”

“Bucky never drops anything.”

“Bucky’s also right here, ya know. And there’s a first time for anything, Parker. Now off you go, work day’s over. Don’t you got classes to get some sleep for?”

“Maybe I can help?” Peter offers, cause he’s never seen Bucky so grumpy save for when Rumlow vetoed his suggestion to add fire to his flair bartending routines.

Steve shakes his head but Bucky pauses with one foot inside the van. “You serious?”

“Sure. If, well, if I can.”

“Why?”
“Uh…” Peter flails. Is it so hard to believe he’s come to think of them as more as colleagues? He gets why Drake was suspicious of the offered shirt, and he’d get this if it were anyone other than these two, but he thought…

Steve’s expression softens. “We couldn’t ask this of you.”

“Ask what? I don’t even know what this is about, but I can spare a few hours, okay?”

Bucky shoots Steve a pointed look which Steve counters with a stern frown, which Bucky answers with another expression that Peter can’t hope to decipher in the split-second before it’s replaced by something else. By the end of the exchange Steve heaves a sigh and starts talking.

“We’ve been getting more and more baking jobs and we’ve been fitting them in around our shifts and it’s been fine —”

“If you ignore the lack of sleep,” Bucky adds.

“It’s been fine,” Steve repeats, “but this Saturday we’re catering a breakfast for the Mayor — privately, not for her office cause they got a chef to do those kinds of things — and we’ve been trying to figure out how to get it all done and still make our brunch shift, and then there’s the meeting with the investors on Monday —”

“I thought that was two weeks ago?”


“Can’t you do that again?”

“We’ll never meet them if we do, and before you ask, mate, no, we can’t cancel a job for the fucking Mayor of New York City, alright, and we can’t call in sick either cause guess who’s all close and chummy with the Mayor and is gonna fire our asses sooner than we can get a word in edgewise?”

Peter has no idea what to say, cause damn, they’re really stuck between a rock and a hard place, and he can’t see a solution for this either except soldier on and get through it. Well, except for…

“Let me help. No, seriously,” he forges on when Steve looks like he’s about to object, “there’s gotta be stuff I can do. Like prep work, or mixing dough, or…” He makes a gesture that hopefully encompasses all the easy tasks that go into catering a breakfast since he sure as heck has no idea what it entails.

Alright,” Bucky says, at the same time as Steve says, “No, it’s fine,” which leads to hushed bickering that Bucky wins by playing the ‘You fell asleep in the van waiting for me’ card and ends with Peter hitching a ride with them to Brooklyn.

He can’t skip class, but he can spend the night kneading doughs that need to rest or mixing ingredients for fillings that have to marinate before being assembled the following night.

Too bad that his body has obviously forgotten what it’s like to pull an all-nighter, no matter how much caffeine he consumes. Maybe he’s built up a tolerance to it over the past couple of years? Or maybe this break, he should order something with as many espresso shots as the barista can legally give him, Peter muses as he waits for the line to move. See if that makes a –

Hold on, is that Acacia?

“Stick to the sciences, Parker,” she says, after Peter has given up on caffeine and joined the PI at the
condiment station. “Took you long enough to notice me.”

“What did you find?” Peter says, then winces. “Uh, sorry. Hello?”

But Acacia merely smiles indulgently and pulls him out of the way of a group of students descending on the water jug.

“I’m pursuing a lead, but it might require some outside help.”

“How?”

“Because there are places even I can’t infiltrate. But I know a guy. I trust him. Reasonable rates.”

Ah, there’s the rub. “How much?”

“Still within your budget. But then, that’s it.”

Shit. Peter runs a hand over his face.

“I wouldn’t suggest this if I weren’t certain this is going to pan out. Trust me.”

Really, what choice does he have? Besides, if the past years have shown him anything, it’s that he’s going to find a way to handle it even if this doesn’t yield any new evidence in Ben’s favor.

He nods. “I trust you.”

With a parting smile, Acacia melts into the flow of students.

*

Needless to say, the prospect of actual results occupies what’s left of Peter’s attention that day, which is why he forgets to tell Tony about the change in plans and turns up in front of the bar where they’d agreed to meet with an apologetic expression after his shift on Friday.

“I could do one drink? A quick one?” he offers, then explains in a rush that he’s gotta head to Brooklyn after their date so he can catch some shut-eye on Steve and Bucky’s couch and get up at 3 am to assist with the breakfast.

“And have you check the clock every couple o’ minutes? Hell no. Come on, I’ll drive you.”

“You really don’t have to –”

“But I want to, cause it gives me an extra half hour with you, kid.”

Peter is tense when he gets into the car (an unobtrusive model that won’t stick out in Hell’s Kitchen – Peter didn’t know Tony even owned something like this) and watches Tony from the passenger seat for any sign of annoyance. Cause surely he’s got to be at least a little miffed that Peter forgot to tell him, doesn’t he? He’s been raving about this bar for days, and Peter’s been looking forward to discovering why a dive in one of the City’s more dangerous neighborhoods means so much to Tony, so there’s bound to be some… something.

“Stop looking at me like I’m gonna shove you out of the car, Peter.”

“Uh – sorry.”

Tony rolls his eyes. “Yeah, driving out to Brooklyn isn’t how I expected to spend the night – for one, it’s Brooklyn, seriously. But hey, at least this’ll give me some leverage the next time I screw up
or forget an anniversary or something. So why don’t you start from the beginning? Cause all I got was something about Steve having the Mayor for breakfast and while the mental image of that’s quite intriguing, I sorta doubt that’s what you were trying to say.”

“Um, not exactly…”

Peter’s halfway through the story and starting to relax when his phone rings.

It’s Steve.

“Hey, hey, slow down,” Peter cuts in, and by the time he makes sense of the panicked words Tony’s brow is creased with worry.

“Problem?”

“It’s fine, just their oven, I’ll be able to repair it. I bought extra when I switched the heater element, it’s a quick fix.”

“And if it ain’t?”

Peter doesn’t want to think about that.

Tony clears his throat as he turns off the Manhattan Bridge Roadway. “Too bad you don’t know anyone with a state-of-the-art kitchen.”

Peter blinks. “You mean…”

“S not like anyone’s using it. The last time I switched on the oven was to reheat the plasticine I couldn’t fit into the one in the workshop when I was trying to figure out how to put all the components of the new waste processing system together, and then JARVIS switched it off on me cause apparently ordinary ovens aren’t meant to be used for our modeling clays and I still think that’s a grave oversight but Lehnsherr veto’d a foray into fusing kitchen appliances with industrial – anyway. Why the hell not? I bet it’s gonna be faster to hurl all their stuff back to my place than it’s gonna be to fix whatever’s wrong and then try and get everything done with just one oven.”

“But why would you…”

A smile is tugging at Tony’s lips, but his eyes remain on the road. “Cause my boyfriend’s helping them, so why not?”

Peter is stunned into silence even as he feels his face flush. He knows for a fact that Tony has about a hundred more important things to do – he’s been complaining about the new consulting gig he accepted on Pepper’s urging, even though he’s still elbow-deep in the Munroe Group’s affairs – so this is… Yeah.

*

The night goes better than Peter could have hoped for, especially once Clint gets bored watching his boss lug supplies and equipment down three flights of stairs and ends up bonding epically with Bucky over long-distance shooting, of all things.

That is, until they reach the Mayor’s house.

“You can put those down in the kitchen and set up. Cara is going to be around shortly to – Tony?”

Cause of course Mayor Estevez is on a first-name basis with Tony.
“Sophia!” Tony says, moving in for a handshake and a pat on the shoulder after placing the cooler with the goat cheese and smoked salmon bagels on the floor. At the lady’s quizzical expression, Tony grins. “I was so jealous you didn’t invite me to your little shebang that I stalked your caterer and forced them to let me crash the party. You got any idea how fucking delicious their food is?”

“I do. That’s why I hired them.”

Steve watches the scene unfold with such a horrified look on his face that Peter has to bite down a laugh.

“Good on you. For real, though, I’ll be outta your hair as soon as Mr. Rogers here releases my boyfriend and I.”

Now it’s Peter’s turn to gape. Next to him, Bucky snorts.

“Oh, is this the young man from Pepper’s birthday?” the lady says, then turns a genuine smile to him.

“Oh, yes, ma’am – Mayor Estevez, I mean. I’m Peter. Peter Parker.”

He makes to extend a hand, only to realize he’s still balancing the covered tray of miniature waffle brioches, but the Mayor just nods pleasantly and shows them around the kitchen and dining room.

Tony slips away while they’re setting up, for which Peter is grateful cause Steve is nervous enough as it is without adding a hyperactive Tony to the mix.

Turns out Tony wasn’t playing hooky, however, cause once everything’s set up and Steve is explaining the dishes to the Mayor’s fiancé, Peter finds his boyfriend (boyfriend) in a study entertaining a group of early guests.

“Wanna tell me what all that was about?”

As if Tony hasn’t figured it out all on his own. It would have been hard to miss the innuendo in the man’s – Mr. Shaw’s tone.

“Come on, you’re starting to freak me out. Was he...” Peter chances a glance and catches Tony swallow. “Was he a client?”

“No.”
Tony’s relief is palpable.

“But he knows what I do. Did. He probably thinks...”

“Yeah, he made that pretty clear. Well, screw what he thinks. We know better than that.”

“What if he... you know. Starts telling people? Or tries to blackmail you?”

“Ha, what’s he gonna blackmail me with? Besides, he’s way too smart to for that. Shaw’s got ambition, and he knows he’s not gonna make it far in this town without my approval. Seriously, no need for the long face.”

Peter bites his lip. “If you’re sure?”

“Yup.” Tony reaches across the space between their seats and squeezes his thigh in reassurance.

Peter breathes more easily for the rest of the journey, but he still can’t shake the feeling that the encounter with Shaw will come back to haunt him.

Chapter End Notes

To end on a happier note: I can promise chapter 16 will be posted soon :)
Chapter Notes

Thank you all so much for your continued comments and enthusiasm for this fic! Words will never express how much I appreciate it ♥

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The kid’s hiding something. Tony’s sure of it.

It’s in the little moments of hesitation when Peter reaches out to touch him, in the movement of his throat when he throws his head back as Tony fits his lips around his cock, in the difference between the bone-deep relaxation that takes over when they’re huddled together on the sofa versus the hyper vigilance that needs a while to fade at the start of a more purposeful making out session.

It’s in the way Peter struggles to keep his eyes open while pawing at the buttons of Tony’s shirt when they finally make it to the penthouse on Saturday morning.

“Don’t get me wrong, kid,” Tony says, cause he can’t not speak up, even though he’s in no state to have a meaningful conversation, not after a night of honest-to-god baking. “I don’t think I’m up for anything right now.”

And fuck, is that disappointment in Peter’s eyes, or relief?

Tony’s too exhausted to tell.

All he knows is that it hurts, cause he thought they’d had a fresh start, that Peter would trust him enough to… which he obviously doesn’t.

It’s not a great realization to come to.

At least he can always count on finding something in the Tower to take his mind off things, which is how he ends up with a flashlight between his teeth buried hip-deep in the newest version of their plasma gasification reactor.

“You don’t want to know why you’re breaking into my office at ten o’clock on a Sunday night?”

Tony almost drops the light as he pulls his body out of the machine. Maybe he imagined the question? But nope, no such luck – Erik’s really standing in the doorway, wearing charcoal pants and one of his best turtlenecks, arching an eyebrow.

“I’m saving you from forcing your epically long legs into the miniaturized prototype to sort out the conversion issue with the syngas! And we should really stop calling it miniaturized; there’s nothing miniature about this thing,” Tony says, patting the top of the reactor and hoping this existential question is going to be enough to distract Lehnsherr from –

“Stark.”

Well, it was worth a try.
“Any chance you’ll believe me when I say this is the last thing I was gonna do before heading to bed?”

Erik gives him a flat look and steps closer. “What do you want?”

Damn, that’s what he gets for hiring smart people: they see right through him. No time to lull them into a sense of calm before broaching a difficult subject.

When Tony doesn’t speak immediately, Erik uses the time to cross the room and straighten the pens that Tony so subtly pushed out of alignment when he first got here. Tony’s been doing that ever since he noticed how much it annoyed the guy, but after all these years, it doesn’t serve to irk Erik anymore. Just like dancing around the topic won’t work, Tony sees that now.

“All right. There’s no easy way to ask, so I figured I’d better do something nice for you and take care of that issue with the syngas. Had it all planned out, was gonna surprise you tomorrow morning – you know, Monday, when people usually turn up for work, not Sunday night when normal people… oh! Were you on a date? That’s your date outfit, right? Okay, also your staff party outfit. Seriously, you’d think I’m not paying you horrendous amounts of –”

“Tony.”

“Yeah, alright!” He throws up his hands. “I need to ask you about Shaw.”

Silence.

It stretches between them for so long, Tony fears he will never get an answer.

 Granted, it’s not like Tony expected Erik to pull out the fine china and sit him down with tea and cookies for story time, but the way he’s clenching his jaw and seems to be seconds from bolting out of the room is another thing entirely.

After an eternity, Erik releases a sharp breath and squares his shoulders.

“What do you need to know?”

*

An hour later, they’re on the floor with their backs to the desk, passing a bottle of Macallan back and forth, if only because it’s too late to drag Erik to Coulson to go on record and too early to call it a night.

Besides, it’s not like Tony would be able to sleep.

“You’ve come a long way,” Erik says, voice rough.

Tony averts his eyes, but Erik’s not done.

“You’re being careful. You think before you act. Never thought I’d see the day.”

Tony takes another swig from the bottle.

“Then again, I never thought I’d see the day you fall for a hooker either.”

Tony splutters, coughing until the burn of the whiskey down the wrong pipe has passed. “Sex worker,” he says, “and I didn’t tell you so you could go all mushy on me, alright. An incentive for giving me information, that’s it. And a promise to never ever –”
“– tell Parker that I know, yes, I remember. I’m not that drunk yet.”

“Good.”

And that’s that. Well, for Lehnsherr anyway. Tony doubts Peter’s gonna be happy, though, should he ever find out that Tony traded the truth about how their relationship started against insights into Shaw’s ties to organized crime, cause Erik wouldn’t start talking without a good reason and surely Peter’s gonna understand that?

Besides, Peter’s too busy hiding secrets of his own.

Monday night, after Tony somehow managed to stay awake during three separate meetings, get Agent Coulson to come all the way across town to avoid Erik showing up on CCTV outside the FBI’s Manhattan headquarters, and remembered to call Harold and allude to having a property for Steve Rogers to set up shop should he decide to invest – after all that, Tony starts a little experiment.

Nothing too drastic, mind you, it’s just that he doesn’t want to say anything before he’s got a clearer picture of what’s going on.

So on Monday, when Peter drops by after class, Tony groans about how freaking tired he is (which is true) and watches the tension that never seems to leave Peter’s shoulders slowly bleed from his body.

Tuesday, Tony caresses Peter’s cheek between kisses in the workshop, reading forgotten on the workstation behind them and all holograms collapsed. He keeps his first kiss soft and languid, no rush to it, no purpose except to enjoy the intimacy of it.

The tension remains.

It’s subtle, very subtle, which is why he never really noticed it before, Tony thinks; if you didn’t look for it, it was easy to miss. Was it there every time Tony initiated something sexual, or is it new?

Then Peter deepens the kiss and for a while Tony forgets he should be thinking about anything other than the pressure of a tongue against his or the warmth of Peter’s body where it’s touching his own. They’re hard within minutes, and it’s Peter who moves first, pressing their groins together – teasing at first but soon building up a rhythm.

Tony lets his head fall onto Peter’s shoulder and his hands fall to Peter’s lower back like they’ve done countless times before, but this time he pays attention, this time he notices the split-second stutter of Peter’s hips before they resume their delicious grinding.

Peter’s fingers don’t fumble when they finally go for Tony’s belt, his hands don’t shake when he divests them of their pants and underwear, but they still when Tony pulls him flush against his front, both their erections trapped between skin and pubic hair.

Before, Tony would have read this as tentativeness, as not knowing where to start touching, as a sign of arousal. Today, Tony isn’t so sure.

He places his hands on the swell of Peter’s ass, giving a squeeze before pulling back enough to look the kid in the eye.

There’s arousal there, yeah, and for a moment Tony panics cause he’s been wrong about these things before, he’s prone to overthink things and let the critical voices in his head seep into this part of his life, but something about Peter’s expression makes him stick to his original plan and shift back his hips as well.
Peter blinks at him in question. His fingers twitch where they hold onto Tony’s biceps and his lips part but he doesn’t say anything.

Not immediately.

“I…”

Peter can’t meet his eyes.

“There’s something I…”

Carefully, slowly, Tony raises a hand to the side of Peter’s face. “You can tell me anything.”

Peter releases a long breath. “Can we, um…”

His eyes flick to where their pants are pooled around their ankles and Tony nods, trying to ignore the loss of Peter’s skin under his fingertips as he steps back and does up his fly as quickly as he can.

Peter is faster and starts shifting from one foot to the other, rubbing his hands over his face twice before eventually just shoving them into his pockets.

The workshop lights remain dimmed, as if JARVIS himself were holding his breath.

“You’ve been so great,” Peter says at last. “And patient and generous and, and I never knew that sex could be this… fun,” and doesn’t that make Tony want to set fire to everyone who’s ever touched Peter with anything other than respect, “but… it’s hard to explain. I’m sorry I didn’t say anything sooner, I thought it’d pass, that I’d just need an adjustment period and I… I’m sorry.”

“What, Peter?” He keeps his voice as gentle as he can, even if his pulse is racing.

“I – it’s just – it’s a bit draining. Also great! I mean, orgasms and all, right? But, um… I never know if I want it cause it feels good for me, or because I know it makes you happy when you get me off and I wanna make you feel that… way.”

Peter stops and his face falls, but Tony can’t keep the emotions off his face. His tongue refuses to work – not that he would have known what to say if it did. Peter shrinks into himself even more and Tony can see his hands have balled into fists inside the pockets of his jeans.

“I’m sorry,” he says again, barely more than a murmur, and that finally breaks the spell.

“You have nothing to be sorry for,” Tony says, then clears his throat when his voice comes out raspy. “I should’ve seen it – or, well, or I should’ve stopped to think for a fucking second cause of course you’re not gonna – I mean, you’ve never had sex just for yourself, have you? Just because you wanted it?”

He knows the answer, deep in his bones, but he needs this out in the open cause fuck, he’s been an idiot, an insensitive idiot who thought he could fix everything from one second to the next, that this was like the plasma gasification reactor in Erik’s office. Identify the problem and solve it.

But in this case, solving it was never in his power.

It’s in Peter’s, and his only.

“I’m really asking,” Tony says. “I know you said it without saying, but maybe I got it wrong, so… Have you?”
Peter takes a moment to reply. “No. But…”

“You’re relaxed here, when we’re working. Or upstairs, when we’re just us. So it’s not that you can’t relax in my presence, it’s that you can’t relax when it comes to sex, period. I should never have –” Tony almost trips over the next words. “I should never have *decided* how you’ll get better. I shouldn’t even get a say in that you *have* to get better. You… You’ll need time. Time without –”

“No,” Peter interrupts, and he’s panicking now, why the hell is he – “I don’t want that, I want to be with you, that’s why I didn’t say anything cause I knew you’d make this into a huge deal and, and –”

“And you’re saying it’s not?”

“It’s fine, I’ll get used to it –”

“I don’t want you to get used to it, for fuck’s sake, I want you to want it!”

Tony’s shouting by the end and Peter takes a step back and looks ready to cry, shit, how did this escalate so quickly?

He bites down on an apology, doesn’t reach out and pull Peter into a hug, doesn’t do anything except wait and hope that Peter’s going to talk and not run out the door like he’s clearly tempted to do.

When he speaks, it’s so soft Tony barely catches it.

“What if I never want it?”

Peter lifts his head. His eyes are wet.

“What if we wait and I never really feel like I want…”

Tony holds his gaze. Takes a tentative step forward.

“Then you never do. And that’ll be okay.”

The confusion taking over Peter’s expression comes as no surprise. In a world where everything’s about sex, the mere thought that it’s fine to be without would seem to break the laws of nature.

“I mean it, Peter,” Tony says. He’s in arm’s reach now but doesn’t dare come closer. “Even if you never want sex again. I’m not gonna go anywhere, alright? This isn’t about that. I can’t say that it never was, cause otherwise we’d never have met, but everything after that… that was you. So unless you decide you don’t wanna date a guy on the wrong side of forty anymore, nothing you do – or don’t do – is gonna change the way I feel.”

He falls silent at last. Peter is staring at him, wide-eyed and lips agape, and Tony can empathize with the disbelief on his face – if anyone had told him a year ago he’d happily enter a relationship without sex, at least for the foreseeable future, he’d have laughed them out of the room.

Yet a year ago, he didn’t know Peter.

Who’s still staring at him. He must have felt the truth in Tony’s words, however, for the incredulity slowly bleeds from his expression, replaced by cautious wonder as well as the edge of a smile.

Tony returns it tenfold.

*
The difference is daunting, Peter discovers.

On Wednesday, MJ wonders if he’s on drugs since he keeps smiling without reason during their morning workout, and in class he can tell his professors are a bit confused by the sudden increase in participation, but he can’t help it.

He spoke up and the world didn’t end. Tony’s still there. His kisses are still there. His casual touches, too, if the past thirty-six hours are any indication. It’s like they took all the exhausting parts of their relationship out of the equation, leaving only the best aspects.

Like lunch break phone calls.

“You wanna come over later?” Tony asks on the other end of the line, over the background noise of a factory around him. “Please say you will, cause otherwise I have no excuse to avoid spending all night in Rockland hoping this waste turns into hydrogen and carbon monoxide.”

“I don’t know, sounds fun,” Peter quips, picking up his bag and heading towards the cafeteria’s exit.

“Just for that I’m take you on a facility tour for our next date. A night tour, so you can fully appreciate the glory of solid waste treatment technologies for hours and hours and hours and –”

“No, no, I’m coming by.”

“Thank fuck,” Tony says, sounding so relieved it has Peter chuckling all the way to Advanced Mechanics in Fluids, which lets out on time for once this term, meaning Peter doesn’t have to sprint to the subway to make it to work on time.

He even arrives five minutes early, meaning he can corner Steve at his station and finally find out how their meeting with the interested investor went.

“Didn’t you get my messages?” he asks when Steve won’t look up from where he’s piping vegan meringue long enough to meet his eyes.

Which can only mean one thing.

“You didn’t get the money.”

Steve heaves a sigh and wipes his forehead on the back of his hand. Peter’s stomach drops.

“I’m really sorry. Maybe I can ask Tony if –”

“No,” Steve cuts in, shaking his head.

“But he loves your baking, I’m sure he’s –”

“Please, just… just leave it, alright?”

There’s something off about Steve’s tone. Peter can’t put his finger on it but it keeps nagging at him throughout his shift. He keeps a close eye on Bucky, too, who’s usually all charisma and smiles but today seems to be set on becoming one with the bar shelves.

It’s not until he notices Bucky’s favoring his left side that his intrigue turns into concern. Yet when Peter approaches him, Bucky fakes a smile and assures him he’s “fine, mate”.

“I don’t understand, I thought they had it in the bag,” Peter says, once he’s caught Tony up on his findings when the other man finally arrives at the penthouse.
“That’s cause you don’t just go spying on people, kid. Wow, listen to me, when did I become Mr. Maturity? JARVIS, can you send an audio clip of that to Pepper first thing in the morning?”

“I thought spying was wrong,” Peter points out, crossing his arms. He can’t keep the edge out of his tone, either.

Tony heaves a sigh, then regards him for a moment. “Fine. I’ll call Harold, ask him what happened. We’ll take it from there.”

Peter tries to put the issue out of his mind, though the memory of Bucky wincing in obvious pain when pouring drinks won’t leave him be. He almost skips his Friday lab so he’ll be there when Tony contacts the investor, but common sense gets the better of him. There’s no news by the time he arrives at No Bones, either because Tony is too busy or because he hasn’t learned anything yet, and he has to stop watching Bucky during his shift when his distraction leads to a dropped plate.

Neil sneers at him, but at least Drake has the decency to fetch a bin.

He finds Tony at his desk in the workshop, frowning at the information splayed across the three monitors. It can’t be project-related, or he would have had JARVIS render holograms.

“What did you find out?”

Tony doesn’t turn, but he wraps an arm around Peter’s waist when he comes to a stop next to Tony’s chair.

“Harold made them an offer. Said they declined.”

“Wha– that makes no sense!”

“Yeah, so I got Bruce’s approval and did some light snooping…”

“And? Wait, why do you need Dr. Banner’s approval –”

“Cause I’m not really the best judge of when to use my superpowers, or JARVIS’s in most cases, and – you know, never mind, I’ll explain later. Look at this.”

Peter leans in. “Are those…”

“Bank statements, plus a savings account,” Tony says, pointing to the screen in the middle. “From what I can tell, they’re living paycheck to paycheck and squirrel away every cent they can, but even I know this ain’t enough to branch out on their own. They need an investor, and Harold said the meeting went splendidly – that’s verbatim, by the way – so why the hell… hm.”

“What?”

“Just remembered something,” Tony murmurs.

His arm withdraws from Peter’s waist and soon he’s typing away at impressive speed. Peter isn’t a hacker by any meaning of the word – that’s always been Ned’s forte – but he’s seen enough to know that it should take a lot longer to access someone’s criminal records from outside the DOJ’s network.

Steve’s record comes up on the left monitor. It’s clean except for a few parking tickets.

Bucky’s is another matter.

“Guess that was an understatement,” Tony mutters. At Peter’s prompting look, he explains, “Back
when I met with them for Pepper’s cake, we got talking and they said Barnes has a record. That’s why they don’t get better jobs – no one would hire him.”

“Except Rumlown.”

“The way they said it made it seem like he only did cause he wouldn’t have to go above minimum wage, but…”

Peter takes another look at the list, trying to see what’s giving Tony that pensive look on his face.

Three arrests for sleeping in subway stations, two charges for assault misdemeanors that were dismissed due to Bucky’s recent return from the war, but that all pales in comparison to the final entry: assault in the second degree, resulting in a twelve-month prison sentence. It says Bucky was released after ten months for good behavior, but it still makes him a felon.

Based on this, Bucky should never have gotten a job at No Bones – Rumlown has a strict background check policy and makes a big deal about trustworthiness. Peter is the first to agree that Bucky is great at his job and any restaurant or hotel bar would be lucky to have him, but Rumlown isn’t the kind of boss who strives for excellence in his employees.

So what set Bucky apart, and what, if anything, does that have to do with Steve declining their offer?

“Maybe he’s forcing them to stay,” Tony suggests. “Might explain why he’s so banged up, too – after all, Rumlown doesn’t shy away from playing pimp. Coercion probably comes easy to him.”

Oh yes, Peter thinks but doesn’t say, cause then Tony would become curious and Peter would either have to lie or talk about poker and private parties and – no, better to keep quiet.

Besides, what good would it do? Peter knows from intimate experience that getting away from Rumlown isn’t on the table, not even with Tony Stark in your corner.

So he says, “I’ll talk to them,” and makes sure he’s lingering at his locker while the rest of his colleagues rush to the break room for team meal, hoping that his plan will work. Steve and Bucky tend to be the last on weekends to start their break, since there is always at least one guest who tries their chance with the hot baker who spent the past hours preparing vegan crêpes and waffles in a skin-tight, by now sweat-soaked white shirt, as well as at least one person who needs one more drink, sir, please.

Just as the door opens, Peter’s phone chimes with a text and he bites down a curse for forgetting to silence it. Thankfully, neither Bucky nor Steve seem to have heard, so Peter remains unnoticed while Steve drops onto the bench in front of his locker with a groan.

From his position around the corner, Peter sees Bucky gently lower himself next to his partner, a hand over his left ribs as if to shield them. Then they simply sit, shoulders touching, heads against the metal, eyes closed.

Half a minute later, Bucky pats Steve’s thigh and gets up again.

“You need help, Buck?”

“Not an invalid yet, punk.”

His movements are slow, though, his expression tight. Peter holds his breath as the black shirt falls open and is shrugged over bare shoulders. Bucky has his back to him, but he turns just as he pulls the shirt off completely. A bruise covers his left side, painting his skin dark shades of blue and purple.
It’s worst over his ribs, where the skin has cracked in several places, and just from that it’s clear this isn’t the result of a simple punch. There’s another laceration on Bucky’s arm, hidden by his shirt until now, the gash barely closed.

Peter can’t stop the gasp that escapes him. Steve is on his feet a moment later and Bucky whirls around to where he’s hiding, holding up the shirt to his chest.

“What the fuck? You spying on us –”

“I wanted to talk to you, I was gonna say something but then you – I had to see,” Peter says in a rush. “And I’m glad I did, this looks serious, you shouldn’t be working, you gotta rest or it could – who did this? What happened? What’s wrong?”

“None of your business, Parker,” Bucky snarls but Peter’s not having any of that.

“You’re my friends, it is my business –”

“So be a fucking friend and stay the hell outta this,” Bucky says. He’s right in front of Peter, towering over him, and for a split-second he’s afraid Bucky’s gonna slam him against the wall cause he looks really tempted, but then Steve pulls him back with a hand on his shoulder and puts himself between them.

“Listen, Peter, it means a lot that you’re… but Buck’s right. We got it under control.”

“You declined Harold’s offer! How can that be having it under control?”

“It just is,” Bucky snaps.

It obviously isn’t, and Peter burns to argue further, but he’s never seen this look in Bucky’s eyes – dangerous, ready to strike. He doubts Steve, in his current state, would be fast enough to stop his partner again should he lose what’s left of his patience.

So Peter leaves the changing room with slumped shoulders and worry pooling thicker in the pit of his stomach. He pauses on top of the stairs to the break room, takes a deep breath, and fishes out his phone to text Tony about how grandly he fucked this up.

Yet when the lock screen lights up, he freezes.

He forgot about the message – the message that came in right before Bucky and Steve did.

It’s from Acacia.

[03:47 pm] Big news. Meet me Monday 8am @Doge

Chapter End Notes

*hits post* ... *returns to cliffhanger hell*

(though chapter 17 is mostly finished, so it won't be too long)

“Whatever,” she says, but the edge of her mouth is quirking.

Peter’s own smile vanishes the second she’s out of sight. He feels ready to burst from anxiety and excitement, which overshadows how very, very tired he feels since sleep was hard to come by these past two nights in the wake of Acacia’s text. His elbow’s still hurting from banging it against the bench as he lost his balance when he saw the PI walk in, looking to everyone around them like just another student getting in a pre-class workout.

“I could have met you earlier,” Peter says in lieu of greeting, but he doesn’t care.

“Well, but I couldn’t. Yours isn’t the only case I’m working on.”

She puts her towel and water bottle down next to the wall, far away from both the cameras in the entrance area and the windows, unlocks her phone and holds it out to him.

Peter has to squint to make out the shape of a person on the grainy surveillance photo of a dark city street, and for a moment his mind has no idea what to do with this, until –

“That’s him.”

Acacia nods.

“But they said – where’d you get this?”

“It wasn’t a malfunction. Someone scrubbed the footage at the store but they weren’t thorough enough. Police don’t have the software to retrieve it. My guy does.”

The photo feels like a diamond in Peter’s hands. This is it. This is proof that Ben wasn’t lying, that there was indeed another person at the store, a person who stabbed the cashier when he wouldn’t give out the money while Ben tried to diffuse the situation.

Back when he first was arrested, Peter wasn’t worried. The case was almost cliché, surely everyone would see his uncle was telling the truth, that the blood on his hands was from performing CPR, and CPR only… but with no CCTV to back him up and the only witness dead, plus a DA out for convictions that played well with the press and an overworked court-mandated defender, Ben stood no chance. He could have taken a plea bargain, reduced his sentence, but lying was never an option for him.

“I’ll have to bill you for all hours from here on out, Parker,” Acacia continues, pulling Peter out of memory lane.
He just nods, not really caring. He’ll pay whatever it takes to free his uncle.

“We have another angle but it’s not nearly enough for a positive ID.”

She swipes once and reveals another photo, taken from across the street by the looks of it. It’s less grainy yet the man is barely more than a silhouette, nothing but his right hand catching the light of the neon sign over his head and too far away from the nearest street lantern.

Peter’s eyes are drawn back to the man’s hand. There’s something there, a shadow or…

“Blood,” Acacia says. “At least I think it is. And this.”

Another swipe. It’s the hand, magnified, skirting the line between too pixelated and barely recognizable. Specks of red make Peter swallow, but that’s not what turns his stomach. What he thought was a shadow isn’t a shadow at all.

It’s a tattoo. A sequence of dots and lines on his fingers.

A sequence Peter has seen before, more than once.

In a hotel hallway.

In the shadows of a bar.

On a lawn in the Hamptons.

This is the mark of the Ortiz cartel. The mark of Fabio’s men.

“… quite pixelated but it’s clear enough that I can draw a rough sketch, ask around. If he was part of a gang, I’ll find out.”

Acacia is still talking but Peter can barely hear her over the deafening beating of his own pulse, thoughts galloping off in a hundred different directions.

Was the guy acting on orders? Was he collecting protection fees, or delivering a message? Was the cashier working for Fabio, or was he just in the wrong place at the wrong time?

“Hey, Parker, hey. Look at me.”

He blinks. Acacia’s brow has creased with worry.

“I know this is a lot to take in, after all this time. But this means hope. I’ll tell you as soon as I find out more.”

All he can do is nod, mind reeling. He belatedly realizes he could have told her – still could – about the connection to the Ortiz cartel, but then he’d have to explain how he knows and beyond that, what’s Acacia gonna do with that information? She’s Mexican, she stands no chance infiltrating a Colombian outfit. Besides, that’s not a risk he could ever ask her to take.

He watches her head towards the changing rooms as realization slams into him.

No, Acacia could never manage to get a positive ID of their suspect.

But he could.

*
Three days earlier

Tony can count the number of times he was in his office in the past six months on one hand.

He’s not even sure why he still has an office in the Tower; most meetings for his consultancy jobs take place with the clients, he pays people to do his paperwork and he can concentrate much better in the workshop or his penthouse. Actually, he’d probably be able to get more work done in an elevator, come to think of it, so really, it’s total waste of space… until JARVIS informs him that Mr. Dietz is waiting there.

“Who?”

“The detective that the Petteys Investigation Agency assigned to handle your case.”

“Right! Finally…”

Mr. Dietz turns out to be a bland, tall-ish, snug man with dark hair and unremarkable clothes, the type of guy you wouldn’t even notice if you passed him by on the street – which is probably best when you make a living spying on people.

He startles out of the visitor chair when Tony says, “You got news?”

“Oh! Mr. Stark, yes, I do. It’s an honor to meet you in person –”

“Yeah, let’s skip the chit-chat. What’ve you got for me?”

Dietz seems flustered but by the time Tony has taken up residence in his office chair (was it always this uncomfortable?), the guy has gotten a hold of himself.

“My investigation has unearthed a promising lead that might confirm Mr. Parker’s testimony. He accused a third party of stabbing the cashier, but according to police records, a signal disruption caused all CCTV in the vicinity to malfunction, meaning there was no evidence. Until now.”

Tony lets his eyes drop to the desk between them, hoping it sufficiently conveys his ‘Were is it, then?’

“Well, the problem is, sir, that my contact is asking for a larger amount of money than you authorized for such purposes –”

“It it worth it?”

Mr. Dietz considers. “I believe so.”

Tony’s fingers twitch. He’s itching to take over himself – he’s no expert at recovering deleted footage, but give him a night and he’d surpass whatever expert this guy’s talking about – but he’s got so much on his plate with the Munroe Group and the new Audi gig that he can’t both spend time with Peter and crack his uncle’s case.

The decision is a no-brainer, so Tony authorizes the funds and puts the issue out of his mind.

* 

Until Monday afternoon, that is, which is when Mr. Dietz requests another meeting.

“What am I looking at?” Tony asks, not accepting the photos Dietz is trying to hand him, which prompts the guy to spread them out on the desk instead.
It’s not much: a series of grainy shots showing a dark figure, first inside of, then running away from a convenience store plus an even more pixelated section of that same photo.

“Recovered footage of the night in question. The only identifier is this tattoo. Looks like a gang mark, but I haven’t been able to get a conclusive match this quickly.”

“Let me guess, you need me to authorize more hours?”

Dietz does, so Tony simply nods, picks up the photos and swarms out of his office again, leaving the guy to let himself out.

“JARVIS,” Tony says once the elevator doors have closed. “You got anything, buddy?”

A slew of images appears in front of him, all showing bulky men and athletic women in dark clothing keeping an eye on either a vehicle, a door, or people whose faces are out of reach of any surveillance measures. Each of them is sporting the same tattoo as their suspect – or a tattoo that’s similar enough to trigger JARVIS’ algorithm – and each of them has at least two gangs of various origins they’re suspected to be working for.

“So we’re dealing either with the Russians, the Mexicans, the Colombians, the Romanians, the Serbians, or some native outfit?” Tony grouses as he steps into the workshop. “Seriously, is there any gang that’s not on there?”

JARVIS projects a list that’s twice as long as the one he included with the pictures and Tony hangs his head.

“Yeah, I deserved that. But how the hell’s Dietz supposed to find out who stabbed that guy?”

“His agency’s solvency rate is unparalleled in the city.”

“If that’s your way of telling me to let him do his job and focus on the blueprints I promised Pepper I’d have delivered by tonight, I think you’re being a little too subtle there, J.”

JARVIS doesn’t rise to the bait, merely pulls up the files for the new and much more efficient assembly line he’s designing for their friends at Audi, and Tony wonders when his baby grew up and started bossing him around.

It doesn’t mean that the issue is gone from his mind – would be kinda difficult, really, considering it’s about Peter and he hasn’t decided whether to tell the kid about this development or keep it back until he actually has some intel to offer.

He’s still undecided when he drags Peter back to Hell’s Kitchen on Tuesday night to celebrate that he not only delivered the blueprints but also completed the Munroe job, fucking finally.

“I’m serious, if this job had gone on for another week, I’d have bought the company and sold it to Toomes myself just to put an end to it,” Tony says, pulling into the parking space JARVIS guided him to.

When Peter doesn’t respond, he glances towards the passenger seat, only to find Peter gazing out the window, obviously miles away.

Tony touches his arm, startling Peter and prompting a string of apologies that don’t actually soothe Tony’s concern.

“You alright? You’ve been quiet all day. Usually I get at least one text during Aerodynamics. I’ve
been hoarding counterpoints for the last week.”

“Yeah, no, I’m fine. Just…”

“Obsessing over a certain baker’s decision to forego a shitload of money and stick with working minimum wage for a despicable human being?”

For a moment, Peter looks like he has no idea what Tony’s talking about, but a second later he’s all, “Yes, that’s – that’s it,” which isn’t suspicious in the slightest.

Tony’s instinct is to probe, yet before he can, the kid’s opened the passenger door and is taking in the run-down bar with a curious gaze.

“Why this place?” he asks, a pleading edge to his voice, and Tony figures that both his intrigue and the issue of the surveillance photos can wait.

By Friday, he’ll have come to regret his decision.

*

Peter’s thumb hovers over Rumlow’s name in his message app for the third time that night.

In a weird twist of reality, he’s the one lying awake while Tony is sound asleep on the mattress next to him. But contrary to Tony, he can’t block out the world by going on an engineering bender or inventing the solution to a problem humanity didn’t even know existed.

Thing is – he has a solution. He needs to call Rumlow and ask him to take Peter to the event instead of Drake. The only problem: his boss would never break his exclusivity agreement with Tony Stark of all people, so Peter would have to lie and say Tony doesn’t require his services anymore. But for that to work, Peter would have to tell Tony he’s quitting entirely so he’ll stop the payments to Rumlow, and sure, Peter would be free to help out with as many rounds of poker as he likes, but how would he explain his all-night absences to Tony? Not to mention that it would only be a matter of days, a week at most, before Rumlow would catch on he’s still with Tony cause even the Mayor knows they’re dating now, unless Peter finds an excuse to stay away or –

Yeah, just thinking about all the ramifications is giving Peter a headache.

There’s nothing to it, however, Peter concludes after obsessing over how to solve this differently for the better part of forty-eight hours. This is the one plan that will deliver, the one path that will lead him to where he needs to be in order to secure the evidence they need to free Uncle Ben.

Or so he thinks.

He didn’t consider another, much easier way in, he realizes as he checks the caller ID on Wednesday and finds the person who’s calling him during his lunch break isn’t Tony.

It’s Rousseau.

Of course. Rousseau has no idea about Peter’s ‘arrangement’ with Tony and Peter never told Tony about Rousseau. All he needs is a reason to decline spending the night at the Tower, then he’s free to accompany Rousseau to any meeting or game of the man’s choosing, where he’ll be in a prime position to take photos of any tattooed hands he sees as well as the people attached to them.

Simple. Peter is smiling when he waves his phone at Yuki and slips out of their lab.
“Hello Matthys,” he says, and the delight rolls off his tongue with no effort at all.

“Hello, mon cher,” comes the familiar voice, the tell-tale sounds of an airport in the background. “I find myself in your city tomorrow for lots of tedious meetings… Please tell me you’re free to brighten my evening?”

“Of course,” Peter says, then pauses. It’s a gamble, but… “I missed you.”

“Oh, le même, mon cher.”

Peter releases the breath he was holding. Rousseau was always fond of the boyfriend experience – it’s a relief to find that hasn’t changed. He doubts a more callous man would be fooled by how Peter plans to wriggle out of actually sleeping with the guy.

“I need you at the Plaza at five o’clock. I’m afraid there is a dinner before we can go on to more entertaining pastimes.”

Five o’clock. When Peter’s supposed to start at the restaurant. Shit.

In a split-second, he weighs the pros and cons.

“I can’t wait,” he says, and is rewarded with a contented “Au revoir” on the other end of the line.

Now all he needs is a doctor’s note for Rumlow to avoid getting fired for missing his shift, to figure out what he’ll tell Tony, to sow the seeds for that tonight during their movie date and prepare for… whatever tomorrow holds.

*

His palms are sweaty.

No matter how often Peter wipes them on the fabric of his jeans or the armrest next to him, the damp sensation won’t go away.

The lights have gone up and the credits are rolling but he has no recollection of whether the movie was as tiresome as the reviews suggested, or as entertaining as Ned promised when they spoke on –

“Hey, you okay?”

Tony is frowning at him. Peter’s about to nod when he remembers that he’s supposed to set up the fever and cough that will keep him from the Tower tomorrow. The single kernel of popcorn still stuck in Tony’s hair is a life savior cause Peter can’t seem to find his voice. He doesn’t even have to feign his smile when he plucks it off.

“We really gotta work on your aim, kid.”

“At least I didn’t tip over the bowl and dump half our popcorn on the floor.”

“Just making sure the cleaning staff keep their jobs...”

“I’m pretty sure they don’t have extra cleaners, so all you’re really doing is pile on more work for the regular employees.”

“And you’re avoiding my question.”

Peter ducks his head and finally gives in to his urge to get up. Now that he has some momentum, the
next words come much easier.

“I’m not... I don’t feel so good.”

He’s not even lying, but the reason for it has nothing to do with the onset of a cold.

Tony immediately starts fussing and doesn’t stop until they’re outside the movie theatre and halfway to the car. Any other day it would make Peter’s heart expand to see this unknown side of Tony, but his nerves are too frayed to appreciate both the actions and the sentiments behind them.

“I don’t wanna infect you,” Peter says when they reach the car. Has pretending always come this easy to him? He honestly can’t say, but in this moment, he hates himself for it. “I, I need sleep and –”

“You can sleep at the Tower. JARVIS is a great diagnostician, seriously, IBM’s little pet Watson is an amateur compared to –”

“I wanna go home.”

His voice is barely audible but it still stops Tony in his tracks. He caves like a house of cards, arms dropping to his side and shoulders slumping.

“Sorry. I get a bit – yeah, let’s get you back to your dorm.”

Peter keeps his eyes closed for most of the drive, head resting against the cold glass of the window. He can’t speak, or else he’ll give in and tell Tony he changed his mind – let Tony make him tea and eventually blurt out the truth, screw his plan cause at least he won’t be lying to Tony’s face anymore.

It plays out like a video in Peter’s mind with a stuck fast-forward button: the look of betrayal in Tony’s eyes, then understanding when Peter comes clean about Acacia’s findings, followed by resolve at the prospect of being able to help.

That’s where the clip ends, though. Cause Tony can’t. This isn’t solved by money or some light hacking.

Peter’s the only one who can get the proof they need.

So he doesn’t speak up, doesn’t let Tony follow him to his dorm, does nothing except savor the kiss Tony presses against the crown of his head and the warm hand cupping his jaw.

He can still feel the touches the next morning all through his first two classes and throughout his wait at the doctor’s office. Once he emails the sick note to Rumlow, however, he knows he’ll have to stop obsessing or he’ll never make it to the hotel by five.

Right. Time to get ready.

Going through his routine feels strange after so many weeks with Tony, but Peter slips back into it with ease. This is what’s familiar, this is simple. He’s back in a world where he knows exactly what’s expected of him, where he doesn’t feel wrong-footed at every other turn he takes.

He only pauses once, as he’s about to cross the street, and looks up at the Plaza Hotel. Just for a second he allows himself to imagine walking on, not approaching the side entrance, not seeking out the room number that Rousseau texted him this morning.

Then he shakes himself and gets on with it.

*
Rousseau is in the middle of changing into something smart casual when Peter knocks, at five o’clock sharp, and wastes no time pushing Peter against the door of his suite as soon as the lock clicks shut.

“You’re as exquisite as I remember,” Rousseau whispers against his ear, one hand sliding underneath Peter’s navy blue jacket but not slipping underneath the white shirt he’s chosen since it was the only thing in his wardrobe that he’s never worn around – no, he can’t think of Tony. Not if he wants to execute his plan.

Instead of answering, Peter lets his fingers roam Rousseau’s bare back, relearning the position of his scars and the strength underneath his skin. He doesn’t expect Rousseau to hiss when he passes over an especially tender spot, but he seizes the chance to put some distance between them so he can meet the other man’s eyes with a worried look.

“It’s nothing, mon cher. I shall reap the benefits of it tonight.”

Rousseau presses another kiss against his lips, then shifts until he’s no longer plastered against Peter, his expression rueful.

“I’m afraid this will have to wait. It’s been so long, I want to take my time with you, but time is not something we have right now.”

Externally, Peter pouts – in his mind, he’s relieved. All he has to do for the next few hours is sit there and look pretty, blush at each compliment he gets, pretend like the little touches are getting to him or spread his legs a bit when the hand Rousseau places on his thigh starts dipping closer, all the while pretending the exports Rousseau talks about are but everyday wares crossing the Canadian border. He’s too busy wondering why Rousseau told him to put his overnight bag into the car he hired to follow the negotiations too closely anyway.

“One more stop, mon cher,” Rousseau promises once whatever deal he hashed out was sealed with a handshake over dessert, and Peter’s pulse stutters when he notices the glint in Rousseau’s eyes.

“You’ll like this one.”

Peter does, yet not for the reasons Rousseau thinks.

Entering the seventh floor of the Brooklyn hotel feels like traveling back in time. Everything is as Peter recalls, from the guards flanking the door to the poker room to the row of ‘Do not disturb’ signs they pass in the hallway.

Even Diego is still here, lips twitching in recognition as he glances up from the card he’s turning over for the players at his table.

Rousseau immediately seeks out the hostess, a tall woman in an elegant dress whose innocent smile hides a wealth of power and influence. She shakes her head at something Rousseau asks, then smoothly guides him to the buy-in desk.

Peter can’t believe his luck. With Rousseau joining the game, he’s free to remain at the bar and play with his phone between making sure Rousseau’s tumbler never runs dry. Back when he was here for Rumlow, there wasn’t a free moment during these nights, but his job today isn’t to ease the sting of a huge loss or revive a player’s motivation.

He waits until their hostess steps into the shadows of the room to take a call before finally starting what he came here to do.

His phone makes no sound when he presses the button, snapping a picture of the bulky man standing
near the door.

A quick check confirms Peter didn’t attract any attention, so he shifts until the camera captures the second guard if tilted just right. He spotted four men in the hallway, three on the left and one on the right. Maybe he could cause a – but no, even with a distraction, he’d never manage to take photos of all four without being caught.

A video, though. A video could work.

The set of rooms that serve as changing rooms is at the end of the hallway to the right, so if Peter manages to make it all the way down to the left before one of the men stops him, then sends him in the opposite direction, he should be able to cover them all.

Only problem – he can’t get his phone in the right position.

It keeps slipping down further into his breast pocket, and he can’t stuff the pocket square underneath it since it’s the only thing he has to conceal the very conspicuous lens peaking out from the fabric.

By now the hostess has returned to where the action is and if Peter keeps fumbling any longer she’s bound to notice. The only choice left is for Peter to take his chances and hope for the best.

Of course he’s stopped by the second guard, and of course there’s someone else in the changing room – Yasmine, he thinks – meaning Peter actually has to pretend he needs to prep himself in the bathroom since she’d grow suspicious otherwise.

He retrieves his phone with shaking fingers.

It’s useless. The video is useless.

Only one guard’s hands are visible. What’s more, he doesn’t match the suspect’s body type in the slightest. Peter has to stifle the frustrated sob rising in his throat since Yasmine would come in and ask what’s wrong, and he’s in no state to think up a reply that would make the woman leave him alone.

He should just bow out now. Take a left instead of a right, catch a cab back to the City, ignore Rousseau’s calls that would inevitably follow and ply the man with tales of a stomach bug that chained him to the toilet for the entire night once the sun has risen again and hopefully he’ll –

A knock sounds through the changing room and startles Peter out of his thoughts. He doesn’t move, though, since Yasmine is closer to the door and will deal with whoever is outside.

Rousseau’s voice chases him out of the bathroom a second later.

Yet the man is smiling at Yasmine, more concern than anger in his eyes.

“Are you alright, mon cher?”

“Sorry, I – I didn’t feel so good.”

Any sliver of annoyance Rousseau might have felt evaporates and Peter has a brief moment of pride over his acting abilities before the other man steps closer and moves in for a tender kiss.

“Better?” Rousseau whispers against his lips, and Peter can’t think of anything other than a breathy “Yeah”, which means he has to accompany Rousseau back to the table for “only one more hand, mon cher. I promise.”
It’s a challenge to not look like the picture of misery at the bar, and an even bigger one to keep his calm as they make their way back to the car. He didn’t accomplish anything tonight except kiss a man who isn’t Tony, and if he doesn’t figure out how to get off this train before they’re back in the City, kissing Rousseau is going to be the least of his worries.

Only problem – they’re not heading back to the City.

“Be a darling and grab my bag as well,” Rousseau says after handing over his car keys to the person welcoming them to what Peter thinks is a car park.

Peter hadn’t even known Rousseau had packed anything, but a staff member at the Plaza probably took care of putting that into the car long before Peter even arrived at the hotel. Which still doesn’t explain why they’d need a change of clothes.

“Matthys,” he begins and his expression must have broadcast his confusion loud and clear since Rousseau stops his strides and smiles at him.

“Pas de souci,” he says, which sounds like it means ‘don’t worry’ or something similarly appeasing, but which in fact does nothing to slow Peter’s pulse. “I wanted it to be a surprise.”

He still doesn’t explain, merely takes Peter’s hand and tugs him further along. Then they round a corner and suddenly, it all becomes clear.

It’s not a car park – it’s a heliport.

Which can only mean one thing.

“Fabio invited us to stay with him, mon cher,” Rousseau says, and Peter’s blood runs cold.

Chapter End Notes

*hits post and hides*

...

*emerges long enough to say that chapter 18 will follow within a week, I promise*
eighteen

Chapter Notes

General content warning for this chapter! If you’ve had problems with any of what has come before, tread lightly.

That said, this is officially my favourite chapter to date… Enjoy!

[01:34 pm] Doc sent me home to rest. Sorry, but I won’t be able to come by tonight.

Tony’s reread the text so often he could recite it backwards if you woke him up at midnight and asked him about it. Attached to it is a photo of Peter in the waiting room of a GP, looking crestfallen.

Something’s off. The entire thing doesn’t sit right with him, but he can’t put his finger on why.

He switches his phone to locked, ignoring the specs for a small-scale arc reactor which, like Peter’s text or Rogers and Barnes’ sudden change of tune, he can’t seem to figure out. Maybe that’s what’s on Peter mind? But why wouldn’t he tell Tony about it then?

It would be so easy. JARVIS is basically fused into the networks of the NYPD and the Department of Transportation (among others), facial recognition would take no time at all if he switched on a couple of additional servers, and within five minutes he’d know whether or not Peter really is at his dorm battling a cold. Tracing his phone would yield even faster results.

Yet he can still hear Pepper’s accusatory questions ring in his ears, can still remember the appalled look on her face, can see the moment her trust in him broke beyond repair.

He can’t risk that happening again.

With a huff, Tony collapses the files and heads down to the arc reactor.

*

It’s like walking back into a nightmare.

The mansion hasn’t changed much in the past two and a half months from what Peter can tell in the artificial lights guiding them from the helipad to the front door. It’s probably a different story by daylight since the garden should be in full bloom in the middle of June, but he doesn’t dare contemplate tomorrow when he hasn’t even made it through the night.

“Carlos, show Mattys’ friend here to the guest room,” Fabio tells the wall of muscle carrying Peter and Rousseau’s bags, then turns his smile at him. “You’re a little overdressed, cariño.”

Peter couldn’t have spoken if he wanted to. He nods and follows, up the stairs and past a line of doors until the… guard? Valet? Henchman? … reveals a spacious room, tastefully decorated with an innocent-looking bed, a sleek desk and a leather sofa and chairs grouped around a modest flat screen.

“I’m gonna take you back once you’re done,” the guy says.
His accent is native New York, like the thick kind you only get if you’re raised in one of the
boroughs and don’t care to watch your vowels or ‘r’s, but it’s the hand he extends to close the door
after dropping the bags at the foot of the bed that catches Peter’s attention.

Of course the guy wears the same tattoo.

Suddenly, hope flares in Peter’s chest. It does little to stifle the stomach-churning uncertainty
regarding what the night holds in store for him, but it gives him something to focus on, something
positive, something that will make whatever happens worth it if he plays his cards right.

He spares a fleeting thought to Tony as he starts unbuttoning his shirt.

There’s still a chance he can make it through the next twelve hours without having to cross any lines
he’ll never be able to uncross. Spencer doesn’t seem to be here and without him, Fabio probably
won’t request anything. And if Peter continues the ‘I’m not feeling well’ angle he began in
Brooklyn, Rousseau might contend himself with a blowjob before dozing off. Peter would be able to
gather the photos he needs, then sneak out of the house before dawn.

Surely Tony will understand it doesn’t mean anything to Peter. After all, he’s the one who didn’t
want Peter on his knees on autopilot. That’s exactly what this is going to be.

He’s glad he packed tight jeans that sit low on his hips and do wonders for his ass, as well as a dark
henley with a neckline that exposes his collar bone and clings to his body in all the right places. His
hair is still artfully tousled from dinner. Good.

Now to the risky part.

Peter’s already playing with his phone when he emerges from the room. The guy with the New York
accent doesn’t spare the device a second glance and leads the way back downstairs, just as Peter
hoped. He slows his pace and has to bite his tongue when the camera lens perfectly captures the
man’s profile along with the tattoo on his hand.

He doesn’t have time to bask in his relief, however, since they have arrived in the spacious living
area and he quickly puts his phone away to avoid any of the other guests catching a glimpse of his
screen. He finds Rousseau lounging in a loveseat opposite Fabio, who rakes his eyes appreciatively
over Peter’s body.

It takes every ounce of self-control he has not to run right then and there.

Yet all Fabio does is tell him to fetch another round of drinks for the three of them, and then his
attention returns to whatever story Rousseau is recounting.

Peter uses the time it takes the young woman behind the modest bar to pour his order to get his pulse
back under control as well as retrieve his phone again and pretend to scroll through something
incredibly interesting.

Don’t lose your cool, Parker, don’t lose your cool, he tells himself, over and over again, until he has
catched all tattooed people visible from his vantage point on video. After that, it’s almost easy to make
his feet move and carry the drinks back to the star of his worst nightmares.

*

[09:32 pm] Hope you’re still alive, kid. Let me know if an impromptu soup run is required.
[09:57 pm] Thanks, but I’m good. Won’t be able to drink tea ever again, though.

Tony chuckles as he reads Peter’s response. It’s not like the kid’s a big fan of tea in the first place.

[09:58 pm] Srly tho, anything you need, just say the word

[10:02 pm] Don’t take this the wrong way, but I’d like to get some sleep now

[10:03 pm] Shit
[10:03 pm] Yeah
[10:03 pm] Sorry
[10:03 pm] Shutting up now. Sweet dreams :)

Tony waits for another five minutes, during which he doesn’t even pretend to be focusing on the schematics projected into the air in front of him, before he decides that Peter has probably already fallen asleep.

Good on him. Sleep’s the best medicine, after all.

“JARVIS, when’s a good time to check in with him tomorrow morning?”

“Initial research suggests waiting until noon might be more beneficial to Mr. Parker’s sleeping patterns, sir,” is the immediate reply, and Tony pouts at the nearest camera.

“Guess I gotta rework your algorithms, then, buddy.”

“Duly noted, sir.”

With a heavy sigh, Tony shakes his head and pushes away the worry still lingering behind.

*

Never in his life has Peter had this much adrenaline coursing through his veins.

It’s a delicate line he’s walking and he knows it – a balance between being present enough so he doesn’t anger either Rousseau or Fabio while still opting out of the conversation in a way that won’t draw suspicion.

Thankfully, none of the other guests really pay him any heed as he fetches drinks or excuses himself to the bathroom. To them, he’s just the bored hooker playing with his phone, not the nephew on secret mission.

Even Rousseau has stopped touching him too much, since Fabio is revealing details on a new trade route Spencer is in the midst of negotiating, and, should that work out, Rousseau will be instrumental in paving the way with customs and other authorities.

If Peter weren’t sitting thigh-to-thigh with the man, he’d be recording the conversation. He’s going to have to contact the FBI or DEA or whoever handles these kinds of things, cause not reporting this would make Peter an accessory, he’s pretty sure… But he’ll worry about what to do with all the additional information he’s accumulating later, when he’s back in Manhattan, sifting through video files in his cloud.

For now, all that matters is that he has caught seven tattooed men on film and is only missing two more. They’re outside, unfortunately, and chances are low that Fabio will have a sudden craving for fresh air. Maybe Peter could –
“What do you think, mon cher?”

Peter freezes. Rousseau is looking at him expectantly but Peter has no idea what they were talking about.

“S-sorry?”

Fabio’s lips stretch into an indulgent smile. “It must be so boring for you. I apologize, cariño. I have been a subpar host. I shall make it up to you.” He straightens in his seat, eyes never leaving Peter. “Why don’t you go on up, make yourself ready. We will be with you shortly.”

Peter doubts his voice would cooperate, so all he does is nod. He remembers to turn to Rousseau for a parting kiss before he leaves, but after that it’s a blur. He has no idea how he makes it up the stairs and into the guest room, but he must have, otherwise he wouldn’t be sitting with his back against the bathroom door, desperately trying to get his breathing under control. He even managed to get lube and the gloves out of his bag, but both are now on the sink, looming over him.

What was he thinking? He should have considered Rousseau’s friendship with Fabio, should have asked about their evening plans, should have backed out when he still had the chance.

Declining them now is not an option. Leaving isn’t either. Even if he runs, how will he get back to the City? He doesn’t have the money for a charter helicopter. Maybe a cab... that is, if he makes it far enough from the mansion to hail one.

There’s nothing to it. It’s going to happen and he better get a move on if he wants to be prepped once Fabio and Rousseau arrive.

He feels numb all over when he inserts the first finger, which simply won’t do cause how will he be able to please these two if he’s just going through the motions?

Focus, Parker. This is nothing new.

Peter meets his own gaze in the mirror. His reflection seems miles away. He shakes his head and squeezes his eyes shut for a moment.

Deep breath.

You know this. You’re good at this.

It’s like flicking a switch. The numbness recedes and an eerie calm takes its place.

He finishes with steady hands.

His pulse isn’t racing when he lays down on top of the covers, stretched and slick but dressed, since he doesn’t know whether they will want a show or undress him themselves.

At long last, there are footsteps outside in the hallway. Laughter, voices. Then, Rousseau enters, followed by a smiling Fabio. They’re both high, Peter would bet on it. He thinks he’s able to taste something on Mattys’ lips when they kiss, but before he can be sure of it, Rousseau settles into the chair Peter turned to face the bed.

Which leaves Peter with no choice but to look up at Fabio. The man steps closer once Rousseau is settled and then simply stands there, looking Peter over, from where his knees dig into the mattress to the open collar of his henley.
At long last, he reaches out. Trails a finger along Peter’s cheekbones and down his throat, pausing when he comes upon the hem of the fabric.

A gesture, and Peter strips it off. It lands on the floor without making a sound.

Fabio, meanwhile, hasn’t stopped caressing Peter’s skin. He lingers appreciatively over the muscles in his stomach before focusing on his nipples – they’ve never been an erogenous zone for Peter, but he’s learned to pretend. He lets his breath speed up, his eyes fall half-shut, and directs the blood flow south.

Fabio buys it, if his soft smile is any indication. Peter only sees it because the man has titled his head up.

“Hands behind your back,” he whispers, and only continues his ministrations after Peter complied.

Once Peter’s erection is a visible bulge against his thigh, Fabio steps closer. The movement draws Peter’s attention to the man’s belt, a little below his eye level.

“Open it, cariño,” Fabio says – orders. “With your mouth.”

It’s an incredibly unoriginal command. Peter has heard it quite often – he even used to be able to get buttons undone with respectable grace – but he’s desperately out of practice.

Which certainly won’t be reason enough for Fabio to change his mind, so Peter leans forward and clasps the loop of the belt between his teeth. Saliva and leather don’t mix well, so he attempts to keep his tongue away from the material and even succeeds for the most part. He could have done without the embarrassing wriggly bit as he tried to get the pin out of the belt hole, but it made both Fabio and Rousseau laugh good-naturedly so it couldn’t have been too bad.

Peter is relieved to finally reach the zipper, cause compared to this, sucking cock’s gonna be like riding a bike. He’s just taken the metal thingy between his teeth when a knock on the door echoes through the room.

“Qué?” Fabio calls out, the annoyance audible in his voice.

Peter’s rudimentary Spanish isn’t enough to follow the exchange that ensues between the person outside, Fabio and Rousseau, but it must be a genuine emergency or else Fabio wouldn’t have redone his belt and wouldn’t be cupping Peter’s face while favoring him with a wistful expression.

“We will have to continue this at another time, cariño,” he whispers, and then he’s out the door.

Peter blinks after him. It takes a moment for the reality of the situation to fully sink in.

He won’t be having sex with Fabio tonight.

Too bad Rousseau’s still lounging in the chair and beckoning Peter towards him. The sight of him, legs splayed and palming himself lazily through the fabric of his cotton pants, is dangerously similar to his first night here, and for a moment the onslaught of memories makes him dizzy. It’s so much better than last time, though, cause Rousseau is the only one dictating his actions, the only one to claim his mouth as he lowers himself on the man’s erection, the only one to thrust into him with abandon.

It doesn’t hurt. Peter doesn’t even feel it. It’s like it’s happening to someone else and he’s merely an observer.
He’s not sure when his mind reintegrates into his body, but it must be quite a while later since the sounds of Rousseau’s even breathing fill the room and the house is quiet.

Peter tries to relax back into the mattress, yet now that he’s awake again, he can’t help but let the next twenty-four hours play out in his imagination. Rousseau loves morning sex, the shower in the ensuite is big enough for three, and if news comes that Spencer was victorious, there will be reason for a real party. It’s Friday night, so it’s going to be bigger in scope, too.

Not to mention Fabio promised to continue where they were interrupted.

He has to get out of here.

The thought fills Peter until every cell in his body is screaming with it, until all he can do is give in, get up, get dressed as quietly as he can, grab his phone from the charging station on the nightstand and leave the room.

He spares a thought to his belongings, but they’re just clothes and a bag, nothing he can’t easily replace, and taking it with him would increase the risk of being caught too much to be worth it.

His best option is the staff entrance, down the hallway behind the kitchen on the ground floor, so he makes for that, senses heightened by adrenaline and hope.

Yet all his hope shatters when he makes it to his destination.

There, at the kitchen island, in the darkness, illuminated only by the flood lights from outside and nursing a considerable amount of rum, is none other than Fabio Ortiz.

Peter has never thought of an excuse this quickly.

“Um, water,” he stammers, gesturing towards one of the cabinets that he thinks might hold a glass for him to then fill at the tap.

Fabio nods towards another cupboard, presumably giving his blessing for Peter to stay while he continues to wallow in whatever manpain a rich and powerful cartel overlord has to process, so Peter plays along and fetches a glass.

After the first gulp, though, the panic seeps back into his veins, along with a bizarre dose of awkwardness. His plan is completely shot to bits now, and he’s left sipping tap water at the sink while Fabio regards his tumbler as if it could answer the mysteries of the universe. Should he just leave as silently as he came? Should he wait to be dismissed?

A heavy sigh pulls him out of his thoughts.

Fabio is looking at him, but it’s hard to get a read on his expression in the low light.

“Would you like me to leave?” Peter dares, barely loud enough to be heard.

Fabio shakes his head. Silence falls again.

Peter continues taking small sips and biting his tongue to keep his urge to babble at bay.

At long last, Fabio pushes away from the counter. He walks slowly, as if still deep in thought, around the kitchen island and towards the sink. He stops once he’s deep in Peter’s space, who has a brief flash of Fabio yanking him around and bending him over… but it never comes true.

Instead, Fabio caresses his cheek with warm fingers.
This close, Peter can see the sadness in the man’s eyes. A deep sorrow, tinged with worry.

Something happened to Spencer, Peter thinks. That would explain why Fabio left when he did. Why he’s drowning his pain instead of being fast asleep.

Peter would feel sorry for him if he hadn’t already seen the man’s true colors.

Fabio strokes a thumb over Peter’s lips, softly, not intended as anything other than a touch, and Peter tries not to shiver. Then there’s a pat on his cheek and Fabio turns towards the door.

“Come,” he says and Peter has no choice but to place the glass in the sink and follow into the unknown.

He thinks, with mounting dread, that Fabio is leading him to the master bedroom for a late night performance, something to take his mind off whatever bad thing happened with Spencer, and he can feel the fear turn his stomach…

But instead he finds himself in a study.

It has no windows, which is the first thing Peter notices. The lamp in the corner that Fabio switched on casts the room in a mysterious shade of orange, from the cupboards lining the walls to the shelves filled with folders. Peter’s eyes dart from unlocked cabinet doors to the spacious, sleek desk holding an iMac and important-looking stacks of paper, and it dawns on him with sudden clarity: this is where he’ll get what he’s looking for.

Peter’s so caught up in his realization that he almost misses Fabio exposing a safe behind a nondescript part of the wall that swings open. He spots a row of gold bars inside, as well as envelopes and wads of cash.

It’s one of the latter that Fabio takes out. He does a quick count and replaces the rest inside again. The safe clicks shut and Peter quickly turns back to inspect the abstract painting on the wall.

Fabio chuckles. “You’re allowed to be curious, cariño. Come here.”

Peter obeys, stopping in arm’s reach of Fabio on the other side of the desk. He doesn’t dare look anywhere except Fabio’s eyes, though – there’s curious, and there’s courting trouble.

Fabio holds out the bills he counted. All of them. Peter swallows.

“The next couple days, and a little extra.”

“Thank you,” he says once his voice decides to cooperate again. The wad of cash rests crisp and heavy in his hand. “Do you want me to…”

He trails off, unable to finish the thought and hoping it will sound seductive rather than frightened. He sees Fabio’s lips twitch, so he probably failed, but rather than calling him out on it, the man considers him in silence.

“I remember you’re quite good at this, cariño,” he says eventually.

Peter does, too. He tries not to, has tried to block out everything that happened during the last trip, but being back here, with Fabio close enough so smell his cologne, makes that impossible.

“I still am.”

His voice doesn’t tremble when he replies, but he forgets to lick his lips. It doesn’t seem to matter,
though – there’s a glint of something dark in Fabio’s eyes as they dilate.

“Prove it,” he whispers, and Peter wastes no time lowering himself to his knees.

It’s only when he looks up at Fabio through his lashes, hands placed on the man’s hips, that his mind catches up with the situation.

Autopilot, a voice supplies, and Peter has to bite down on his lip, hard, to stop himself from reacting to it. He wants the floating sensation back, to be an observer again, but instead he feels every shift of the belt as he stages another attempt to open it with his mouth.

Once the zipper is down he slips his fingers between the hem of the pants and Fabio’s skin, then looks up for permission. A hand is placed on his head, fingers carding through his hair for several torturous seconds. Then Fabio nods.

The last time Peter did this, he was on his knees in a shower, hot water irritating the scratches on his chest and obstructing his nose, those same hands holding him in place with no consideration for the diminishing oxygen levels in his blood.

Peter has to dig his legs deeper into the carpet to anchor himself to the present, yet it still takes him a moment to regain control over his body. The hand in his hair tightens and nudges him forward, gentle but insistent, so Peter tries to make his mind go blank… But it’s impossible when he has to go through his memories to recall whether Fabio preferred a slow build-up or being swallowed in one go, how much pressure he liked and when, which of the tricks Peter has learned over the years make him sigh and moan.

The first taste of Fabio on his tongue after weeks without sex isn’t the switch Peter hoped it would be. He doesn’t get to let it happen and observe from afar. He’s present for every second of it, every inch that he covers with his lips, every droplet of precome he tastes because Peter didn’t dare bring up the question of condoms.

It’s only when he feels Fabio place both hands on either side of his head that things grow fuzzy again.

One moment he’s in the study, fully clothed, the next he’s wet and hurting, clenching down on his gag reflex as Fabio thrusts in as deep as he physically can and holds him there.

Peter gasps and sputters when Fabio pulls out, and it takes him a moment to realize the wetness on his cheeks are tears that have leaked from his eyes rather than phantom drops of water from a shower spray.

He barely has enough time to catch his breath before the head of Fabio’s cock pushes against his lips and Peter understands the rhythm he’s trying to build – thrusts so deep he can feel Peter swallow around his erection, again and again, until Peter’s vision blurs and he starts clawing at Fabio’s hip for him to pull back, which he does at the last possible moment.

At least there’s no second pair of hands lifting his hips up, no additional fingers closing around his limp cock, using water as lubricant until he’s hard, no nails digging into his shoulders and no teeth sinking deep enough into his skin to leave marks.

When Fabio finally comes, it’s just as he thrusts back in, and Peter gets to feel every throb against his tongue, can feel the come sliding down his throat. It takes every ounce of willpower to hold still since Fabio’s grip on his hair has loosened and it would be easy to pull off, to grab the paperweight he saw on the desk and aim for Fabio’s temple –
No.

He needs to be able to return to this office. He can’t let this opportunity slip past him. He needs as much evidence as he can gather, and if there’s even a sliver of a chance Fabio keeps files on his employees, one of them is bound to feature the man who committed the crime Ben is imprisoned for.

So Peter overrides the urge to run. Ignores the need to breathe. He swallows every last drop and does his best to keep his gasping to a minimum when Fabio finally pushes him off his cock.

Peter must look absolutely wrecked, collapsed on his hunches at Fabio’s feet, sucking in gulps of air and blinking tears away, but when he dares to lift his head, Fabio’s regarding him with a satisfied expression.

Hands shaking, he pulls up Fabio’s pants and underwear, does his best to tuck in the shirt before closing the zipper and belt, but he overestimates the state of his legs and topples to the floor when he tries to stand up.

“Careful, cariño,” Fabio chuckles, and holds out a hand – like he did in the shower before Spencer crushed him against the cold tiles.

You’re not back there, Peter tells himself, it’s only him.

He accepts Fabio’s help in getting to his feet.

The palm cupping his cheek comes out of the blue – or did he zone out? – and he barely manages to stop himself from flinching. He fails a split-second later when he feels the touch of Fabio’s lips against this, but his sudden inhale only serves to make Fabio smile when he pulls away.

“We are going to have a great weekend together,” he whispers, voice soft and sated.

All Peter can do is nod.

*

[12:05 pm] hey kid, you doing better?
[12:55 pm] btw remind me to never ever agree to consult for a German company again; the Audi guys need everything in triplicate and signed
[12:56 pm] at least I can sign them digitally
[1:27 pm] Srly are you ok?
[2:55 pm] on my way to a meeting but will keep my phone on so write or call when you need anything
[3:40 pm] who the hell schedules initial meetings on a Friday afternoon?
[3:40 pm] I should totally switch all my first consultations to mandatory video chats
[3:40 pm] and then have J feed them old footage so I’d be free to do something productive while desperate people try to secure my services... like make soup! I’m totally making you soup today, you’ll love it
[4:51 pm] I’ve been released!!!!
[5:31 pm] Want me to bring soup? I got the recipe for Bruce’s famous butternut-ginger soup off him last Christmas
[5:32 pm] I swear it's a life savior

[6:02 pm] Srly kid, just tell me you haven’t choked on your own vomit, I’m getting real worried here

[6:09 pm] Peter?
Surprise! Second update in a week, because now that this chapter is finally in a shape I’m happy with, I can’t wait to share it. A bit on the shorter side (after cutting about 900 words in the editing process), but more will follow soon!

Tony pulls up in front of Peter’s building at 7:35 pm, large thermos with Bruce’s famous butternut-and-ginger soup on the passenger seat and still no reply from Peter.

There’s not even a read-receipt. Well, there won’t be until Peter has replied since it’s a StarkPhone and SI values their customer’s privacy and right to control their user experience yada yada yada. Gah, how Tony regrets going along with it now.

Never mind that, though. He’s got soup to deliver.

It’s hard to believe he’s never been inside Peter’s room. He’s been to the door a few times, doing the gentlemanly thing when he wasn’t being ungentlemanly and took the kid back to the Tower, but he’s never made it past the threshold of the first floor apartment.

His heart is beating in his throat when he knocks.

A few seconds pass in silence, then there’s movement behind the door, and Tony can feel his pulse stutter when footsteps draw closer and –

It’s the roommate. Some jock whose name Tony has already forgotten cause Peter only mentioned him once, and who’s now blinking at Tony standing in front of him in jeans and an ancient Black Sabbath tee. And holding a thermos, let’s not forget the thermos.

“Hey,” Tony says. “Is Peter home?”

“He’s at work,” the jock says. “Won’t be back till late.”

“You saw him before he left?”

“Nah. We got real clashing schedules. Barely ever see him, but I know he’s working at this vegan joint, real fancy place. Might need to change if you wanna visit him there, bro.”

“When’s the last time you saw him?” Tony asks, cause he can’t not.

The guy shrugs. “Wednesday, I guess? You done with the twenty questions? I got a steak in the pan.”

The moment Tony nods, the jock has closed the door and apparently sprinting back to the kitchen.

Okay, so Peter’s at work. Probably slept until right before so he’d be fit enough to survive the shift cause Rumlow hates employees taking sick days, Peter explained once. As if the guy weren’t raising enough red flags.
But why didn’t Peter message him before his shift, then? Even if he was running late, he’d have had a couple of minutes on public transport. He would have seen Tony’s messages and replied, wouldn’t he?

“Boss?”

Tony blinks at Natasha, who has dropped out of the shadows and is regarding him with a tense expression. Apparently him stopping in his tracks on his way to the car is cause for concern.

“I gotta make another stop,” he says, and unlocks the car.

*  

The jock was right – Tony’s way too underdressed to waltz up to anything beyond a gourmet hot dog stand. Good thing the edges of Natasha’s suit are as sharp as the knives she fancies.

When she returns to where Tony is pretending to be occupied with his phone, her lips are pursed.

“The Maître said Parker called in sick till Sunday.”

“Sunday?”

“Yup.”

“Fuck.”

“Look, boss,” Natasha says after a beat, “from what I can tell, Parker wouldn’t be ghosting you without a good reason. Is there anyone in his life he’d lie to you for?”

Tony’s thoughts immediately go to May.

“He’s got an aunt in Queens.”

Natasha nods and then simply follows him to a run-down neighborhood only to find out from a mean old lady in the apartment next door that Mrs. Parker is, in fact, at work and that no, her nephew hasn’t been by in ages.

“That’s it,” Tony says, “I’m tracing his phone.”

“Boss—”

Tony’s already rushing back to the car.

*  

Peter’s heart is racing. Just two more steps, then –

A floor board creaks.

Shit, someone’s coming down.

Peter turns around, double-times it on the staircase and is back in his room before whoever was on the upper floor made it to his level and spotted him.

He’s up to four failed attempts now. Every time he thinks he has a window of opportunity to slip into the study – either cause Rousseau’s having a post-coital nap or is busy making calls to help mitigate
whatever disaster happened last night and still hasn’t been resolved – every time Peter gets within reach, something happens that forces him to abort.

He needs to get this done tonight. Sure, Rousseau is a lot more predictable than Fabio, and a lot less forceful, and while being on familiar territory has gone a long way in restoring Peter’s mental equilibrium, he can’t help but think of Tony at every other touch.

Tony’s texts aren’t helping.

Peter drops onto the bed with a frustrated sigh and pulls out his phone again. The latest message, something about implementing a new policy of video chats for first meetings with potential consultancy clients, is still unanswered, like every other text Tony sent since noon.

It’s almost five o’clock, meaning Peter better send his decoy message now. The best course of action, he decided, is to pretend that he slept until right before work and didn’t have time to write until he was on the train to the restaurant. That should buy him another six hours and put Tony’s mind at ease.

He’s composing his reply in his head when a commotion from the house makes him lower the phone again and sit up. Time to play the worried boyfriend again.

Not half a minute later, Rousseau enters – but he’s smiling.

“Everything okay?” Peter asks, on his feet immediately.

“Oh, more than okay, mon cher,” Rousseau says and swoops in for the kind of kiss that leaves Peter gasping for air once he’s finally released.

“What happened?”

“Don’t you worry about it. Spencer is safe, everything is back in the hands where it rightfully belongs, and I was able to help my best friends. Come,” he says, and takes the phone Peter’s still holding out of his hand to put it on the nightstand. “We have an hour before the celebrations truly begin. Turn over, mon cher.”

And that’s that. Peter obeys, moans dutifully when Rousseau fingers slide inside him, while his mind remains stuck on one phrase: celebrations.

That’s his chance. That’s when he’ll manage to sneak into the study.

Rousseau makes the most of the hour they have, so high from whatever power play he pulled off that for once he doesn’t want Peter to do all the work, which comes in handy since Peter’s too busy devising his plan.

He makes sure Rousseau sees him take an aspirin before they leave the room but swears he’s fine, and leads the way out of their quarters to prove his point.

The garden is teeming with people when they arrive. Booze flowing, white powder passed around like candy, and at the center of it all is Fabio, smiling and engaging with his guests in a way Peter has never seen him.

“Mattys, the man of the hour.”

Fabio greets Rousseau with a backbreaking hug and kisses on both cheeks, then places a hand on Peter’s shoulder and pulls him close. He feels hot breath against the side of his neck and he’s
intimately aware of how little space there is between their bodies.

“We will celebrate later, cariño.”

Peter shudders but smiles, and Fabio laughs, apparently buying that his reaction is due to anticipation rather than dread.

Not for the first time today, his eyes dart to the doors.

And like every time before, he squashes his impulse to flee cause all he can see is Ben sitting down across from him in the prison’s visitation lounge, over and over again, until his uncle is old and frail, a shadow of himself… just because Peter couldn’t be bothered to get himself together and endure a few more hours of pretending.

Put like that, he can’t believe his own selfishness.

He’s sent to fetch drinks for the entire group that has flocked around Fabio and Rousseau and is trying to decide whether the barkeeper would appreciate a hand or be offended Peter thinks she can’t get the orders done asap, when someone laughs right next to him.

“Well, well, well,” the person says. “Parker, was it? Peter Parker?”

He turns… and comes face-to-face with Sebastian Shaw.

“If this isn’t a surprise… This doesn’t strike me as Tony’s scene, somehow. Don’t tell me he’s grown tired of you already?”

Peter only has a split-second to decide how he’s gonna handle this. It’s been two weeks since Shaw saw them together – breaking up would be a lot more plausible than Tony somehow being okay with him spending time with another man.

So he makes sure he looks adequately morose when he says, “Yeah. He did. But plenty of other fish in the sea, right?”

He cringes at the platitude, yet Shaw’s grin never falters. Either his poker face is beyond reproach, or Peter was just that convincing.

Not that it matters. He has other things to worry about.

Like supplying their host with drinks and a secret smile, and snuggling up to Rousseau on the comfortable deck chair. The sun is setting, spirits are high. He gives it another half hour, during which he massages his temple at regular intervals, before he tugs at the sleeve of Rousseau’s shirt.

“I’m not feeling too good,” he whispers. Rousseau’s expression immediately clouds with concern. “I’ll lie down for a bit, okay? I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“Yes, yes, mon cher. Go rest.”

A soft kiss, and he’s dismissed. Peter makes sure to meet Fabio’s gaze across the coffee table to avoid raising suspicion, then weaves through the guests.

Like he hoped, all guards are either outside or downstairs. Only one is positioned at the foot of the staircase and Peter greets him with a nod. A glance over his shoulder confirms the guard’s attention is elsewhere again once he reaches the first floor.

This is it.
Peter sneaks down the hallway without making a sound. His hand is steady on the door handle. It opens without resistance.

Peter takes a deep breath, relief flooding his veins quickly followed by a new surge of adrenaline. He’d better be as fast as possible.

The cabinets hold ledgers and folders full of gibberish – probably code to hide the illegal nature of their contents – and there’s nothing in the desk except empty ledgers and office supplies. Peter makes to pull out a drawer from the shelf in the corner and startles when it won’t move.

It’s locked.

Good thing he’s an engineering student, cause otherwise he’d have had to somehow get a key off whoever’s guarding them (probably Fabio, and wouldn’t that have been risky). As is, he’s determined the kind of lock used and the best way to crack it in no time.

He builds a pick and a tension wrench out of paper clips, then goes to town.

Once the first drawer is open, he pulls it out. Inside: a row of hanging file folders, each baring a name.

Employee files.

Peter wants to cry, he’s so relieved.

But there’s no time for that. He needs to crack the other locks and start going through the folders as quickly as he can, all the while keeping his ears open and an eye on the clock.

They’re a fascinating read, filled with different handwritings. Peter doubts Fabio updates them personally, he’ll have lackeys for that, and they detail everything from addresses to job performance to loved ones that can be – and from the looks of it, have been – used as leverage.

Peter skims kill orders and ignores pictures of mutilated spouses, regardless of how horrible they are. He’s gotta keep his eye on the prize.

The date of Ben’s arrest will forever be seared into his brain, so he recognizes it the moment he opens the new file.

Carlos Mahoney.

The guard with the New York accent. The one who carried their bags when they arrived yesterday.

Protection fee collection – civilian interfered, footage removed, civilian charged

A line below, the date of Ben’s conviction.

Peter found it. Their smoking gun. This – this makes everything worth it.

He scrambles to get his phone out and needs three tries to take a photo that isn’t blurry since his hands are shaking so hard. It’s added to the dropbox folder a moment later, and only when that’s done does he dare to relax.

It doesn’t last long.

Because Shaw is standing in the doorway. And he’s smiling.
Bruce is waiting in the workshop when Tony gets there, Natasha at his heels cause for some reason she doesn’t want to leave him alone.

“What happened? All JARVIS said —” Bruce begins, but Tony cuts him off.

“Peter’s missing. I need you to disable the protocol, now.”

“Missing? Are you sure?”

“I can circumvent it myself but that’s twenty minutes I don’t have, so for fuck’s sake, just do it.”

Tony doesn’t know whether it’s the desperate edge to his tone, or the urgency in his eyes, or the grim set of Natasha’s jaw, but Bruce does the sensible thing and complies.

“JARVIS, please disable the Remember Snowden protocol for the next forty-eight hours.”

“Yes, Dr. Banner.”

“Fucking finally,” Tony says, and activates the closest workstation. “J, gimme a location on Peter. And his phone records.”

He could fetch them himself, but what use is having an AI when it can’t track down your boyfriend in eleven seconds flat?

“On the map, sir.”

It takes Tony a moment to make sense of the information presented to him, cause –

“The Hamptons? What the hell’s the kid doing in the Hamptons? I wanna know who owns the house, asap.”

“Yes, sir.”

By now, Peter’s phone records have come through, rendered to mirror the interface of Peter’s actual StarkPhone.

“Tony…”

“Save your lecture on gross invasion of privacy for later, doc.”

The last call Peter got is from a Canadian number, accepted at noon on Wednesday. Duration two minutes, thirty-seven seconds. There’s a text, too, dated Thursday morning.

[06:43 am] Suite 3A. 5pm. I cannot wait to see you again, mon cher.

5pm on Thursday. A call the day before. Meaning Peter lied about being sick.

Tony feels his stomach drop.

The sender’s name is saved in the contacts, and a quick search identifies him as Mattys Rousseau, 42, French-Canadian, CEO of the county’s second biggest logistics company, facilitating imports and exports on a global scale.

“Flight manifests state he is currently in New York for business,” JARVIS continues, prompting an
incredulous “Flight manifests?!” from Bruce and an arched eyebrow from Natasha. “He checked into the Plaza Hotel two days ago, sir.”

“And how much would you bet that ain’t where he’s at right now? Oh, look, full points to me, he’s also...”

Tony turns towards the map with a flourish just as the second location pin pops up in the exact same address in Water Mills.

“… in the Hamptons! JARVIS, what’s the status on that name?”

Nonexistent, unfortunately. According to official records, the property belongs to a shell corporation. Dead end. Fuck.

Tony huffs. “Alright, what’s the nearest satellite? I’ma reroute that, see if some decent footage is gonna tell us more.”

“And how many people will that leave without signal?” Bruce says, this time physically putting himself between Tony and the keyboard. “Please think for a moment, Tony. What if one of these people needs to call nine-one-one and can’t, and all because of a hunch?”

“It’s more than a hunch! I have his location!”

“We could send Clint down to check it out,” Natasha suggests, but –

“It’s a three hour drive. Ain’t got time for that.”

“Tony, please –”

“Fine!” he shouts, throwing up his arms. “I won’t reroute any satellites! Even though they’re mine,” he adds, though even to himself it sounds petulant.

He starts pacing cause he’s gotta do something with all the ball of anger and worry forming in his chest and threatening to burst out of his ribcage any second now. He’s Tony Stark, for fuck’s sake, billionaire genius, tech daddy – if he can’t solve this, who can?

Bruce clears his throat, then seems to immediately regret it when he draws both Tony and Natasha’s attention.

“Maybe it’s time to inform the authorities?” he suggests. “For all we’re legally allowed to know, Peter’s missing.”

The edge to his tone doesn’t escape Tony’s notice, but he’s too busy groaning to come up with a witty reply. Of-fucking-course – if Peter’s off with one of his old clients, Rumlow’s bound to have had a hand in this.

And Tony knows exactly whom to ask.

“Bruce, you’re a genius,” he calls over his shoulder, already dashing off towards the garage. “J, I’m taking the R8.”

He’s distantly aware of Bruce calling his name and Nat telling him “I’ve got him” or something equally patronizing, but Tony could care less. All that matters is getting into the fastest car he can reach and catching Steve and Bucky on their way out of the restaurant.
Peter has no idea what to say, even if he could speak past the rush of fear clouding his mind, cause this is exactly what it looks like and Shaw obviously knows that.

He’s smiling like the cat that cornered the canary, only in that scenario Peter would be able to fly away.

“What a nosy little whore you are, son,” Shaw tsks, stepping forward. Peter inches further back. “I hope Tony won’t mourn you for long.”

Peter swallows, but stays quiet.

The only thing he can think of right now is the tiny icon in his dropbox folder, proving the photo of the file has been saved. No matter what happens to him tonight, someone is bound to find the evidence he collected, and Ben will go free.

Shaw takes another step towards the desk. Peter has backed up as far as he can. If this were a movie, there’d be a window behind him instead of solid wall, and he’d throw himself out of it.

But this is real life, and there’s no window. There’s enough distance between him and Shaw that he’s out of arm’s reach, so Shaw will have to choose a side to round the desk if he’s to actually catch him.

Peter’s fast. He can outrun him.

Suddenly, he feigns left. Shaw lunges to his right, but his reflexes are too slow, so Peter’s already shifting his weight and exploding into movement. He sprints past him, is out the door, turns left – And collides full-on with a guard.

She uses his momentum against him and next thing Peter knows, he’s slammed against the wall, arms twisted painfully behind his back, kept in place by expertly trained hands.

“I can see why Stark likes you,” Shaw says when he emerges into the hallway, shaking his head as though Peter’s a small child in need of a scolding. “Take him back inside. I need to inform our host we have a spy in our midst.”

The man sounds far too happy about the prospect. Peter has a comment on the tip of his tongue but the guard has twisted his arms in a different direction and is using the painful angle to walk him back into the study.

Once inside, she spins him around and kicks his legs so that his knees buckle. Pain flares when they connect with the hardwood floor and he would have lost his balance if she weren’t maintaining an iron grip on his arms.

That in turn puts even more strain on them, and Peter can’t help but cry out before he manages to balance out and find a position that’s manageable instead of excruciating.

Three minutes pass, maybe five, then he hears footsteps approaching.

Fabio stops in the open doorway. Behind him, Peter spots Shaw, still smirking, and Rousseau, an expression of disbelief on his face.

But it’s Fabio who commands his attention. The man’s relaxed posture is at odds with how all of Peter’s joints are locked into place. He takes a leisurely step forward, hands in his pockets.
“Sebastian tells me you were copying my files.” His eyes take in the very incriminating testimony to
that on the desk. “But I promised Mattys I would give you a chance to explain. What do you have to
say for yourself, cariño?”

Peter meets Rousseau’s eyes over Fabio’s shoulder.

“I… He’s lying,” he says, cause what choice does he have? “Mr. Shaw – he pulled me in here, he
came on to me, but I declined, and he didn’t like that but when I ran he had me restrained. I swear, I
don’t care about any files or any of your dealings,” Peter continues, outright pleading now and
addressing Rousseau for the most part with big, wet eyes. “Please, he’s jealous, this is his revenge.
You have to believe me.”

Peter’s chest is heaving with shallow, panicked breaths by the time he’s done, and Fabio’s face is
giving nothing away. He just regards Peter from above, while Shaw seems to be having trouble
containing his amusement and something like… bone-deep disappointment settles around
Rousseau’s shoulders.

Peter grows cold all over.

“I did not get to where I am by trusting every pretty face I meet, cariño,” Fabio finally says, as if he’s
talking about something as inconsequential as the weather. “Who’re you working for? Feds?
INTERPOL? I have to admit, you played your part well. Or is this personal? A private vendetta?”

Something in Peter’s expression must have slipped because Fabio’s lips twist in a humorless smile.

“Good. Always such a hassle when agents disappear. Tell me, cariño, who will miss you?”

‘… when you’re dead?’ goes unsaid.

The full severity of the situation hits Peter for the first time.

My family, my friends, he wants to say, but he’s read too much about what happens to the loved ones
of people who so much as disappoint this man. He doesn’t dare contemplate what would happen to
May if Fabio found out about her, or MJ. Or Tony.

“You’re allowed to answer. You were so vocal today.”

Peter shudders. Fabio chuckles, followed by Shaw like a twisted echo. Only Rousseau looks hurt.

Instead of replying, Peter tries to tear himself free of the guard’s grip – trying being the operative
word. He always read how adrenaline increases one’s strength, but apparently that doesn’t apply
when you’re terrified.

“Qué lindo,” Fabio says, then tilts his head. “Whatever will I do with you?”

His gaze flicks from Peter to the guard. A brief nod.

Pain explodes from his temple when his head connects with the ground.

Another hit –

Darkness.

Chapter End Notes
Chapter 20 will follow next Tuesday, February 12 :)

Tony notices the flaw in his plan when he asks JARVIS for a location.

“Messrs Barnes and Rogers are currently at work, sir.”

A glance at the clock confirms it’s much too early for them to be back in Brooklyn, and the end of their shift is still ways off.

“Suggestions, J?”

“Based on your previous experiences at No Bones, I believe the staff would accommodate your wish to speak to members of their team.”

“Yeah, and I’d be tipping my hand to Rumlow… and then probably smash it into his face. Nah, not gonna work. Oh – they got sprinklers? With the dining room on a separate loop? Perfect.”

Cause these things malfunction sometimes, right? Especially when you’re too cheap for regular checks, as Tony would bet half his fortune Rumlow is.

Three minutes later, CCTV from the main entrance shows the mass exodus of dripping wet restaurant guests, all disgruntled and definitely not willing to leave favorable Yelp reviews, so it’s only a matter of time before the staff filter out the back as well. No need for them to rake up wages while they wait for the electrician.

Damn, Tony would pay to see Rumlow’s face right now.

Just you wait, pal. I’m nowhere near done with you.

Yet all his visions of FBI agents eventually breaking down Rumlow’s door after there’s actual, probable cause to arrest the dirtbag aren’t enough to distract him from his worry about Peter. Tony can’t remember ever being this… this afraid for anyone or anything, and it would be paralyzing if he stopped long enough to breathe.

As is, he parks his R8 right in front of Barnes and Rogers’ van just as they emerge from the staff entrance, rolls down his window and cuts off any complaints they might have about his car obstructing their vehicle.

“Get in. Now.”

“Mr. Stark? What—”

“No time for chit-chat, Rogers,” Tony interrupts and opens the back door with the push of a button to underscore the urgency in his tone. “Get in. I’ll explain once we’re somewhere more private.”
Barnes and Rogers do the couple-y thing where they have an entire conversation in the span of a look, but it works out in Tony’s favor cause they slide into the back seat and he speeds out of there before they even have a chance to fasten their seat belts.

“What’s wrong?”

Of course Steve picks up on his air of concern.

“Was that you? The sprinklers?”

And of course Bucky is suspicious.

“I gotta talk to you. It couldn’t wait.”

“Is this about Parker? Did you do something to him?”

“Yes, and of course not. Now shut up and let me drive, Barnes.”

He catches another exchange of glances in the mirror but they do as told and don’t utter another word until he lets them out of the R8. His garage is as secure as any other place in the Tower, so he cuts right to the chase.

“Peter’s not sick. He’s in the Hamptons and lying about it. I gotta know all you can tell me about what Rumlow’s up to on the side and how any of that could explain why Peter’s currently at a mansion in Water Mill.”

Steve just stares. Bucky crosses his arms over his chest.

“And what makes you think we got anything to tell you?”

“Cause I saw your rap sheet, Barnes. First roughing it, then an address in a cozy part of Brooklyn, and a few arrests for assault. Jail time. And now you’re sticking with Rumlow over the shot of a lifetime. Cut the bullshit and talk.”

“You got no right –”

“I mean it, Barnes –”

“Enough!” Steve’s tone is commanding enough to get both Tony and Barnes to shut up. “What’s wrong with Peter?”

Tony wants to point out that he already covered this, but the aggressive muscle in Steve’s jaw makes him breeze through more detailed explanations – safe the text he found – until they’re both caught up.

“So are we finally in agreement that you better start talking before I fucking make you?”

“I’d like to see you try,” Bucky mumbles, but a stern look from Steve makes him stop.

“Look,” Tony tries again. “I just wanna make sure he’s safe.”

“Shoulda thought of that before he ran off to the Hamptons.”

“Buck –”

“No, Steve, he’s acting all sanctimonious and shit but I betcha he ain’t telling us the full story. And
how the hell can you just track his phone?"

Barnes is all up in Tony’s face, and damn, he’s one scary son of a bitch when he sets his mind to it. But Tony’s met worse.

“Take a number and get in line, pal. Tracking him was a last resort and I don’t regret it cause this is the only lead I got, so what the hell is Rumlow’s connection to the Hamptons?”

Barnes continues to glare at him. It’s Steve who replies – whatever he knows is clearly weighing heavily on him.

“Rumlow sometimes caters events there. Exclusive ones, especially in summer. He never pulls restaurant staff for them except for meal prep. Well... almost never.”

“You gotta prove yourself if you wanna get on the team, if you know what I mean,” Bucky adds, innuendo heavy in his voice.

Tony holds his gaze. “Do you?”

“I got my suspicions. Guess you just confirmed them.”

Tony turns away and massages the bridge of his nose. He didn’t want to share the text he found, but he’s starting to think honesty is gonna get him what he needs a lot faster.

He pulls out his phone and throws up a projection of the message, the call info, and a brief dossier about Mattys Rousseau, then watches their reactions.

Steve obviously didn’t believe Bucky’s theories, yet in light of the evidence has no choice but to concede the point.

Bucky, meanwhile, has zeroed in on Rousseau’s file.

“Beaulieu Logistics,” he reads. “That’s... That’s bad.”

Judging by how quickly the color has drained from his face, ‘bad’ might be an understatement.

Tony arches a prompting brow at him. Bucky’s eyes dart from him to the file, to Steve, where they linger for a second before flicking back to Tony with new resolve.

“From what I’ve heard, Beaulieu Logistics is one of the corporations the Ortiz cartel’s been using to smuggle their products into Canada. Rumlow’s real chummy with them, from way back in the day when he was still more involved in the trade. If this Rousseau’s in town, I bet it’s cause he got business with the cartel. You don’t do these deals over Zoom.”

Tony needs a moment for it to sink in. When it does, it’s with a cold fist closing around his heart.

“You’re telling me that Peter – the Peter we all know, my boyfriend, that Peter – that he lied to me so he could spend quality time with a bunch of drug dealers?”

“They’re more than that, Stark. Way more.”

If he thinks Barnes had gone pale before, it’s nothing compared to the genuine fear in his eyes.

“Like right outta the movies. Drugs, arms, extortion. Only Rumlow’s exempt from protection fees cause he helped them get where they are, after Shaw decided to take his power play public.”
“Protection fees?”

“Yeah, like when you pay a –”

“I know what it means, Barnes, I was thinking,” Tony snaps, already pulling up the photos that haven’t been on his mind since Monday.

The ones Dietz found.

He pushes the phone under Barnes’ nose. “That their mark? Of Oriz, whatever?”

“Ortiz,” Bucky corrects but it’s Steve’s reaction that’s more interesting cause he visibly flinches. Tony files it away for later, though, much much later, cause Bucky’s nodding and suddenly all the bits and pieces slot together with stomach-churning certainty.

No, he can’t prove it beyond the shadow of a doubt but give him an hour and he’ll have all the evidence to back up what he already knows deep in his bones.

His phone connects with the wall across the garage at the worst possible angle and shatters into pieces from the force of his throw.

That stupid kid. That stupid, self-righteous kid.

He’s tracking down the person who framed his uncle.

*

Tony doesn’t remember how he got into the elevator, but he could care less about leaving Barnes and Rogers alone in the garage.

The only thing on his mind is Peter, and the danger he’s in, and what the hell was the kid thinking?

He’s out the doors before they’ve even fully opened, tearing down the hallway of R&D to where he knows security keeps their backup firearms alongside Stark Industries’ most coveted prototypes. At least, ever since Happy pointed out how easy it would be for a disgruntled employee to go on a rampage with the weapons under regular lock and key.

A rampage isn’t exactly Tony’s plan, but it’s not like he has much of one beyond getting Peter the hell out of there regardless of what it takes.

“Sir, I must advise you to reconsider your actions,” JARVIS says when Tony punches his executive override code in the lock panel of the armory.

He doesn’t respond, except by hitting ‘Enter’.

The lock clicks open and he’s in. It’s been a while since he handled a gun, but he used to be good at it. No child of Howard Stark, Merchant of Death, would ever make it past the age of ten without knowing how to fire his own products, even if said child would eventually turn his back on the weapons trade.

He grabs what seems most useful, lightweight handguns and holsters and ammunition, then rushes back to the elevator – which won’t respond.

“J…”

“I apologize, sir, but the elevator is otherwise engaged.”
Fine, he can take the stairs.

He makes it ten stories down before someone intercepts him.

“Stark, JARVIS said you – fuck, I thought he was joking.”

Tony skitters to a stop on top of the flight of stairs to find none other than Erik Lehnsherr gaping up at him. Betrayed by his own AI, wonderful.

“Don’t you ever go home?” he says, calculating his chances of making it past Lehnsherr and down to the garage. It’s not looking good.

“What’s going on?”

“None of your business.”

“You’re stealing guns from security, Stark, I’m damn well making it my business.”

“Technically, I pay for the guns –”

“Tony!”

Great, now Bruce is here, too. Another two or three flights down, by the sound of it.

“JARVIS is so getting donated to MIT,” he grumbles, then takes off in a sprint, back where he came from, onto the nearest floor and down the hallway cause thank fuck there’s more than one staircase in his Tower.

He almost makes it there, too.

He forgot how well Natasha knows him.

She tackles him from the side and proceeds to disarm him before he can so much as blink. His right hand closes on air where the gun used to be and a pinch of his shoulder makes him drop the ankle holster and bag of ammunition, which Nat kicks as far away from him as she can.

“Can I let you go, or are you gonna do something stupid, boss?” she asks, not even out of breath, the minx.

By the time he’s straightened his T-shirt and dusted off his dignity, Bruce and Erik have caught up with him, both various degrees of angry, yet before Bruce can unleash the full force of his Stare Of Disappointment, there’s a ding and everyone turns to where a baffled Steve and Bucky step off the elevator.

“Your robot butler told us to join you,” Bucky says, taking in the scene with a glance. “And that’s not creepy at all.”

Steve crosses his arms and damn, that guy has a mighty glare.

“It’s an artificial intelligence, Barnes,” Tony says, “one that’s gonna be decommissioned, you hear that, buddy?”

“I was acting in accordance with the Malibu Protocol, sir.”

“Fuck you, J. That’s for when I decide to play with lasers again after one too many glasses of champagne, not when I’m off to rescue my boyfriend!”
Barnes snorts. “Ha, you were gonna take on the Ortiz cartel? Yeah, nope, I’m with the guy in the ceiling. You’re outta your mind.”

“Ortiz?” Erik interrupts, anger suddenly turning into something like shock. “What the hell did you do to get on their radar, Stark?”

“I didn’t do anything – Peter’s with them, in the Hamptons, and I was gonna go and get him out until my own creation turned against me.”

What follows is a lot of shouting and even more explaining until everyone present is on the same page, but rather than agree with him and letting him drive off to the East, Erik has the gall to round on Tony.

“Rumlow?” he hisses. “Brock Rumlow?”

“Yeah, why the –”

“He used to work for Shaw,” Erik says, and that shuts Tony right up. “High up, too. Even did time for him, never snitched. He’s dangerous.”

Tony stares at him. “Why the fuck didn’t you mention that when I asked you about Shaw!”

“I did, for fuck’s sake, Stark, but to the FBI when they showed me his picture! God knows what you’d have done if I’d told you,” he adds, with a glance to the weapons on the floor.

“Gotten Peter outta there immediately, for one,” Tony snaps. “You ever stopped to think how a kid like him got a start in selling himself?”

That draws Erik up short. “You mean...”

“Rumlow.”

“I didn’t know,” Erik grits out. “You kept that to yourself.”

“Whatever.” Tony throws up his hands, then takes a deep breath that fails to have a calming effect on the anger burning in his chest because all this talking is wasting time they don’t have. “Now all of you get the hell outta my way or you’ll regret it.”

“Oh yeah, and what’re you gonna do?” Bucky asks. “Drive down there and just pull him out? These guys are gonna shoot you on sight and make Parker watch!”

“Is that what they did to you?” Tony turns from Bucky to Steve cause lashing out’s the only thing he can do right now. “Beat the shit outta Barnes in front of you? That why you rolled over like a coward?”

“I did what I had to protect my partner –” Steve begins, but Tony doesn’t let him finish.

“Which is exactly what I’m trying to do!”

“No,” Bruce cuts in, “you’re reacting. If you stopped for a moment and actually thought this through, you’d see how crazy this is! We need to inform the authorities, Tony, and we need to do it now. Please. Think. For Peter’s sake.”

Shit.

Tony blinks. Much as he hates to admit it, but... Bruce is right, isn’t he? There’s no way he’d have
succeeded, one man against who knows how many armed thugs. That’s exactly what Peter did, and look where it got him.

Tony’s gotta be smarter than that. Or all hope is lost.

There’s a collective exhale when the immediacy bleeds from Tony’s shoulders.


Bruce gives him a small but proud smile.

Tony takes a deep breath. Time to call Coulson. And figure out how Peter got his hands on the evidence Dietz found to substantiate Tony’s theory.

*

As it turns out, the kid never did. Instead, the same source Peter’s PI used sold the pics to Dietz when they caught whiff of him snooping around.

Tony’s almost impressed by the spirit of entrepreneurship… But mostly he doesn’t care, cause it’s two and a half hours later, he’s got everything in one place, neatly packaged and presented with the help of JARVIS’ holography software, projected into the air above the coffee table in their crisis center – aka his penthouse suite – and Agent Coulson still doesn’t look convinced.

Christ, there’s even a clear timeline of events, thanks to that PI Acacia who proved rather helpful once she realized that it was her information that inspired Peter to cosplay Sherlock Holmes. What more can the guy want?

“A version of this where Parker’s location wasn’t obtained by illegal means would be a great start,” Coulson says, in that calm tone of his that make Tony question whether the agent is human in the first place.

“You’re not meant to broadcast that, jeez, how do you get anything done down at the Bureau?”

That earns him a flat look. “Mr. Stark, as the one to bring Mr. Rumlow to my attention, I would assume it’s in your best interest to insist on running an airtight case. I won’t deny it’s impressive that you’re serving us a major player in the international drug trade on a silver platter, but I need this to hold up in court, so we’re doing this by the book.”

That would require patience that Tony doesn’t have, however, and he’s about to give Coulson a piece of his mind when Acacia cuts in.

“Peter’s a smart kid. He knows we’ll need evidence that holds up in court if he wants to clear his uncle’s name. Maybe he’s already found something – and recorded it.”

Tony thinks he gets where the PI is going with this. “You’re saying he took pictures.”

“I’m hoping he took pictures… and backed them up.”

“And as his boyfriend it’s reasonable to assume I have access to his files!” Tony concludes, his fingers already back on the keyboard of the computer he had Bruce bring up from the workshop.

Bruce, along with Natasha, Erik, Steve and Bucky are grouped around the kitchen island, drinking tea and generally being as unobtrusive as possible. Now Tony can feel them move closer behind his back, and Coulson enters his field of vision to his right.
With the FBI literally watching over his shoulder, he can’t rely on JARVIS, which is the only reason it takes him a full four minutes to access all of Peter’s cloud data bases.

“Alright, let’s see,” he murmurs as he clicks through folders. “StarkCloud’s only got files, Drive too, what about – bingo.”

Peter must have cleared out his entire Dropbox before meeting up with Rousseau, since the only thing in it are images and videos. The oldest are from the night before, showing a shady hotel of some kind, but there’s only a handful. The majority were taken inside a luxurious residence, the type of mansion peppered along the coastline of the Hamptons.

“Which is exactly where the geotag says the picture was taken! Would you look at that,” Tony points out with faux surprise. “Now can we finally get a SWAT team and storm the place?”

Coulson’s poker face is still very much active. “In theory, yes.”

“So let’s do that!”

“I still need to present this to a judge, and it will take a moment to find one in the middle of the night to sign off on a search warrant of this magnitude, not to mention the time it’ll take to mobilize resources –”

“Judge, you need a judge?” Tony says, pacing again and dimly aware that his voice is verging on hysterical. “Why didn’t you lead with that!”

“Mr. Stark –”

“I got the DA on speed-dial, for fuck’s sake – did you really think getting a warrant’s gonna be a problem? Jeezus.”

He’s already pulling up his contacts. He needs to keep pushing, needs to do everything he can to get Peter out of there to make sure they’ll get to him – before something happens that is beyond Tony’s power to undo.

“Mr. Stark,” Acacia interrupts.

Tony pauses with his thumb over the ‘call’ button and follows her gaze to the computer screen where she sat down after he started pacing.

She’s enlarged one of the images in Peter’s Dropbox. It looks like a page out of a personnel file, but filled with handwritten notes. Acacia zooms in on a couple of lines.

Peter found it. The kid got what he was looking for.

Then why isn’t he on his way back already?

“Timecode says it was uploaded seventeen minutes ago,” Acacia says, as if reading his thoughts.

Suddenly, a notification pops up in the middle of the screen.

**PHONE SIGNAL LOST**

“What?!” Tony snaps, shoving Acacia away from the keyboard.

*Cause: inconclusive*
Tony thought he knew fear, that he looked it in the eye and conquered it in a cave in Afghanistan, but today he realizes that fear has nothing on the cold dread that settles in the pit of his stomach like a black hole.

“We gotta go,” he says. His voice sounds like it’s miles away. “I’ll call from the road. Coulson, come on.”

He grabs the nearest StarkPad, trusting JARVIS to upload all the evidence they have before they need to present it, and positively flies out of the penthouse, praying to whatever entity is listening that they won’t be too late.

*

Peter can’t have been out for long because the cut above his right eye is still bleeding.

Yet any relief he feels about being alive and dressed evaporates quickly once he realizes he’s handcuffed to the headboard of a bed, which is when a different kind of fear kicks in.

He knows this bed. It’s the one in the master bedroom. The one where…

Peter shakes his head, ignoring the phantom pain flaring up above his left hip, or the ghost of touches he’s managed so well to suppress these past twenty-four hours.

When his mind clears, more of the present filters in. He can hear voices outside – Rousseau and Fabio, he thinks, engaged in a heated discussion, maybe arguing about what will happen to him.

Peter bucks against his restraints, yet to no avail. There’s no give from the cuffs. Not even breaking his thumb would enable him to wriggle out of them. His only chance is picking the lock, if he can get his hands on the right tools... somehow.

There’s a lamp on the bedside table; a sleek construction of metal and fabric that fits into the overall style of the mansion. Maybe he can –

The voices stop abruptly. Fabio enters a moment later, his expression neutral. Peter would have preferred open hostility, but the times he gets what he wants are decidedly over.

The mattress dips when Fabio sits down, his body angled towards Peter.

“You’ve broken my best friend’s heart, cariño. Mattys is devastated. He thought you two had something special.”

Peter can’t tell if Fabio’s serious or merely mocking him, but the lighter he takes out of the nightstand drawer makes him forget the question. It’s the same one Spencer used, two months ago, to heat his fraternity ring which he pushed into Peter’s skin.

The burn mark above his hip bone hasn’t faded yet. Apparently Fabio wants to ensure it never does.

Peter tries to muffle his scream and even succeeds, even if the pain makes his vision go white around the edges. It’s the same ring – he knows for sure when Fabio murmurs, “Spencer sends his regards,” before doing it all over again.

Fabio returns the ring to the chain around his neck when he’s satisfied. He doesn’t pull Peter’s henley down, for which he thinks he should be grateful cause the fabric would chafe like hell. At least his jeans sit low enough that Fabio didn’t need to open them.
Instead of leaving, however, Fabio places a hand on Peter’s exposed stomach, thumb caressing the skin just underneath his ribcage.

“I paid for the weekend, cariño. And I always get what I paid for.”

There is no doubt in his voice, no anger. Just cold certainty and an edge of something dark.

Peter suddenly finds it very hard to breathe.

A knock on the door breaks the moment. Fabio rises, crosses the space. He accepts a small, transparent bag.

“Do you know what this is?” he asks, still incredibly calm.

Peter forces himself to look at the contents… and feels the last of his blood drain from his face.

It’s his phone – or what’s left of it after methodically smashing it to pieces.

“Can you imagine what this did to the files on your phone? Of course you can. You’re quite intelligent, no?”

I backed them up, I saw the icon, I backed them up, I got the evidence, Peter repeats inside his head like a mantra, cause if he even allows the possibility that this could all have been for nothing… No. He checked. Ben will go free, no matter what happens to him.

Fabio’s smiling now. Peter used to think Spencer is the only one of them who gets off on fear, but he’s not so sure anymore.

“I have guests to attend to,” Fabio says placing the transparent bag on the nightstand as if to taunt Peter. “But I will be back, cariño.”

He leans closer, drags his fingers along Peter’s throat, right down to his clavicle. Peter clamps down on his body’s impulse to shiver cause he won’t give Fabio the satisfaction of seeing him tremble. He won’t.

Fabio’s smile widens. Bends forward, until Peter can feel his breath against his ear, then traces the path his fingers forged with his tongue.

It takes every ounce of willpower Peter has to keep still, but he manages, even when he feels Fabio chuckling against his throat.

*

There’s only so long one can spend in a state of existential panic, Peter discovers, and once his pulse stabilizes after Fabio leaves and he’s able to think more clearly, he takes stock of his situation.

Police-grade handcuffs. Probably a guard outside the room. The night sky visible through the balcony door. Nothing in his vicinity except for the lamp and –

The destroyed phone.

A heap of wires and metal. Peter has to stifle a gasp when he realizes he’s actually got a fighting chance.

Twisting his body in order to grab the plastic bag between his feet aggravates both the burn mark and his head wound to no end, but he forces himself to push through the pain until he’s got the bag trapped between his soles.
Opening the zipper with his toes takes longer than Peter accounted for, yet once it’s done he wastes no time contorting himself again. All he needs is two wires or one flat piece of metal to circumvent the locking mechanism, and if he’s really careful, such a tool might actually fall into his open palms if he shakes the bag carefully enough.

He loses track of time. The world narrows down to the feeling of electronic debris between his fingers and the craning of his neck to check if the bits are long enough.

When the actuator connects with his skin, he almost drops it in his excitement.

The flat piece of metal is actually an engine of sorts, used to generate tactile experiences for the user, and it’s flat enough that Peter thinks he can use it as a shim. It’s thin as a credit card but narrow enough to fit –

No, it’s not.

*Fuck.*

Peter collapses back onto the mattress, frustration and despair making tears well up in his eyes.

He feels a sob rise in his chest, resignation threaten to consume him from within, but when his foot knocks against the still half-full bag, the spark of hope is enough to squash his desperation, at least for a little while longer.

The small plate that eventually spells his salvation might have been part of the motherboard or a broken-off component of the speaker system, or even part of the case that shattered into the perfect width to still fit underneath the teeth of the handcuff – Peter will never know cause the second the first cuff loosens a new surge of adrenaline floods his system and he doesn’t take the time for a closer look.

Which is a good thing since the noise he’s been making has drawn the attention of the guard outside.

The guy is tall and broad, a wall of muscle, strong enough to snap Peter like a twig, but the bulk makes him slow as he reaches for his gun.

Peter is at the balcony door a moment later.

He remembers Fabio and Spencer leaning on the railing in the morning sun, shoulder to shoulder, gazing down into the pool below. Back then, he wondered if it would be possible to dive into the water from up there, even went so far as to calculate the variables in his head.

Now he’s gonna find out. He leaps, head-first, over the railing just as he hears the guard call, “Oy!”

There’s a loud *BANG*, but all Peter can focus on is keeping his angle of impact flat cause the water’s only twelve feet deep –

He knows he did it when his arms slip beneath the surface. The force of collision on his wounds hurts but there’s too much adrenaline in his system for it to disrupt his dive – which is fortunate cause he misses the ground by inches. A split-second later, he manages to get his feet under him to kick off, and then he’s gulping in air again.

He’s dimly aware of shouting from the mansion as the world grows fuzzy for a second, maybe two, then he spots the edge of the pool, the dark stone a stark contrast to the underwater lights underneath the night sky. He heaves his body out of the water despite the renewed pain from the burn wound, irritated by the chloride and not diminishing once he’s out cause all his clothes are soaked through.
The noise grows to confusing levels but Peter has no time to wonder why cause someone’s seen him and is taking off towards him in a run.

He scrambles to his feet, stumbles a few steps before finding his balance and is ready to break into a sprint when a hand at the back of his soaked henley topples him again.

Reflexes he thought long-lost take over and he breaks his fall, but the damage is done and his pursuer is right behind him. He gets up to what sounds like gunshots and the blades of a chopper, though surely he’s imagining things –

Arms close around his waist and he hits the ground, tries to escape but can’t get out from under the other person, kicks and squirms and struggles until his elbow connects with a face, but the string of vulgar Spanish that follows comes in a familiar voice –

*Of course* it’s Fabio who’s gotten between him and freedom.

Peter crawls but Fabio’s quicker, pulling him back by the belt and straddling him after Peter twisted around and aimed a knock-out punch that never lands. Then he paws at the hands closing around his throat, at arms and shoulders and sides cause this face isn’t going to be the last thing he sees, Peter won’t let that happened, no, he doesn’t want to die –

But there’s the bright light he’s heard people talk about, blinding and white even when he squeezes his eyes shut and –

*BANG*

– suddenly the weight is off him and air fills his lungs and he’s coughing and confused and the light is still there even after his blood becomes more oxygenated.

Since as it turns out, there is, in fact, a helicopter shining its light right at a spot behind him where two people in black gear with big letters on their backs are restraining a struggling Fabio.

Someone kneels down next to Peter, making him flinch – but it’s an agent, weapon lowered and face calm.

“Peter Parker?” the man asks, and Peter nods. “I’m Agent Coulson. Please stay down, you’ve been shot. Medical assistance is coming.”

He attempts to sit up cause what the hell is the guy talking about, he’d have noticed if he’d been shot… though as soon as he lifts his torso the dizziness is back and yeah, no, staying down is good.

He watches with a sense of relief as Fabio is being dragged away in handcuffs while the man who introduced himself as Agent Coulson applies pressure to his shoulder.

It would have been the perfect end to the entire ordeal if it weren’t for one thought: How is he supposed to explain any of this to Tony?

Chapter End Notes

*Special thanks* to merlenhiver for going above and beyond the duties of her position as beta and ensuring this chapter adheres to real-world physics.
Chapter 21 should follow soon. Hopefully next Tuesday!
twenty-one

Chapter Notes

I'm so humbled by the response to the last few chapters, guys!!! Here is the new one, only one day later as intended :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony lets his head fall back against the red brick wall. The thump is loud in the quiet of the twilight.

In the City, he never would have found a quiet bench just round the corner of the ER entrance of a hospital, but then again, small facilities in Southampton are nothing like the perpetually busy ERs in midtown. Here, he can even appreciate the sunrise.

Or he could, if he were able to focus on it.

The sound of approaching footsteps doesn’t make him look up. He’s much too tired for self-preservation, which is why Clint came to take over for Nat an hour ago. If the newcomer has it out for Tony, he’s welcome to try.

“I brought coffee.”

Coulson. He does have it out for him, but not in any way Clint can help with, Tony thinks. It’s a weak joke, but he chuckles anyway.

“I’m happy to drink it myself if you don’t want it, Mr. Stark.”

At last, he turns his head. Somehow, Coulson still looks as put-together as he always does. You’d think that after spearheading a high-profile raid and running point in the aftermath, his shirt would have the decency to wrinkle.

“Vending machine or outside source?”

“Bakery around the corner. Should be decent.”

“This a bribe to soften the blow?” Tony asks, but he accepts the paper cup anyway. It smells a hell of a lot better than what he found in the waiting room, that’s for sure.

“No. Our deal holds.” Coulson pauses, probably for effect. “If you and Mr. Parker maintain your end of the bargain.”

“We will.”

“I doubt you can read Mr. Parker’s mind from all the way out here. Or have they let you in to see him since I left?”

“I’m not allowed to see him,” Tony points out, which Coulson knows perfectly well, cause he’s the sonofabitch who instituted the ban on anyone getting to Peter before the FBI has had a chance to question him.
Not that Peter’s up for visitors at the moment. Last he heard – courtesy of Natasha – was that they’re still tending to him.

Coulson’s carefully blank expression mellows into something like empathy at Tony’s glare.

“If he’s as smart as you say he is, he won’t turn down immunity. He’ll cooperate.”

He better. Tony didn’t risk his good standing with the DA only for Peter to refuse, out of whatever self-sacrificing notion his mind alone could come up with. Tony’s still amazed how, in all the chaos and excitement of the night, he remembered that the deal he made with Coulson before only pertains to anything directly related to Rumlow. Since prostitution is illegal in New York, Peter would implicate himself if he testified against this Rousseau guy or Fabio Ortiz.

Hence, immunity.

Tony takes a sip from the coffee. It’s actually quite good.

“What about the other part of our deal?” Tony wonders, and he swears Coulson had to abort an eye roll just now.

“Arresting Rumlow in the middle of brunch was never a condition I agreed to, Mr. Stark.”

“You’re no fun.”

“Which is why I am not telling you that Mr. Barnes’ testimony enabled me to dispatch a handful of my men to apprehend Mr. Rumlow at his Upper West Side apartment, or that they should reach their destination within the next forty-five minutes.”

There’s a twinkle in Coulson’s eye and Tony feels like smiling for the first time in the past twenty-four hours. Guess there’s gonna be footage of Rumlow’s arrest after all, even though a public arrest during brunch service at the No Bones would have been preferable. But yeah, flight risk, yada yada yada… Tony gets it.

He waits until Coulson has rounded the corner before he takes out his phone to call Acacia. She’s bound to be awake and he’s been wanting to give her a shot anyway, cause apparently she did all the work in finding the Ortiz IT-guy responsible for scrubbing the CCTV footage and making him give out the originals. All Dietz did was fall for the same IT-guy, who realized another PI was snooping around and proceeded to capitalize on Dietz’ interest.

Coverage arranged, Tony makes his way back inside the waiting room. Maybe this time around he’ll find someone bribable who’ll give him an update on Peter’s condition.

Everyone assured him that the kid’s gonna be fine, from Coulson to the first ER nurse to Natasha to Bruce before he left to get some sleep, and while Tony knows in theory that ‘minor GSW to the shoulder’ is nowhere near life-threatening, he can’t unsee the copious amounts of blood. Or the way that Ortiz guy’s hands closed around Peter’s throat, or how the kid’s movements grew sluggish before the shot rang out.

He doesn’t regret hacking the FBI’s feeds during the raid. Yes, the images will haunt him for the rest of his life, but he’d rather know than be in the dark about this, too. His imagination is going haywire enough as it is, since Peter spent about thirty hours with Rousseau and there’s no way of knowing what happened unless Peter tells him.

Which he probably won’t. Tony’s under no delusion anymore about how little Peter trusts him.
Someone rushes past him in loud heels and pulls him back into the present. The person almost collides with the reception desk in her hurry.

“Please, I’m looking for my nephew, they told me he was here,” the woman says, out of breath and frantic, and Tony blinks at who can only be May Parker.

Tall, wry, exhaustion written in every line of her body, hair still mussed from sleep and pushing a pair of glasses up her nose as she shows the nurse her ID.

Right, Coulson mentioned he’d called her.

“I’m afraid I can’t take you to him right now,” the nurse – Kenji, according to the name tag – says, probably aiming for calm and reassuring, but the effect falls flat.

“No, you can and you will. It’s my right –”

“He’s being questioned at the moment,” Kenji barges on, and part of Tony sags in relief, cause that means Peter’s out of the woods, “so I’m afraid you’ll have to wait, Mrs. Parker.”

“Questioned? Why? What happened?”

“I don’t have that information.”

“But he’s okay? Peter’s okay?”

“I’ll see if I can find a doctor.”

Once Kenji has left, May Parker tries to keep still but continues to fidget at the counter while Tony pulls the hoodie of his jacket over his head and pretends to be just another relative waiting for an update. There’s barely ten people around the room, all in various stages of over-tired zombification. Tony fits right in.

His plan works.

The doc who comes out says she tended to Peter in the OR and is sincere in her positive outlook. Apparently the amount of blood was merely due to tissue damage, Tony learns, and the bullet missed the bones of Peter’s upper right arm entirely. The concussion isn’t too severe and they’re optimistic that with skin grafts, the scarring from the burn wound will be kept to a minimum.

She goes on, but Tony stopped listening after ‘burn wound’.

He asked the kid, once, when he noticed the scar above his hip.

“Accident at the restaurant,” was all Peter said, his self-deprecating smile not reaching his eyes, and Tony decided not to push.

He should have. He should have done so much.

When he surfaces from his latest deep-dive into what-if land, May Parker is fumbling with a pack of cigarettes on her way outside.

It’s been years since Tony smoked, but right now, he can’t think of a single reason why he stopped.

“Care to share?” he asks before May has a chance to put the pack back into her purse, and pulls back his hoodie.
She does the thing where people look up without actively seeing the other person and holds out the cigarettes, then does a double-take when her eyes focus on his features.

“You’re Tony Stark.”

He nods, fishing the lighter out of the pack along with a cig and hopes May doesn’t notice how much his hands are shaking as he lights up.

“You’re here for Peter,” she says, more to herself than to him, Tony thinks. “Were you with him? Do you know what happened? They wouldn’t…” May takes a deep breath, and swallows back tears.

Even just a week ago, Tony would have told her everything. He’d have thrown the fact that her ward’s been selling himself to cover her bills back in her face, would have cut her to the bone with words and accusations, would have felt great about swooping in and delivering her and the kid from all financial woes.

Yet that was before Tony learned how talented Peter is at keeping secrets. He can’t blame May Parker for shortcomings he possesses himself.

He’s also not entitled to share the truth with her.

“I don’t have all the details,” he says.

“But you know something.”

“And it’s not my story to tell.”

Anger flashes across her face. “Don’t patronize me, Mr. Stark –”

“I’m not. Peter has a right to privacy –” oh, yeah, Tony sees the irony, but there’s a difference between hacking his phone to save his life and divulging the extent of his investigative endeavors that even Tony is aware of – “and he’s gonna tell you himself, once he’s ready.”

“Why would he… Did he – what did he do?”

Damn, perceptiveness apparently runs in the family. Tony cards a hand through his hair for what must be the fiftieth time in the past twelve hours. His stylist would weep should any footage of this night ever see the light of day.

“I really can’t tell you, Mrs. Parker,” he says eventually.

She grows quiet for a moment, yet never takes her eyes off him. Tony can positively hear the wheels turning in her head and her next question confirms he was right to dread the results.

“It wasn’t from tips, was it? He said he made it all at the restaurant, but I always… and now this…I…”

Tony swallows. May moves to take a drag from the cigarette but flicks it towards the ashtray with a huff when she realizes it’s gone out. Then she just stands there, forlorn and confused, and Tony decides there’s at least one thing he can do.

“Mrs. Parker,” he says, “it’s safe to say that Peter will be out of a job after this weekend –”

She looks ready to interrupt, but Tony barges on.

“– which you didn’t hear from me, okay, but thing is, he won’t be able to pitch in as much as he used
to, and in case he’s gonna refuse me again, I’m gonna make this offer to you, too: I can help. At least, you know, let me cover legal fees. I got an entire department full of lawyers, I know how freaking high their billables get.”

May’s brow furrows. “I… thank you. But, well, there’s no need. Our lawyer has taken us on pro bono.”

“That’s what he told you?”

It’s out before Tony’s brain catches up with his mouth.

*Shit.*

“Was he lying? Have you been paying them all along?”

“No, that’s is the entire point of this conversation!” Tony says, and yeah, what happened to his resolution to keep mum about this? “I offered, but Peter refused, so now I’m offering this to you. Legal fees, anything you need. I got the means.”

“Why?”

Tony shrugs, but he’s unable to school his expression in time. He’s probably wearing his heart on his sleeve right now.

Needless to say, May sees right through him. “You really care about him.”

In the silence that follows, he remembers the cigarette still in his hand. With a sigh, he walks over to the ashtray and puts it out, then turns towards May with a tentative smile.

“I think we got off on the wrong foot. How about I treat you to breakfast? There’s supposed to be a decent bakery around the corner, and knowing the guy interviewing Peter, it’s gonna take a while.”

He can see her indecision, but the prospect of waiting around for who-knows how much longer apparently trumps that of awkward silences over pastries and coffee, cause a moment later she’s extinguishing her cigarette as well and letting him lead the way.

*

Peter talks until his throat hurts.

Agent Coulson offers to pause but Peter shakes his head, cause if he doesn’t get it out now, he’ll never find it in himself to put his experiences into words.

Besides, talking helps distract him from the way the gauze on his shoulder has started to itch, or from the persistent pressure of the bandages above his hip.

Worst of all, however, is the smell. No matter how old he gets, the sharp scent of a hospital will always transport him back to the day his parents died and all the emotions that entailed.

He mentions every detail he remembers, every name he caught, every deal he witnessed, both in the Hamptons and in Brooklyn. And when Coulson asks about Rumlow, Peter keeps going, sketching a rough picture of underhanded compliments and unspoken threats, but never diminishing his own role in everything.

Not that it matters.
“Mr. Stark secured immunity for both of you, Mr. Parker.”

Coulson’s words still echo in his head.

It’s surreal. Peter has no idea how he’s feeling about the fact that even in the midst of tracking him down and coordinating with the FBI, Tony did this for him. From the way Agent Coulson told it, Tony even seems to have shouted at the DA.

“Mr. Parker?”

Peter blinks. “Sorry, sir. Could you repeat the question?”

Coulson smiles, pocketing his audio recorder. “I was wondering if you’d like some rest. I assume that by now, your aunt has arrived, and I know for a fact that Mr. Stark has been loitering outside since shortly after you were admitted.”

May. Tony.

Oh god.

“Mr. Parker?”

“I – no, I’m fine, sorry, I…”

Peter digs his fingers into his thighs but he barely feels it through the haze of pain killers. At least his eyes remain dry when he squeezes them shut this time. Coulson has seen him cry enough.

“You’ve been through a lot tonight, Mr. Parker,” the Agent says, his voice still unwaveringly calm. Peter doubts there’s anything in this world that could make this man lose his nerve. “No one expects you to be fine. And if you need some privacy before the nurses allow in your aunt, I can get you as much time as you require.”

Peter is tempted, oh so tempted. It would be easy to sink back into the mattress and let sleep claim him… but that would only delay the inevitable, wouldn’t it?

“Very well,” Coulson says after Peter shakes his head, and it’s not even ten minutes later that Aunt May tentatively opens the door to his room.

“Oh, sweetie.”

Her eyes are wet, her hand shaking when she raises it to her mouth.

“Hey, Aunt May,” he manages, but his voice breaks cause shit, for a moment he thought he’d never see her again and now she’s here, putting her arms around him carefully, and he buries his face in the fabric of her T-shirt.

Any other day he’d be embarrassed by how tightly he’s clinging to her, or by how he clutches even tighter when he feels her kiss the crown of his head. Today he just holds on and lets the lingering scent of her detergent chase away the memories of days long past.

Unfortunately, it can’t last forever.

When May pulls back to meet his eyes, he can see the questions written all over her face.

Peter’s throat closes up, but it’s no use. She’ll figure out what he went to the Hamptons to do soon enough cause Coulson said they found Peter’s photos and that the FBI seized all of Fabio’s files, and
with a bit of extra luck the IT-guy who sold the original footage to Acacia will flip on the cartel and cooperate…

So yeah, May will learn about his actions sooner rather than later. This way, he at least controls the narrative.

In the version he tells her, he was ‘providing companionship’ to poker players, nothing more than intelligent conversation and attention, which is when he noticed the tattoos. He glosses over just how intimately he is acquainted with Rousseau, never mentions Spencer’s or Fabio’s interest in him.

Yet May still ages a decade in ten minutes, simply because he went undercover without telling anyone.

In that moment he knows he’s made the right decision. She can never know the full extent of what he did.

“Don’t ever do anything like this again, Peter,” she says after a long silence.

There’s a trace of anger in her voice, visible in the line of her shoulders and the flash of her eyes, that she’s trying very hard to suppress. Peter can’t say how grateful he is for it – he doubts he could handle having to justify his actions to her right now.

So he ducks his head, nods, and they leave it at that.

“Now,” she says after wiping her eyes. “How about I tell Tony to come in and pretend I have a few calls to make?”

“T-Tony?”

“He’s been here longer than I have. He’s beside himself with worry.”

“I…”

He has no idea what to say. There’s no clip playing inside his head today, no vision of how this meeting will go. All he knows is that this is another inevitability, and that six hours ago he would have given everything to lay his eyes on Tony just one more time but now –

“Alright, sweetie?” May asks again.

This time, Peter reacts with more conviction. One more hug, and she’s out of the room, leaving Peter with only his thoughts for company.

Tony knows he lied to him. He found the text, according to Coulson, meaning he’s bound to have considered the implications and come to the right conclusions. Were Tony any other man, Peter would know what to expect. Yet Tony has proven again and again that he’s so unlike anyone he’s ever met that he’s drawing a blank, and that’s worse than if he could predict exactly what is about to transpire.

The door creaks softly. Closes with a click.

Peter’s eyes find Tony’s immediately.

His appearance is a mess – hair mussed and stringy, zipper hoodie and tee rumpled, the laces of his sneakers haphazardly bound. It’s curious what you notice when you can’t hold someone’s gaze for long.
Peter forces himself to lift his head. Tony’s pale. Standing stock still, lips parted as though he’s about to say something but can’t find the words.

He has no idea how long they stare at each other until at last, Tony’s legs seem to remember how they work and carry him closer. He stops two steps from the bed, out of reach, and Peter wonders if that’s out of consideration or punishment.

It hits him like a wave then, a storm of conflicting emotions all crashing over him with a force that leaves him trembling. Guilt and defiance, relief and regret, shame and hurt and hope and –

“I’m sorry,” he says, cause that’s what he finds at the bottom of it all. “I’m so sorry, Tony, I…”

“Hey, hey, Peter…”

And Tony finally moves closer, the proximity reduced enough that Peter can sense the warmth of his body – but still not touching. Peter wraps his arms around his middle in an attempt to stop himself from shaking apart at the seams but it’s no use, not with Tony’s hesitation so blatantly obvious.

“Fuck, alright, screw this.”

Next thing he knows, Tony’s there – sliding onto the mattress, putting an arm around his back, pressing close without jostling any of his wounds, just a solid presence at his side.

Without thinking, Peter turns his head and burrows close, soaks in the warmth and the smell and the sound of Tony’s heartbeat underneath Peter’s fingertips, until his breathing evens out and he stops feeling like he’s blurring at the edges.

If only they could stay like this forever, as entangled as his injuries allow, a bubble apart from the rest of the world.

Yet there’s no such thing as eternal stasis, as they’re both very well aware.

Eventually, Peter’s throat is too dry to ignore. He tries, but only ends up coughing, which sends Tony off the bed instantly.

“Here,” he says a moment later, offering the water from the bedside table that the nurse placed there when she showed Agent Coulson inside.

Peter drinks carefully. Hands it back. Tony hovers, eyes flicking from the space he just occupied to the visitor chair in the corner next to the window, until he makes up his mind and crosses the space.

Against the backdrop of the morning sun streaming in from the window, Tony’s exhaustion is even more evident. Peter swallows.

“Thanks,” he says. “For… for arranging the deal. And this.”

He nods to the room at large, hoping Tony will get that he’s referring to the strings he must have pulled to get him a private room at a facility such as this. Peter’s own insurance would never spring for it.

Tony gives an eloquent shrug, and silence envelopes them again.

“And thanks for –” saving my life – “for tracking me down. I…”

Peter trails off, cause what can he say? It all made sense to him at the time. Of course, in retrospect, he’d do things differently, but that still doesn’t change what happened.
“Walk me through your thought process on this, Peter,” Tony says then, his tone almost pleading. “Cause I can’t for the life of me understand why you didn’t just tell someone – anyone. Didn’t even have to be me, just… Why?”

“I couldn’t…” Peter swallows. “You’ve done so much, I couldn’t ask this of you.”

“How about next time you don’t assume what I’m willing to give?”

“This wasn’t something money could fix!”

“Oh, cause that’s all I’m good for, huh?” Tony shoots back, and he’s on his feet again. “Never knew anyone so smart could be so fucking dense! Look at where your solution got you and then think about what we could have done if we’d tackled this together.”

“It was my fight, my problem –”

“And I want things to be our fight!”

A beat.

It takes Peter a moment to make sense of what he’s seeing and hearing – the desperate edge in Tony’s voice, the fire in his eyes. The fact that he’s here, trying to talk, not writing Peter off as the lying sex worker who can’t change his stripes.

The emotion that is so obvious in the morning light.

“Oh.”

Tony huffs. “Yeah, oh.”

And waits.

Peter has no idea what to say. He can’t even… He didn’t think Tony’s feelings would ever progress – but they did. It’s surreal. Unbelievable. Peter can’t seem to wrap his mind around it.

When the silence has gone on for too long, Tony breaks out of his stupor. He gives Peter’s hand a light squeeze.

“I’ll let you get some rest,” he says, brushing his fingers against Peter’s before heading for the door.

“Will you…” Peter begins, stopping Tony with one hand on the door knob. His question must be obvious in his expression, for Tony sends him a parting smile.

“I’ll be back later, alright?”

All Peter can do is nod.

*

He hears them before he sees them.

“Get your paws off my balloons, punk –”

“Then stop dangling them in my face.”

“Well, I ain’t doing it on purpose!” Bucky says, pushing into the room and – okay, dragging about
ten neon-colored balloons along with him. One says ‘Get well soon!’ in glaring glitter.

Both Steve and Bucky look tired, but this version of exhausted is worlds removed from the running-on-fumes kind right before the Mayor’s breakfast. It’s like they’re… lighter, somehow. Standing taller.

They smile when they spot Peter’s out of bed, stretching his legs in the soft sweatpants May got him from a shop down the street.

“Hey, Parker.”

“Is this a bad time?” Steve asks when Peter only blinks at them. “We can come back later.”

“No, no, I’m just… surprised?”

The ‘that you’re here’ goes unsaid but Bucky grins nevertheless.

“Hitched a ride with Stark. ’S not like we gotta go into work today. Figured we’d bring you some balloons – everyone needs balloons when they’re in hospital but Captain Spoilsport here disagrees.”

“They’re impractical, Buck.”

“Nonsense!”

“Tony’s here?” Peter blurts before he can stop himself. Between his aunt’s return, doctor’s visits and meals, he’s had way too much time to think. Officially he should have been resting, but Peter dares anyone to sleep after Tony Stark pretty much bared his soul to you.

Bucky and Steve exchange a meaningful glance at this question that Peter can’t even begin to decipher.

“He said he had stuff to discuss with your aunt,” Bucky says eventually. “Told us to go ahead. Then I saw the hospital store had balloons – woulda bought you a few more, but someone put his foot down.”

“Thank you,” Peter says before the two start a new round of bickering.

He accepts the bundle of strings attached to the neon monstrosities, then has a moment of confusion as to where he’s supposed to put them before going for the simplest solution and tying them to a leg of the small table in the corner.

“See, much better than flowers.” Bucky grins.

Steve just rolls his eyes.

“So, uh,” Peter says after a beat. “I heard you, um, testified?”

Belatedly, he remembers his manners and motions for them to take a seat but they decline.

“Two hours in a car, mate,” Bucky groans. “I’m just happy to be vertical.”

“Yeah,” Peter agrees emphatically, which earns him another grin. “Um… well?”

Bucky sobers. “Yeah… Had some insights into Rumlow to share.”

“About…?”
Bucky shakes his head. “Never knew for sure he was pimping you out till Stark confirmed it last night.”

Peter bristles at the turn of phrase, even though it’s technically true, but he’s not the best with self-control right now, which is probably why the next question out of his mouth is, “Were the insights what landed you in prison?”

Now it’s Steve’s turn to wince while Bucky grumbles something about snoopy little billionaires sticking their noses where they don’t belong, which simply isn’t fair cause Peter was worried about them, and he says as much.

“You were hurt and acting dodgy; we were only trying to –”

“Yeah, yeah, save it, Stark already gave us the speech.”

Peter swallows the rest of his indignation, then takes a deep breath cause he doesn’t want to start another row with people he cares about, but he can’t help how close to the surface his emotions are today. It’s like his skin is paper-thin, ready to crack at any moment.

“Sorry,” he says when he finds both Steve and Bucky watching him, worry evident in their expressions. “You don’t have to tell me if you’d rather… Sorry.”

Steve’s eyes grow soft at his apology, but it takes longer for Bucky’s scowl to vanish. They exchange glances again, an ‘Up to you’ from Steve prompting a drawn-out exhale from Bucky.

“You sure you wanna hear this, Parker? Cause it ain’t a pretty story.”

His nod must have carried enough sincerity to convince them he means it, since Bucky heaves a sigh, grabs Steve’s hand and pulls it with him as he sits down on the edge of the bed. He intertwines their fingers, and doesn’t let go.

Peter leans against the table.

“Way back, during our last tour, some shit went down and I got an early release,” Bucky says. “But the shit had screwed with my head a little – couldn’t hold a job, let alone pay rent. Drifted a bit until this punk here came back, but some shoebox apartment ain’t no way to live… so I took some shady jobs for this guy named Shaw – yeah, that Shaw,” Bucky confirms when Peter makes a surprised sound. “Ain’t proud of what I did, but it put a roof over our head and got us the funds to start Stars and Stripes, so ya know…”

Peter sees Steve squeeze Bucky’s hand on his thigh.

“Anyway, one of my ‘cases’ – that’s what they called it – was this twink of a dude, owed a lotta money, and I mean a lot. I’m talking half a mil. Roughed him up real good but his big brother didn’t like that, so he sought me out to take revenge. Or, well, tried to.”

Bucky looks down at his hand, then up at Steve. Peter thinks he knows how this story will end.

And sure enough, Bucky admits, “He was gonna kill me. You can sense it, when you’re up close, like…”

Peter doesn’t realize he’s nodding until Bucky’s eyes find his. They flick down to his throat where the traces of what Fabio tried are still visible.

“Steve had gone looking for me cause I was running late. Came across us fighting and me loosing.
Broke the guy’s jaw and beat him so hard I wasn’t sure he was alive or dead. Neighbors called the police, and an ambulance. I told Steve to run.”

Peter glances at Steve, whose eyes are downcast, shoulders heavy.

“You told them it was you.”

Bucky gives a humorless smile. “I was the guy with the priors. Stevie got the talent and the dreams. Besides, bleeding heart like his, they’d have eaten him alive inside.”

Steve begs to differ, judging from his expression, but it seems like his protest is largely out of habit. Peter can’t imagine how often they must have had this discussion.

“Lucky for me, the guy couldn’t remember anything. So there you have it, Parker. The merry tale of my ten months in the joint.”

“Thanks. For…” Peter trails off at Bucky’s curt nod. But if that’s not what the testimony was about, and it wasn’t about Peter’s involvement either, then…

“Was it Rumlow? The bruises? The cut on your arm?”

“Like a dog with a bone,” Bucky mumbles before heaving a sigh at Peter. “Yeah. Indirectly.”

He disentangles his fingers from Steve’s, rakes his hands through his hair and starts tying it up in a haphazard bun with the band from his wrist, which is when Peter looks to Steve, whose expression hardens.

“Rumlow wouldn’t let us leave. Told me to decline the investment offer. When I refused… Three guys came for Bucky. Even said Rumlow had sent them. That they had orders to kill if I didn’t do what he wanted.”

His voice breaks on the last few words, and Bucky grabs Steve’s hand again, holding tighter than before. Peter feels like an intruder to the intimate moment, but before he can figure out how he can allow them some privacy, Bucky gives a wry huff.

“Better be glad they were so full of themselves, or we couldn’t’ve nailed him for coercion. And conspiracy to commit murder, that’s gotta be my favorite.”

“Buck –”

“Yeah, yeah, too soon, sorry.”

But the corners of Steve’s lips are curling regardless and something in Peter settles.

It’s really over. Rumlow’s not getting away with any of this. Agent Coulson told him, but it didn’t quite hit Peter like it does now.

He’s out of a job – both jobs. Everything’s gonna change.

“So you’ll open your own place?” Peter asks, cause if he doesn’t distract himself, he’ll give in to the panic rising his chest. “The investor has to give you another chance, right?”

He doesn’t expect Steve to break into a full-on smile. “He already did.”

“Yeah,” Bucky says, “Stark called him from the car and explained. News about the arrest ain’t out yet, guess it helped butter him up. And then…”
The last time he saw this degree of unadulterated glee in Bucky’s face was when he filled all the donuts in the break room with mustard on April’s Fools Day.

“Then he said that he’s gonna buy the building. Cause the FBI’s frozen all of Rumlow’s assets and seized his property, and Stark’s gonna buy at least the one the restaurant’s in when they inevitably start pawning it.”

“Mr. Stark offered it to us,” Steve adds, and warmth fills Peter’s chest. “Right there in the car. We don’t have to decide immediately, but…”

They both seem dazed, and now Peter understands why they looked so different to him when they entered. They have a plan, a future. Tony ensured they would.

“Speaking of Stark,” Bucky says, and suddenly he’s serious again. “For a guy who just saved the day, he’s sure as hell moping pretty hard. You two good?”

Peter averts his eyes and draws in on himself, which is the wrong thing to do since Bucky’s on his feet a moment later.

“What did he say to you? Cause saving the day don’t mean he’s allowed to treat you –”

“No, nothing like that, he…” Peter stares at his feet, bare in the soft hospital slippers. “Quite the opposite. And I… I don’t…”

“Hey, hey, it’s okay,” Steve says, and he’s getting up, too, but keeping his distance until Peter lifts his head.

Whatever Steve sees in his expression makes him straighten up.

“Buck,” he says, “could you…”

Peter doesn’t follow, but Bucky obviously does, since a few seconds later he’s out of the room, leaving Peter to squint at Steve.

“He doesn’t like talking about it,” Steve says, which doesn’t explain anything. “But I think, maybe…”

“What?”

“Peter, I don’t know exactly what happened to you, but I’m not stupid. You’ve been through a lot. Maybe you should talk to someone. You and Mr. Stark, I mean.”

The suggestion takes him by surprise, as do the implications. “Did you and…”

Steve nods. “He… What happened back then, it left a mark on both of us. But Bucky… it was harder for him. And I thought I understood because I was there, but I couldn’t make sense of him a lot of the time. It was either seek help or give up on us. I’m with Buck till the end of the line, so I got over my pride and looked around. Found this guy, also a vet. Does couples counseling. Think he could be a good fit for you, too.”

“I wasn’t a soldier,” Peter points out.

“Doesn’t matter. I’ll give you his details, and you just think about it, okay?”

He tries to imagine it, he really does, yet the mental picture of Tony in a psychiatrist’s office simply refuses to happen.
Peter wants to say no. A week ago, he would have in a heart beat. Yet back then, he didn’t have all the information he has now.

“How about next time you don’t assume what I’m willing to give?”

Maybe this is something Tony is willing to give. Maybe Steve’s right.

Cause one thing is certain – Peter’s no closer to figuring this out on his own.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed reading this as much as I did writing it!

Fair warning, the next update might take a bit longer. I'm doing a lot of mental recovery work which is quite draining but a really positive development for me, even if my writing energies are depleted in the process.
twenty-two

Chapter Notes

I’m back, at long last! The mental health break did me wonders, I’m finally improving for real. Thank you for your patience, dear readers ♥ I’m still working on chapter 23, but posting this today is my birthday present to myself. Hope you enjoy!

(Also, I feel knighted now, somehow. This fic has its first troll/hater!)
“You’re welcome. Laterz, looser.”

MJ hangs up and Peter blinks down at his phone. He’s… yeah, he’s grateful, he finds. He thought about reaching out to MJ but, much like with Tony, he has no idea what he’s supposed to say. Let alone what he wants to say.

“Duh,” MJ sighs as he admits to the fact, after watching MJ’s usually so unflappable expression crack when she sees him lying on the bed in his sweatpants and loose cotton tee covering bandages and stitches. “You’re processing. Give yourself time.”

“I don’t have time,” Peter says. “I have class tomorrow, and assignments to finish and exams and experiments to write up and, and, and an internship to prepare for,” it suddenly dawns on him.

With Rumlow arrested and Ben’s appeal on the right track, nothing stands in the way between him and his alternative summer plans.

MJ regards him as if he’s grown a second head.

“What?” he says.

“Parker, I didn’t cash in my biggest favor to burrow Sameer’s car and drive about a hundred miles only to have you try your best to finish the job whoever shot at you botched up.”

“How’d you –”

“Snuck a look at your file at the nurse’s station. Gunshot wound? Third-degree burns? What the fuck.”

“It’s only a graze, see, I’m fine,” Peter says, rotating his arms for good measure cause he’s not even feeling that bad anymore.

“Physically, perhaps. Stop lying to me, Parker,” MJ snaps with the kind of vehemence in her tone that’s usually reserved for misogynistic professors, unethical food practices or the dieting industry, “or I swear to Žižek I’ll blackmail the intel out of your boyfriend.”

“It wasn’t…”

Peter trails off – cause it was, wasn’t it? He thought he was going to die. That Fabio was going to kill him (or have him killed) after getting what he paid for, and isn’t that sending Peter’s imagination into overdrive.

“Okay, but that’s why I gotta go back, don’t you see?” Peter says, slipping off the bed cause the feeling of the mattress against his back is suddenly too much. “I need the routine. Something normal.”

“Distracting yourself won’t help –”

“How do you know? Maybe it’s exactly what I need!”

MJ makes a strangled sound of frustration. “Maybe you have no idea what you need.”

“Well, what I don’t need is you telling me how to handle this – especially when you don’t even know what this is!”

“Only because you won’t tell me anything!”
“I don’t know how!”

The last sentence was supposed to come out loud and strong, but instead Peter’s voice breaks and he has to suck in deep breaths to keep himself from getting dizzy. He sinks back onto the bed, face in his hands, and tries desperately to keep the tears at bay.

But then he feels MJ’s arm around his shoulders and…

She’s never hugged him before. He’s never seen her hug anyone. Her movements are stilted but she’s trying to comfort him and that’s what breaks his composure.

MJ pulls him close and lets him hide his face in her shoulder, not a single snarky remark on her lips, and for the first time since his rescue, Peter allows the tears to flow.

When he eventually pulls back, he can’t help the blush rising in his cheeks, but –

“Don’t you dare apologize, Parker.”

Peter ducks his head.

“So. You wanna share, or you want me to distract you with how I kicked my instructor’s ass during fencing on Friday?”

“I…” Peter swallows.

Thing is, he wants to tell her. She’s his friend, and he’s been lying to her about part of his life for years.

“It’s a long story,” he says.

MJ grins. “Good thing I brought snacks.”

Tentatively, Peter finds himself smiling back.

*

When May texts him in the early afternoon on Sunday that the doctors are keeping Peter for another night, Tony has to re-read it twice before he believes it.

Based on the way he was acting the night before, he’d have sworn the kid would rather sign himself out against medical advice than remain hospitalized.

Guess Tony’s idea to involve MJ paid off. He’s gotta send that girl… whatever the politically-correct version of flowers is.

Unfortunately, he doesn’t get the chance to research since his life has suddenly turned into a legal drama. He’d hoped to be done with dealing with the repercussions after signing a check for Deckert & Prather and briefing his PR and legal teams about what went down Friday night – in broad strokes – but he didn’t account for Pepper on the war path.

“You became an informant for the FBI and took on a drug lord without telling anyone at the company,” she snaps when he complains. “You’re going to stick around to clean up this mess, Tony.”

So he spends Sunday in emergency meetings and only manages to stay sane by auctioning off footage of Rumlow’s arrest for an insane amount of money.
In a bout of inspiration, he sends the footage to Peter along with an apology about probably not making it back in time for visiting hours, then tunes out whatever legalese his lead counsel is spewing for the next five minutes cause he keeps checking his phone.

Until, finally…

[5:32 pm] *It’s okay. MJ is still here. Thank you. For giving her my number and for the footage.*

Tony never thought a single message would fill him with such relief, but it does. Even more so when another message arrives later that night.

[7:03 pm] *MJ invited us to her next showcase, as long as you’re incognito*  
[7:03 pm] *Sorry, I mean… do you want to go?*

Tony can’t remember the last time a text made him grin so widely.

[7:04 pm] *It’s a date! And I promise to leave the Maserati at home.*

He gets a smiley in response, something the kid only does when he’s getting too tired to type, so Tony wishes him a good night and promises to be there tomorrow.

For himself, there’s very little sleep on the horizon – as per Pepper’s design, granted, but the joke’s on her cause there’s no way Tony could have dozed for long anyway when Rumlow’s initial appearance takes place on Monday.

To no one’s surprise, he’s not allowed to post bail.

Not that he could, considering all his assets have been seized.

According to Coulson, it’s unlikely they’ll ever be returned, meaning forfeiture, meaning Tony’s plan to buy them can eventually proceed, something which makes both Harold and the Rogers-Barnes household quite happy.

“Guess you’re gonna have to think about how you’ll want to remodel,” Tony says, clinking glasses of celebratory champagne with a dazed Steve.

Next to them, Harold chuckles. “Don’t rush them, Tony. Culinary genius needs room to breathe.”

“Damn right,” Bucky agrees, and downs the contents of his flute.

Once Harold is gone and Tony has given the conference room he highjacked to host the signing of the deal back to SI’s legal department, he finds himself at the receiving end of two very worried stares.

“How’s Parker?” Bucky asks.

“Getting released today. Gonna pick him up with his aunt.”

“Tell him to call if he needs anything,” Steve says, but Bucky’s tilting his head.

“Where’s he gonna stay?”

“That, barkeep,” Tony says with a sigh, “is the million dollar question.”

If it were up to him, he’d move the kid into the Tower permanently. May initially wanted Peter to stay with her, but considering she doesn’t even own a pull-out couch, Tony offered her a guest room
of her own.

In case Peter accepts, that is.

“It’s for the best, sweetie,” May says when Peter doesn’t immediately pounce on the idea. Not that Tony expected him to. “What if something happens at your dorm? I don’t want you to be alone.”

“I won’t be, I’ll be at class.”

Now that is news to Tony.

“What?!”

To May as well, apparently.

“I already missed three days,” Peter continues. “Four if I stay home tomorrow. I can’t afford more, not with exams coming up.”

So much for MJ talking sense into the kid. Given how stubborn Peter is, Tony figures he better not waste both their energy with arguing. Time for damage control.

“Then that’s all the more reason for staying at the Tower,” he says. “Think of all the resources at your disposal, quizzing you about aerodynamics and fluid mechanics…”

“You – you’d do that?”

“And I’m sure Bruce can be tempted into reading over your write-up when you remind him what you guys are trying to accomplish. I saw you talking to him at Pepper’s party, he’s already invested. Would be unfair to keep the results from him.”

He can tell the exact moment that Peter’s hesitance tips over into eagerness – and makes a mental note to get Bruce that special chai tea mixture he likes so much but never buys for himself – and four hours later, he’s getting the Parkers settled into their rooms.

“Need help unpacking?” he offers when he realizes he’s been standing in the doorway for too long, watching Peter take in the rooms.

He can’t help it. The fact that Peter’s here, in one piece, when for a moment there, Tony feared… But he’s okay, and in the Tower, plus obviously enjoying the way Tony designed the guest quarters, which is a sight for sore eyes.

Peter shakes his head, then gives him a tentative smile. “But thanks. For this. This is great.”

Tony grins back, and leaves the kid to rest.

He resolves to find some of the same, but sleep escapes him. Considering how short the previous night was, you’d think Tony would manage to keep his eyes closed for longer than two seconds, but well.

Good thing there’s always work to be done.

Well, not consultancy cause Tony already had JARVIS cancel any new meetings this week back on Saturday, but the aviation industry won’t revolutionize itself.

He’s elbow-deep in the prototype arc reactor for the next-gen StarkJets when JARVIS lowers the volume of his music.
“Hey, buddy, what’s with the –”

Oh, that’s why. Peter’s here, biting his lip and shuffling awkwardly in soft-looking sweat pants and a faded Columbia tee.

“How’s everything alright? You okay?”

Peter nods. “I… I couldn’t sleep. JARVIS said you’re down here and I thought…”

“Best AI ever,” Tony says with a grin before the kid even has the chance to doubt he’s not beyond happy to see him. “What d’you wanna do?”

Tony knows what he wants – what he needs: ask Peter what happened, figure out how to help no matter what, wrap his arms around him and never ever let him go. Yet after the epic failure of their talk in the hospital, Tony has resolved he’s done rushing the kid. Peter’s gonna tell him on his own terms. Or he won’t. Either way, Tony’s gonna stick around.

So when Peter asks, “What’re you doing?”, he goes with it – explains about the shortcomings he’s fixing, about what the reactor’s supposed to do and that he hopes to be able to move it into an actual hangar for real tests soon.

Peter hands him tools every now and again, yet apart from occasional question he’s silent.

It’s only once Tony’s done and leaning back against the worktable next to Peter with a satisfied groan that he speaks up.

“Physics saved my life.”

It’s not at all what Tony would have expected, but it’s something. He’s careful to keep his expression neutral when he says, “Come again?”

“I… I calculated if it was possible to survive a jump from the balcony into the pool the first time I was there. Concluded it’s likely, so when I… when I got out of the handcuffs and the guard noticed, I knew what to do.”

Tony has no idea what part of that to focus on first. Asking about the handcuffs seems like the safest option – despite the irony.

“Yeah, they’d destroyed my phone but Fabio, he left it there. The scraps. I guess he wanted to, you know, taunt me…”

“And instead you used it to escape. Damn. Wait, how’d you even reach it?”

His forced flippancy startles a laugh out of Peter, which is the best sound Tony’s heard all day.

“I’m flexible?” he says, and Tony chuckles despite himself.

The light-heartedness doesn’t last long, however. In fact, Peter’s face immediately crumbles and a moment later, he’s blinking rapidly. Tony’s throat grows tight cause Peter can’t seem to meet his eyes anymore, let alone figure out his next words.

“You can tell me anything, Peter,” he whispers, cause he feels it needs saying. “It’s not gonna change how I feel.”

Not when he’s reminded every time he looks at Peter how close he came to never seeing him again.
He watches Peter process. The hand splayed against his thigh clenches and unclenches while his left is fisted into the fabric of the sweatpants.

Seconds stretch between them. At last, Peter takes a decisive breath.

“I did things,” he says, with a quick glance at Tony before blinking at the floor again. “I had to, cause I was there as… I wouldn’t have managed to get the evidence we need otherwise. I didn’t know we were going to the Hamptons, I swear,” Peter says, meeting Tony’s eyes for long enough that he can see the sincerity in them, “but I couldn’t get out and once I realized the chance I had… I can’t apologize, not for that, cause I’m not – I’m not sorry. It didn’t mean anything to me. It was like, you know. Autopilot. Well, mostly. I… I didn’t do it to hurt you. I did it for Ben. But I did it.”

Tony doesn’t realize he’s crying until he feels a tear run down his cheek. Peter’s own eyes are gleaming and suddenly the distance between them is like a physical ache.

Tony reaches out and covers Peter’s hand on his thigh with his own – lightly, without exerting pressure. Peter twitches, but when he locks eyes with Tony, he stops before pulling away.

“I believe you,” Tony says, not caring how rough his voice is when he does. Let the kid see him cry.

He gives Peter’s hand a gentle squeeze. “We’ll figure this out. Together. Alright?”

A shaky exhale. Then Peter nods.

The hand underneath Tony’s turns until Peter can intertwine their fingers. Of all the things they’ve ever done, of all the ways Tony has ever touched another person, nothing compares to the level of intimacy he feels right now.

The moment breaks eventually. Peter clears his throat and draws a wet breath. He doesn’t let go of Tony’s hands, though.

“I… Steve had a suggestion.”

When all Tony does is arch an encouraging eyebrow, Peter seems to gain confidence.

“He and Bucky, they saw this guy. Sam Wilson. I researched him, he’s a former air force pilot, did three tours, then a masters in counseling. Spends most of his time helping fellow vets but Steve thinks he might be a good fit for – for us.”

Tony blinks.

“Maybe he still has a free spot.”

“A shrink?”

“A counsellor,” Peter corrects. “But he helped Steve and Bucky a lot. He’s good.”

Why don’t you simply talk to me? Tony thinks – almost says it, too, but manages to bite his tongue at the last moment.

Instead, he asks, “How’d that work? We lie on his couch, tell him about what happened, he waves a magic wand and everything’s dandy?”

Yeah, his tone’s disparaging, but sue him. When you grow up hearing your old man going on about how “Stark men are made of iron and iron don’t need no shrinks”, you’d be scoffing, too.
The effect it has on Peter is startling, however. He deflates from one moment to the next.

“No, sorry, I wasn’t – You’re right. Stupid idea. Forget I said anything, okay?” With an apologetic look, Peter pushes off the worktable and aims for another prototype. “What’s this?”

His interest sounds hollow, though, and Tony can’t help but feel a twinge of regret in his chest. What if this is Peter’s way of telling him he has no idea how to talk to Tony? What if a mediator is exactly what they need at this point? Personal reservations aside… Peter actually asked for this. That alone should have silenced any of Tony’s objections.

Shit, he’s screwing this up again, isn’t he?

“Hey, wait,” he says, catching up with Peter again. “Sometimes my mouth does things without letting my brain know about them first and that was one of those times, I guess. You want us to see a shrink? Let’s find out if it helps. Always been big on ‘I’ll try anything once’, and sure, usually that’s about other activities but why limit myself, right?”

Peter’s hesitant, almost as though he doesn’t trust Tony’s change of heart, and Tony figures he only has himself to blame for that.

Yet eventually, Peter’s lips curl in a cautious smile. “You sure?”

No, he ain’t… but for Peter, he’s willing to ignore that. Besides, Howard’s dead – his scorn can’t hurt him any longer.

So he agrees, and offers to reach out first thing tomorrow.

The way Peter slumps against his side when the tension of the conversation finally bleeds from his body chases any remaining doubt on Tony’s part away. This might not be the type of conversation he was hoping for… but it’s a start.

*

Their first session with Sam Wilson is scheduled for Sunday morning. Peter suspects the guy only agreed to fit them in on such short notice due to a substantial donation on Tony’s part to one of the charities Wilson is involved with, but he decides not to ask.

Any issues he has with Tony spending huge amounts of money on him without getting anything in return can wait until they’re with Mr. Wilson. Same with Tony being perfectly chivalrous when Peter can see the questions at the tip of his tongue.

Part of him is grateful for the unspoken embargo Tony has placed on any and all discussions of what happened, since if he wants to keep his scholarship, he’ll need all the mental energy he has. With JARVIS’ help, he even devised a study plan that should see him through finals and his outstanding assignments with the efficiency only an AI is capable of.

When he finally ventures outside the Tower on Thursday to attend class, it’s a relief.

Remembering to check in with Tony or JARVIS every hour is a small price to pay for the distraction of science… even if it comes in the form of a bumpy introduction that Peter can’t seem to figure out how to improve.

“It’ll be fine,” Nara Yuki says from across the table. “We’ll just revise it once we’re done.”

They’ve been at it since four, which was two hours and a modest post-final-classes-of-the-day rush
ago. Apparently this is the least busy coffee shop on campus according to Yuki, making it the perfect place to meet and put a dent in their write-up. Peter was all too happy to go with her expertise on this, considering he’s always had to hurry to the restaurant right after his last academic event of the day rather than splurge on expensive coffee and snacks.

“Aaaand done,” Yuki says, stretching her arms above her head with a smile.

Peter’s mail program *pings* with her latest nit-picking notes on Peter’s part of the write up. He doesn’t open them yet, however, since he’s worked with Yuki long enough to recognize the signs that her notoriously small bladder is making itself known again. About time, too, considering he’s felt his concentration slip for the past twenty minutes due to his pain killers wearing off.

Once she’s gone, Peter allows the pain from his shoulder to show in his features. He’s tired, too, but he committed to at least another two hours of work and it’s not like he doesn’t have the time with *No Bones* closed for good. Also, if Tony was serious about Dr. Banner taking another look, the sooner they have it finished, the better, so they won’t have to rush the man for a read so they can meet the deadline.

“Peter? You okay?”

He blinks. *Shit,* Yuki’s back already. Did he just zone out?

“Uh, yeah… Sorry.”

“You don’t look so well. How about a break?”

Peter shakes his head, gesturing at his laptop. “I haven’t finished your section yet.”

“You’re really pale.”

“I need the bathroom. Be right back,” he says, already on his feet and grabbing his bag before he disappears around the corner to where the restrooms are. The bag isn’t heavy by any means but it puts more strain on his already-aching shoulder and by the time he reaches the sinks, the pain has made his eyes burn.

He’s quite pale indeed, he notices when he looks in the mirror. Sleep did come eventually last night, but his alarm woke him what felt like minutes later for his morning lectures.

He fishes his pain meds out of the bag and switches on the faucet. The sound of running water echoes in the empty room.

“Go ahead, mon cher, I’ll join you in a moment.”

The memory comes to him out of the blue, unbidden. Peter shakes his head.

*You’re in a coffee shop bathroom, Parker, not a guest room in the Hamptons.*

He splashes his face in the hopes to drive the point home but the way the droplets of water cling to his chin has the opposite effect.

“You’re exquisite, mon cher.”

*Strong fingers stroking down his front. A hand closing around his cock. Legs nudging his feet apart. A palm bearing down on his shoulder blades. So gentle and yet so insistent, his body responding even as his mind is telling him it’s wrong, the wrong person, the wrong hands, but then Rousseau*
When Peter comes back to himself he’s gripping the sink so hard his knuckles are void of blood. He’s shaking, breathing shallow, and his head is pulsing with pain that even eclipses that in his shoulder. He feels raw, like his skin is paper-thin and has been worked over with sand paper.

And he’s supposed to spend another two hours working with Yuki.

But it’s hard to focus on anything right now, let alone open his pill bottle. How’s he going to form coherent sentences on the topic of medical adhesives?

Peter meets his own gaze in the mirror. He used to be so good at pushing through pain or discomfort, had mastered fighting against his body’s signals to stop and managed to keep going instead – when did this turn into such an insurmountable task?

*When Tony turned down a blow job in the arc reactor room,* his mind supplies.

That’s when it all changed. When he really started to understand that Tony wants him to be himself, regardless of whether or not Peter has any idea of what that means.

*Tony.*

Tony also wants this to be their fight, wants to help, not just with money, but any way he can.

Peter grabs his phone and makes it to his list of recent calls before doubt sets in. What if he’s interrupting something important? What if he’s blowing this out of proportion? It’s only two more hours before Yuki has to leave for kickboxing, it’s not like it’s that long…

Then he remembers the look on Tony’s face when he admitted to… doing things in the Hamptons. The empathy in his eyes, the deep feelings so devoid of pity or anything resembling judgment. Tony stressing that he needs rest, which echoed his doctor’s advice upon his discharge.

Maybe… maybe it’s okay to stop.

The concept feels foreign on Peter’s tongue. Yet somewhere deep down, it also resonates with him, which is why he makes himself tap Tony’s name on his phone screen.

“Hey, you okay?” Tony says instead of a greeting, sounding worried.

“Uh…” Peter has no idea what to say. “Not really? I mean, I’m… nothing happened, but…”

“Want me to pick you up?”

“If you’re busy, I can –”

“Nope. Free as a bird. And happy to pick up my hardworking boyfriend for a relaxing night in.”

Peter wonders if the thrill of hearing Tony refer to him as his *boyfriend* will ever wear off, but he finds he kind of doesn’t want it to.

“O-okay,” he says, ignoring the tremble in his voice. “I’ll send you my location.”

“Be there in twenty,” Tony says without missing a beat, and there’s the sound of footsteps on his end, meaning he’s already on the way to the garage. “Fifteen if I can convince J to tinker with traffic lights.”

*hits his prostate and he’s seeing stars —*
“Please don’t get arrested on your way here.”

“You seriously underestimate JARVIS, kid.”

He probably does, but that might be a good thing, in the scope of everything.

Peter takes another breath and is amazed to find he feels lighter already. His shoulder is still throbbing, though, but at least now he manages to uncap the pills without too much trouble.

When he returns to where Yuki and he set up camp, there’s genuine concern in her features.

“I was about to send off a search party.”

“Yeah, sorry, I’m… I’m not feeling well,” he manages with almost no stumbling. “Could I email you my notes? And the rest of my draft?”

The slight pursing of Yuki’s lips doesn’t escape his notice, yet fortunately her good manners win out and she agrees.

Still, he can’t help the twinge of regret he feels when he steps outside into the warm evening air. Doubt nags at him throughout the sixteen-minute wait at the curb before the roar of an engine pulls him back into the present.

Tony pulls to a stop at his level, drawing the stares of the handful of students still around. Then again, the frozen orange BMW Z4 might be more to blame for that than the degree of Tony’s fame.

“Thank you,” Peter says when he’s finally buckled into the passenger seat.

“I’m glad you called.”

Tony’s tone is neutral but Peter still feels the gravity of his words. And how much calmer he is now that he’s in Tony’s presence.

“I am, too.”

His sincerity seems to be showing since Tony’s lips curl into a smile.

In a fit of daring inspiration, Peter reaches out and covers Tony’s hand resting on the gearshift with his own. He doesn’t let go for the entire rest of their drive.

Chapter End Notes

This was quite difficult to write, I have to admit. Chapter 23 is proving tricky, too, but should follow soon-ish :) Aaaand it looks like the end is in sight, I’m afraid…. *sniffs*
Alright, real life has calmed down a tiny bit again, so I can finally post this :) 

We also have an official chapter count now... and I'm sad to say after this there are only two chapters left. *stocks up on tissues*

In happier news, merlenhiver and I already have tickets for Endgame! YAY!

No one speaks for a full minute.

Peter certainly won’t be the first to break the silence – not after what Tony pulled on him. So he lets himself sink deeper into the chair.

Sam Wilson watches them with a calm rivaling Agent Coulson’s. In their first session, Peter found it soothing – he was nervous enough as it was without their therapist adding to it – but today, it’s infuriating.

Okay, it was infuriating last time, too. Peter didn’t expect therapy to be this much work, so when Sam told them his job was to help them find solutions for their issues, not solve their problems for them, Peter started questioning his impulse to follow Steve’s advice. But then Sam coached him through finally telling Tony the truth about what had happened in the Hamptons and… yeah. That was good.

Less good is Tony’s resulting tendency to treat him like he’s about to break.

“I could have handled it,” Peter finally says when the silence gets too much. “You could have told me.”

He doesn’t look at Tony, but he hears him heave a sigh next to him.

“I didn’t want to upset you.”

“I had a right to know.”

More silence.

Until Sam says, “Anyone willing to share, or do I gotta play twenty questions?”

Peter crosses his arms and sends a dark look Tony’s way, but it rolls right off of him.

“Yes, doc,” Tony says, ignoring Sam’s “Still not a doctor,” to plow on. “One of Peter’s colleagues from the restaurant contacted Stark Industries on Monday, said he had information to sell to tabloids unless we make him a better offer. We did. End of story.”

“You seem to disagree, Peter.”

Damn right, he does.
“He wasn’t gonna tell me,” he says. “If Mrs. Potts hadn’t mentioned it, I never would have known.”

“Cause it’s no big deal, kid –”

“Eight hundred thousand dollars are a big deal!”

“Nope,” Tony says, popping the ‘p’ in a way Peter usually finds adorable but today is really annoying. “Billionaire, remember?”

“Guys,” Sam interrupts, holding up a hand. “Let’s untangle this. Tony, why don’t you explain to us why you decided not to tell your partner about this?”

Tony shrugs. “Like I said. It’s no biggie. The company’s got a budget for this stuff; ask Pepper if you don’t believe me.”

Rather than probe deeper as Peter expects, Sam sits back and considers them for a moment. Peter wonders what he’s thinking about them – do they make sense to him? Can he see the solutions to their communication issues clearly, or are they as hidden to him as they are to Peter?

“Let’s talk about money.”

Oh. Peter’s beginning to think Sam might be as good as Steve made him out to be.

“Alright,” Tony says, leaning back in his chair and crossing his legs in a way that calls attentions his high-end shoes. “I got it, I like spending it, but Peter here would rather choke on his pride than let me help.”

“I’m not a charity case!” Peter protests, which has Tony whip around and meet his eyes for the first time since the session began.

“Did I ever say you are? Nope, I didn’t, cause guess what, me offering to pay your uncle’s legal fees has nothing to do with charity.”

“What’s it, then?” Sam asks.

“You got friends, doc?”

“Still not a doctor, Mr. Stark.”

“It’s a nickname, I’m sticking with it, it suits you. Answer the question.”

Part of Sam clearly wants to whack Tony over the head, but his years of experience apparently enable him to merely narrow his eyes at Tony’s brattishly demanding tone.

“Several. They’re all bigger than you.”

“And they got nothing on my bodyguards,” Tony says without missing a beat. “But point is, you got friends. You help them, cause you care. Now imagine you got a significant other.”

“You assuming I’m single?”

“I know you’re single, but that’s beside the point,” Tony waves him off and continues before Sam has the chance to tell him to hold on a minute, since yeah, the thoroughness of Tony’s background checks still shocks some people. Peter wonders when he stopped being surprised… maybe when JARVIS suggested he call Ned after Ned looking at flights to New York had triggered JARVIS’ algorithms, and Peter found himself really glad for the kick in the butt he needed to finally call his
best friend for the first time since the Hamptons.

And Tony’s still talking.

“Point is, if you had an S.O. – significant other, not superior officer. Damn, that abbreviation doesn’t work on vets, does it? Anyway, you’d be happy to help them even more than your friends, cause you care. And for most people, helping means moving boxes or picking up a wardrobe from IKEA. But I’m not most people – I wouldn’t be caught dead in IKEA. That’s what interior designers are for.”

And now Peter really wants to drag Tony into an IKEA just to show him how fun it can be.

“So I’d hire one of them, help that way. Or make it possible for us to have these sessions,” Tony adds in a tone that immediately makes the mirth rising in Peter’s chest deflate again.

Which is also when Tony turns towards him.

“And I get that you need time to get used to all this,” he says. “Everyone would. Well, unless they’re some royal or trust fund Barbie, which I’m glad you’re not. Even though you wouldn’t be making such a big deal out of this. Cause it’s not. It’s just money.”

Tony spreads his hands, leans back and looks at Sam all ‘Am I right, doc?’, and Peter can’t keep quiet anymore.

“It is a big deal. I’m my own person, I want to be autonomous.”

“That’s what got us here in the first place!”

“So what d’you want me to do? Be your kept boy?”

“Of course not, you’d be bored outta your skull within a week… I just wanna spend money on you without you being mad about it. Jeez, you’d think I was asking him to try pet play, doc.”

Sam lifts a hand before Peter has the chance to react beyond an affronted huff. “Rewind this for me real quick, Peter. What’s the relation between money and autonomy for you?”

Peter blinks. “It just… is?”

Sam waits. Peter is grasping for words, but he has no idea how to explain… until his eyes fall on Tony’s watch. It’s one of many in his collection. They have their own chest of drawers in his walk-in closet. Some are heirlooms from Howard.

“You never had to worry about money,” Peter says eventually, looking at his knees. “You were born into wealth. I wasn’t. You never had to work for minimum wage, but it’s all I’ve known since I was 14 cause May and Ben weren’t able to buy me the sneakers I wanted and told me I could buy them with my own money, so I got a job and another, and… and then I started taking clients…”

He trails off, unable to express what’s inside his head.

“How’d you handle this in the past?” Sam says after a beat. “What were your past relationships like in terms of money?”

Oh.

“They paid me, I did what they wanted.”
Silence.

Peter chances a glance at Sam, who’s looking from him to Tony, brow furrowed, as if he’s been presented with a mystifying riddle rather than Peter’s attempt at telling the truth without actually spelling it out.

Tony must have picked up on his unease, since he clears his throat. “He’s never had one, doc. I’m his first relationship. And you know how that started.”

Sam’s face does something complicated but a moment later, his expression is neutral again.

“All right,” he says at length. “We’re not done yet but I’m gonna give you homework now cause it fits the topic.”

Peter anticipates Tony’s groan and has to suppress the urge to apologize for dragging him to see Sam even though he can tell it’s mostly for show. Apparently Sam does, too, if the flat look he gives Tony is any indication.

“All right, okay… Hit us, doc.”

“I want each of you, independent of each other, describe the ideal of how finances are handled in a relationship. One with equal partners. And I mean ‘the ideal’, understood? Don’t get bogged down by practicalities, just let your imagination run wild. We’ll go through your results next time and see if we can find some common ground. That sound good?”

Peter doubts it’s going to be as easy as Sam makes it out to be, but he’ll do his best to try.

“Good,” Sam says once they both nod in agreement. “Now, how’re finals going?”

“Oh, yes, let’s talk about that, please,” Tony says sardonically. “Maybe you can talk some sense into the kid.”

Sam arches a prompting eyebrow at Peter.

Well. He knew this was bound to come up.

*

*Last Thursday*

Peter never thought a smile could make his heart beat so fast.

He also never thought he’d have Tony Stark quiz him about aerodynamics and to be getting most of the answers right, but here they are. The proud smiles definitely make staying up till three in the morning totally worth it (which was necessary cause he fell asleep on the sofa before he was able to complete his revisions for the day).

“Kid.”

Peter shakes his head. “Sorry, I was elsewhere.”

“Yeah, off to dreamland, probably,” Tony says, his tone tinged with worry. Shit, no, worry is the last thing he needs right now.

“Next question?”
Tony considers him, lowering the StarkPad he’s holding. “How about bed? You’ve been at it all day. There’s such a thing as too much revising.”

But Peter’s already shaking his head. “We’ve got to finish so I’ll know what topics to re-read later.”

“What d’you mean, later?”

Peter shrugs. “I always re-read everything before bed the night of an exam. I retain it better, then. I don’t know, it’s always worked in the past.”

“You mean you’re following up a full day of revising after a day of which you spent half writing an exam and the other half studying with more revising?”

“Yes,” Peter bites out. “Cause I don’t want to fail.”

“You won’t.”

“How can you know that?”

“Cause I’ve witnessed your transformation from hating aerodynamics to perfectly explaining the probability density function of inter-particle separation in homogeneous isotropic turbulence.”

“But that’s just one topic!”

“So?”

Tony puts the tablet down entirely and shuffles closer on the sofa, which is way more distracting than it should be for the sake of Peter’s academic future. Tony spent the afternoon in the workshop and has yet to change out of his threadbare tank top and jeans.

“You worried about the write up?” Tony wonders. “Cause Bruce is genuinely impressed. I heard a rumor that he even talked to Lehnsherr about maybe borrowing you once or twice during summer, but Lehnsherr’s worse than a mother lion when it comes to hogging his interns.”

“I… Not only, but… I could be working with Dr. Banner? As well, I mean?”

Peter is glad he’s already sitting since the prospect is making his knees weak.

“Your science crush is adorable.” Tony grins, and Peter has to fight a blush. “But if it’s not that, what is it? All I remember from finals back in my day is the parties at the end.”

“I…” Peter swallows. “Sometimes I still, you know… What if I have a panic attack in the middle of the test and I can’t complete it, or I can but I fail and have to re-take it?”

*  

“Would failing some of the tests be so bad?” Sam interrupts, and Peter has to remind himself to breathe evenly. The thought alone fills him with dread.

“It could,” is all he manages.

“What’s the worst case scenario?”

“I…” Peter takes a deep breath. “I lose my scholarship. I gotta meet certain academic requirements, and if I don’t, they could take it away.”
He can almost hear the click as Sam connects the dots.

“And you wouldn’t be able to afford tuition unless…” Sam looks to Tony, but Peter can’t bring himself to meet Tony’s eyes.

“Or I take out student loans.”

“Ugh, no,” Tony says. “If you lose your scholarship – which you won’t, cause you got this – but let’s assume you do fuck up too many tests to please the stuffy bureaucrats and you don’t wanna just accept my help like a normal person, then we’ll consider it a loan or something. With zero interest. Once you’re being headhunted by every engineering company on the planet and we’ve started a bidding war over you, you’ll be able to pay me back in no time anyway.”

Peter has no idea where to start with this. “Bidding war?” is all he manages, at which Tony nods like it’s a foregone conclusion.

“What, you thought you were gonna have trouble finding a job?”

At Peter’s hesitant shrug, Tony’s jaw literally drops. It’s only for a split second, but it happened, and Peter is so surprised that he almost misses what Tony says next.

 “… if you think Lehnsherr’s so persistent with any potential intern, and Bruce usually hides in a corner at my parties, meaning your ability to make him actually brave the crowd and engage in conversation already puts you in the upper percentile of smartest people on this hemisphere, so you better start owning your capacities, kid.”

“You look a little dubious, Peter,” Sam chimes in again. “Wanna tell us why that is?”

“Well,” he says, then stops. “I mean, I know I’m good at this stuff, but everyone is, aren’t they? They wouldn’t be at Columbia if they weren’t. I’m nothing special.”

“So how come you got the internship?” Sam asks. “Cause from where I’m sitting it sounds like there’s a lot of competition.”

“Hell yeah, there is,” Tony says. “Most sought-after internship program in the country.”

Peter considers his hands. He’s never really thought about it, but the answer is obvious.

“I got lucky.” At Tony and Sam’s matching quizzical looks, he adds, “Right time, right place.”

Sam adjusts his position in his chair. “So you think you’re not the best candidate for the job?”

“I… I’m a good candidate, and a hard worker. I won’t disappoint –” you, Peter almost says, but catches himself just in time. “I won’t disappoint Mr. Lehnsherr.”

“And maybe Tony as well?”

Of course Sam caught his almost-slip.

“Yeah, maybe.”


Peter has to look away from the certainty he sees in Tony’s eyes. His gaze falls on Sam, who’s regarding him with a peculiar expression he can’t name. So he waits.
“Do you think you deserve the internship?”

“I… I don’t know.”

“Course you deserve it!” Tony says, sitting up and gesturing with his hands like he does when he’s getting really worked up. “Why wouldn’t you?”

“Cause I… I just stumbled into it. I didn’t really work for – I’m only able to do it since Rumlow’s in jail and I lost my job and you’re covering our legal expenses and…I didn’t work for it.”

Tony looks like he’s about to launch into a long tirade, but Sam cuts in before Tony has a chance to start.

“So you only deserve something if you work for it?”

Peter nods, cause what kind of question is that even? There’s a low “Oh” from next to him, and when he checks on Tony, his eyes have widened on a realization that is a complete mystery to Peter.

“Which is why you feel you need to pay your tuition yourself?” Sam continues.

“I guess?”

“Alright. We’re already a couple o’ minutes over, so let’s circle back to Tony’s suggestion. He’s prepared to cover tuition, in case you lose your scholarship for whatever reason, and to treat it like a loan. So you’d have to pay it back. How’s that sound?”

Too good to be true, in Peter’s opinion, but he opts to hold his tongue.

It still doesn’t sit completely right with him, but it’s a much better alternative than having to drop out of college altogether. And if he’s really able to expect a bidding war once he graduates, he’ll be able to pay Tony back for all that he’s done.

“Okay, I guess.”

“Awesome!” Tony says. “And what about his insane workload?”

At Sam’s prompting look, Peter sighs. “It’s not insane. It’s necessary.”

“It’s counter-productive –”

“It’s the way I learn –”

“You’re recovering, you gotta take it easy –”

“I’m not gonna break from a few late nights!”

“A few late nights? How many have there been?”

“None of your business!”

“Guys.”

Both their heads whip around to where Sam is watching them with a long-suffering expression.

“Mr. Stark, how would you feel if Peter told you to cut back on your work hours? Or hours in the workshop?”
Tony rolls his eyes but doesn’t say anything.

“I didn’t quite catch that.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Tony grumbles. “I’d tell him to back off, probably. Or just ignore he said anything.”

Sam spreads his hands, the ‘So there’ clear.

“It’s not that I don’t appreciate it,” Peter hurries to say, cause he doesn’t want Tony to think he’s ungrateful. “I do, I really do, it’s sorta surreal that you care so much but I’m doing okay and I know I can tell you when that stops being the case… so, trust me?”

“Like you trust me?” Tony shoots back, then looks like he regrets it the second he did.

Peter has no idea what to say. He glances at Sam for guidance and the counselor clears his throat.

“Mr. Stark, trust is not a topic I think we should tackle right now. And I’d say it’s not about trust anyway; it’s about respecting your partner’s boundaries. That means backing off a bit and letting them figure out their limits on their own. You’re two different people, not one unit, right?”

Tony seems inclined to argue but as Peter watches, he swallows whatever he wants to say. The relief Peter feels is somewhat dampened by the way his thoughts seem stuck on Tony’s last question and his inability to formulate a reply.

He does trust Tony, though… doesn’t he?

At this point, he honestly couldn’t say.

*

“We boring you, Stark?” Bucky asks when Tony checks his phone for the fifth time in ten minutes.

Yeah, he knows Peter still has half an hour on his exam, but what if something happens? Like a panic attack, or the kid’s system finally succumbs to the urge to sleep, regardless of how many shots of espresso he injected this morning? Or what if –

“Everything okay?” Steve says, brow knitting in concern and putting his sketch folder back onto the kitchen counter they’ve all gathered around.

He heaves a sigh. “Finals. Well, final finals. Final final? No, plural, two tests today.”

Steve and Bucky exchange a look, which comes as no surprise. Even to his own ears, Tony sounds weird.

Guess checking on the progress on the bakery front by dropping by Steve and Bucky’s apartment wasn’t such a good idea after all. He should’ve used the morning to either catch up on sleep – something he’s severely lacking since worrying about Peter caused several all-nighters, which in turn took care of all consultancy work on his desk at the moment – or do therapy homework. But that’s not due until the day after tomorrow, that’s plenty of time.

Or it would be, if he had any idea about where to start.

Bucky’s voice pulls him out of his head again. “Let’s reschedule, mate, alright?”

“Yeah, might be for the – hang on.” Tony stops in his tracks, two steps away from the hallway, then looks the men over. “You’re equals. In your partnership. You handle money together. How?”
The way Steve’s eyebrows rise towards his hairline would be comical if Tony weren’t so serious.


“Research.”

“For?”

“Jeez, what is this, the Spanish Inquisition?”

“Nah, but I ain’t airing our laundry for you without good reason,” Bucky shoots back, and Steve seems inclined to agree.

“Okay, fine!” Tony throws his hands up. “Wilson gave us homework. I’m doing recon.”

Understanding spreads across Bucky’s features, along with amusement. “Oh yeah, I remember that. I wanted separate accounts cause I figured I gotta protect Stevie here from myself, but the punk insisted on pooling resources. Now he’s stuck with me.”

“Like it’s such a hardship,” Steve teases, and squeezes Bucky’s shoulder affectionately.

Tony rolls his eyes. “Yeah, go ahead and gimme a cavity, will ya? I somehow can’t imagine Peter agreeing to joint accounts.”

Judging by the way Bucky snorts, he can’t either.

“Sam asked about your ideal, right?” Steve says. “Well, what is your ideal?”

Good question. Whenever Tony tries to imagine a scenario, all he sees is Peter enjoying the security and not making a big deal about it.

“But that’s never gonna happen,” Tony adds when he explains his vision to the couple. “Kid doesn’t even think he deserves the internship, for fuck’s sake, how’m I gonna get him to be fine with spontaneous trips to Europe?”

Bucky snorts. “Better start with something closer to home. Like, what’s that term? Systematic desensitization?”

Tony blinks. He’s never considered that.

“No, Stark, fuck, that was a joke!”

“Too late, Barnes,” Tony cuts him off cause yeah, he’s having a lightbulb moment here.

It’s not like Peter’s gonna go from ‘I gotta earn my worth’ to ‘I’m worth my boyfriend spending lots and lots of money on me cause I’m inherently awesome’. Just like Tony didn’t go from measuring his sense of self-worth in his professional success to accepting that every person’s valuable regardless of what they’ve accomplished within a week. No, that took years of exposure to Rhodey’s special brand of friendship, a cave in Afghanistan and long conversations with Yinsen.

And even now Tony sometimes catches himself in moments of self-doubt, but he doesn’t believe it anymore. He never would have been able to turn Stark Industries around like he has if he were still stuck in that mindset.

Neither would he have decided to invest in Steve’s bakery plans.
Right, and that’s what the sketches were for.

“Loving the concept,” Tony says with a nod towards the folder once. “You should sell popcorn in some form, cause people are gonna line up around the block just to watch you create non-vegan pastry magic. You gotta rethink your stance on an Insta account, too, you’re gonna be sensations.”

Bucky and Steve are getting that overwhelmed look again, so it’s brilliant timing that Tony’s phone chimes just then.

“Final finals over, finally,” he quips with a smirk, and leaves the Rogers-Barnes household to discuss their social media presence in private.

Getting from Brooklyn to the Tower takes him only slightly longer than it takes Peter to get there from Columbia (bless JARVIS), meaning Peter hasn’t even toed off his shoes. He’s just standing there, at the kitchen island in the penthouse, gazing at the fruit bowl but obviously not seeing it.

It’s only now that Tony notices Peter has thrown on one of his own few graphic T-shirts that’s not a band shirt – a present from Lehnsherr he’s taken to wearing in the workshop sometimes. It says *The Universe is made of protons, neutrons, electrons and morons*, but Tony doubts Peter had enough presence of mind for mundane things like getting dressed this morning to notice he picked up Tony’s shirt off the living room floor.

He’ll never admit it to anyone, but his chest expands at the sight.

“Would’ve expected you to head straight to bed,” he says, making sure to keep his tone fond, before the sappiness has a chance to bypass his brain-to-mouth filter. “Or you hungry?”

“I…” Peter swallows. Tries again. “I just wanna sit and not think for a bit.”

“Good plan, kid.”

Tony gently tugs at his wrist and leads him to the sofa. He intends to keep a respectable distance between their bodies, but to his surprise Peter shuffles close and sags against him with a sigh.

Yeah, kid’s exhausted alright. Tony squashes the urge to say ‘I told you so’ – not relevant right now.

So he wraps an arm around Peter’s shoulder and simply enjoys the contact.

Tony doesn’t expect the kid to fall asleep in this position, but that’s exactly what he does: his breathing evens out, lips open slightly, and a bone-deep relaxation spreads through him. Peter’s head is cushioned on Tony’s shoulder, a warm pressure right above his heart.

Tony buries his face in Peter’s hair and just breathes in.

Something settles inside of him. For Peter to let himself be so vulnerable, so exposed at his side… he wouldn’t be able to do it if he didn’t trust Tony. At least a little bit.

And maybe, for the time being, that’s enough.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed reading this as much as I did writing it :)}
Chapter 24 is still very much in the early stages. The last thing I want to do is ruin this story by rushing the ending, so I'm letting it take as long as it does to ensure it fits with the rest.

Also, I will probably change my user name soon, to align my real-life pseudonym with my fanfic account. So don't be confused if your next notification looks less familiar!
twenty-four

Chapter Notes

Don't worry, it's still me, JayEz – just with a new pseudonym *winks*

I know this chapter is long overdue... but in my defense, in the past two months I've rewritten someone's screenplay, scored a second rewrite gig, gotten my website closer to launch than ever, picked up some light journalism, aaaand kicked off my Patreon page...

... all while actually making progress with recovery. Thank you for your patience! I hope the last two chapters will be a fitting end to this story ♥

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There’s sunlight behind his closed eyelids.

It takes Peter a moment to identify why this is so strange, but then his system floods with adrenaline and he is out of bed a split second later.

When he spots the clock on the night stand, it’s like every single cell of his body grows cold, cause fuck, it’s eleven in the morning, how could he forget to set his alarm, he’s beyond late, he’s gotta –

Wait.

Peter stops dead in the doorway to the bathroom.

His last test was yesterday. Therapy isn’t until tomorrow. They won’t hear about the exact date of Ben’s release until Monday or Tuesday and he still has an entire week before he’s got to report for internship duties.

Meaning it’s okay that he slept for twenty hours… since his day is completely free.

The thought feels surreal, and yet he can’t escape it.

“It’s called holiday,” Tony grins as he pours them both a cup of the coffee JARVIS had timed to be freshly brewed by the time Peter entered the kitchen. “I hear it’s awesome. Been a while since I tried it. You know, we should seize the day and catch up on our Star Trek marathon. We’re so behind in your education, it’s not even funny anymore.”

A smile tugs at Peter’s lips at Tony’s flippant tone and he finds himself nodding around a mouthful of toast. His body feels like it was stuffed into a centrifuge and left to spin for too long, which can’t be good for his physical healing process, so relaxing sounds like the way to go.

And that’s exactly what they do, at noon on a Saturday: bunker down on the couch and watch classic sci-fi.

For some reason, however, Peter can’t settle down. Whenever he thinks he’s found a comfortable position, something will itch, a muscle will twitch or he’ll have to adjust an angle here or correct a tilt there and –
“If you move one more time,” comes Tony’s voice suddenly, “I’ll have Lehnsherr stick you on first level support for a week.”

Peter ducks his head and rests his left ankle on his right knee again rather than switch legs as he originally intended.

“Sorry,” he says, but Tony’s already paused the episode and has turned to face him.

“What’s wrong?”

Peter’s first impulse is to say, ‘Nothing’ and force his body to just keep still already, but what came oh-so-easy to him in the past seems impossible now.

“You in pain? D’you take your meds? You want me to call –”

“No, it’s not – I’m fine. Physically.”

“And mentally?”

Peter exhales and shifts his attention inward, like Sam taught him how to do. Which is still so weird, but… well. It’s worth a try. So… How is he feeling right now?

“I’m,” he begins, “I’m, I don’t know, restless? I’m sorry, I’m trying to focus on the cyborg thingies, but…”

“Borg,” Tony snorts. “They’re called the Borg.”

“Sorry.”

“Hey, I get it, you’ve been going two hundred miles per hour for years and suddenly there’s no more road ahead. Course that’s gonna take some getting used to and it’s gonna be hard, but you gotta learn how to relax and recharge, kid.”

“Like you’re so good at that,” Peter snaps before he can bite his tongue.

Tony merely arches an eyebrow. “Better than you.”

_Touché._

Tony shifts next to him. “How about a massage? Or’d that be counterproductive?”

“I… Counterproductive, I think – I’m sorry,” Peter adds when Tony immediately scoots further down on the sofa.

“Nah, it’s fine. Just a suggestion.”

Peter nods but doesn’t lift his eyes. Knowing Tony, he’s probably already thinking of ten different alternatives, and Peter doubts he’ll manage to say no more often. Thing is, he wants to be closer to Tony, but at the same time, he also doesn’t cause he doesn’t want to send the wrong signals, or confuse him – or himself, for that matter – and everything is just a big, awful mess inside his head.

“Hey, you done the homework yet?”

Peter blinks. “Huh?”

“Oh, um… Well, a bit?”

Tony leans back with a sigh. “Thank fuck, I thought you’d already have a power point ready to go. Or at least give it its own stack of flashcards.”

Peter blushes, cause he might have considered that, just to help him brainstorm.

“You’re impossible, kid,” Tony says, though his fond tone belies the statement. “You wanna start, or should I kick us off?”

Since Peter doubts Tony’s ideal is gonna be anything other than ‘Peter letting me spend way too much money on him every day without having a problem with it’, he motions for him to go ahead. He’s not wrong.

“… though I get that’s asking too much, so I’m willing to compromise.”

“Oh…”

“But let’s not get ahead of ourselves. I showed you mine, now show me yours.”

He can tell Tony’s mind is racing through the options – probably has been since Sam gave them their homework, trying to figure out the variables and determine the best possible solution. Something in Peter bristles at that. They’re supposed to be a team, aren’t they? So he’s gonna be part of whatever they come up with.

“What do you think I’m gonna say?” Peter challenges, partly out of spite, partly out of genuine curiosity.


“Close.”

“Nope, I got standards! Ramen is not food, and not a single one of New York’s Cheapest Delis made it on JARVIS’ approved shortlist of places to order from, so –”

“No, no, I didn’t – I meant the spending.” Off Tony’s owlish look, Peter continues, “Sure, I’d be more comfortable if you spent less than the GDP of a small country in a month –”

“That calculation’s a myth, Vice has no sources to back that up –”

“I don’t want you to change.”

Tony cuts himself off abruptly. “What?”

Now it’s Peter’s turn to shift closer on the sofa. He’s thought hard about this, whenever his mind couldn’t stomach another moment of revisions, and while he hasn’t figured out a true ideal, he’s certain of what he doesn’t want.

Which is for Tony to force himself into a mold that will never fit. Asking him to be more mindful of his spending would be like asking a cat to stop stealing unattended fish off a table – it would go contrary to his nature.

“And I like your nature,” Peter says, aware that he’s starting to babble. “You shouldn’t have to change on my account.”
Tony swallows. “I would. For you, I would.”

“You’d try, and then you’d hate me, and then…”

Peter doesn’t want to finish that sentence. Being able to follow that thread until its inevitable end in the privacy of his mind is enough.

Seconds tick on in silence, both of them lost in their own thoughts.

Eventually, Tony sucks in an audible breath and catches his eye. “Alright. So, compromise. How about we meet halfway?”

“Like… me sometimes paying for coffee and stuff, and you running all bigger purchases by me if they affect me?”

“As long as you won’t decline outright.”

“As long as you’re honest.”

“Same for you,” Tony says, underscoring it with a gesture. “If I’m screwing up, which I will, you tell me. Or when you’re uncomfortable. Or when I’m being too much. And then we’ll talk, like Wilson suggested, and we’ll figure it out. Together.”

Something settles in Peter’s chest when he takes in Tony’s expression at the echo of their argument at the hospital. He knows Tony notices, too, because his smile widens to mirror Peter’s when he agrees, “Together.”

Their eyes hold for moment.

Then, Tony leans in and waits for Peter to do the same before he whispers, “You wanna prep a power point for Wilson?”

* 

“I’m glad you didn’t,” Sam says the next day around a chuckle. “And that you took initiative. Means I’m doing my job right.”

Tony notices Peter preen a little at the praise.

He’s in the same chair as always, wearing the same kind of outfit, and yet something profound has changed about the kid. Maybe taking the day off was more impactful than Tony anticipated, or their frank discussion helped smooth things out—either way, the sight fills Tony with a sense of accomplishment.

As does the compromise they reached yesterday.

“Um, for one, I’m gonna stay at the Tower during the internship,” Peter explains at Wilson’s prompting look. “It cuts down on my commute and it’s closer to the doctor’s in case I have any trouble, and, well.” Peter glances at Tony with a soft expression. “I’ll get to spend more time with Tony.”

“Always a win in anyone’s book,” Tony says, but it comes out a beat too late since he had to battle his voice into submission. “And this way he’ll be closer to his aunt and uncle.”

Wilson makes a questioning sound at the same time as Peter huffs, which Tony feels more compelled to address, cause it “Wasn’t your business, kid. My guest rooms, my decision who I’m gonna offer
them to. I could still put their bedroom right next to yours, you know.”

“How about we back up here for a sec?” Sam cuts in before Peter has a chance to argue – yet again – that Tony’s done enough and that this should count as a big expense, thus requiring his input.

Yet thankfully, Wilson says, “How’d you feel if Mr. Stark tried to tell you what to do with your dorm room,” and Peter grumbles something into his non-existent beard.

Too bad Wilson has to ruin any bonus points he scored with his follow-up question.

“Are you nervous?”

“Why’d I be nervous?”

“Oh, no reason, Mr. Stark. Just meeting your partner’s second parental figure for the first time ever.”

“Nah, I got this.”

Wilson snorts.

“Ben likes you already,” Peter says. “You got nothing to worry about.”

“I’m not worried!” Tony says, and okay, not helping his case.

Wilson sighs. “Mr. Stark,” he begins, but to Tony’s surprise, Peter intervenes.

“Uh, there’s actually… something else I’d like to talk about.”

Peter doesn’t seem to be totally convinced, but he barges on anyway, effectively steering the conversation away from Tony’s insecurities about coming face-to-face with the guy who’s indirectly responsible for Peter putting his life at risk, and directly responsible for teaching the kid about great power and great responsibility. As much as Tony admires those qualities in Peter, no one would argue that they’re not the safest attitudes to have.

But yeah, Peter’s got something to share.

“I wanna be physical again. With him.”

… wait, what?

“How’s that making you feel, Peter?”

“… excited? And, uh, afraid? Cause it’s not just about… touching. It’s also…”

A faint blush rises in Peter’s cheeks and suddenly, it clicks in Tony’s mind – Peter’s talking about sex.

“You set the pace,” he blurts before his brain-to-mouth filter can kick in. “No doubt about it. You say stop, we stop, don’t –”

“Mr. Stark.”

Tony mimes zipping his mouth shut and tries to project a rueful vibe, cause Peter’s starting to look overwhelmed again.

“Tell me, Peter – why do you want to initiate something intimate?”
“Um… do I need to have a reason?”

“Not necessarily,” Wilson concedes, “but given your past history, sex tends to be tied to conditions for you.”

“I know he’s not paying me –”

“Not what I meant,” Wilson says. “Remember when you both told me about your sexual history? You mentioned being honored because Mr. Stark showed you the arc reactor of the Tower and then initiated oral sex.”

Tony’s stomach tightens at the memory. Peter on autopilot is something he never wants to witness again.

“So… did you want to initiate intimacy as a thank you?”

Tony holds his breath for the split second it takes for Peter to shake his head.

“I just want to be close to him, I guess?”

Damn, the kid sounds so confused. Tony has to literally bite his tongue to keep from interrupting. Wilson’s the professional, after all. He’s bound to have a better reaction up his sleeve than ‘You can be close to me any time.’

He’s not wrong.

He’s not exactly right either.

Cause what Wilson does is sit back and consider Peter for a moment, then ask, “Do you feel like that’s something you deserve?”

“What kinda bullshit question is that, doc?” Tony says. “Why wouldn’t he feel like…”

But then his brain reminds him of what Peter said about getting the internship and all further protests die in his throat.

The kid, meanwhile, has turned his attention to his knees. It takes a while before he speaks again.

“I… I don’t know.”

Wilson silences any protest on Tony’s tongue with a look before leaning forward to catch Peter’s eye.

“Not asking about knowing, Peter. I asked about how you’re feeling. There’s no right or wrong answer. Do you feel like you deserve to be with Tony?”

Peter’s response is immediate. “No.”

“Why?”

“I… I’m just… me.”

“And who is that? How’d you describe yourself?”

Peter gives an evasive shrug that makes something tighten in Tony’s chest. He’s burning to intervene, but Wilson clearly has a plan here, and the last thing he wants is interrupt and derail the process.
“I’m an engineering student. A waiter. I’m – a former sex worker.”

“No, you used to be a sex worker, Peter,” Wilson says. “There’s an important difference between saying to yourself ‘I am something’ and being someone who used to do something, or is still doing something. Would you say Mr. Stark here’s still the Merchant of Death?”

Peter shakes his head. Tony thinks he spots the beginnings of understanding tugging at his expression.

“So by that same logic, you’re not a sex worker anymore. That part of your life’s over.”

Peter nods. Tony can see his throat working when he swallows. “I guess… But that still doesn’t mean I… I’m nothing special.”

Peter sounds so resigned and convinced that Tony’s restraint finally snaps.

“Wrong,” he says, turning to face the kid fully, show him he’s got his full attention. “You think I’d spend time with you if I didn’t think you’re worth it? I’m Tony fucking Stark, I can do whatever the hell I want, and that’s vegging out on the couch with you watching DS9, or quizzing you about aerodynamics or working with you nearby doing your own stuff, or, hell, even going to your best friend’s showcase with you, not cause I care about crappy student theatre but cause I wanna be with you. And guess who gets to decide whether or not you’re worth my time? Yup, me. Not you. Just like I don’t get a say in whether or not you wanna be with me.”

“Thank you, Mr. Stark,” Wilson cuts in the moment Tony finishes, but all he has eyes for is Peter’s wide-eyed reaction.

After a moment, though, Peter swallows. Nods.

“Wanna share, Peter?”

“Tony’s right. I just… I don’t really believe it yet? Like, I know it’s true, and I know Rumlow’s gone, and I know Ben’s about to be released but… I used to imagine this. Having a – a boyfriend,” Peter stumbles over the word. “But I never really thought – it’s just, it’s surreal.”

Wilson’s face softens. “It’s gonna take time. Don’t think you gotta go all in within a couple o’ weeks. Be patient with yourself. Go for progress, Peter, not perfection. Same for you, Mr. Stark.”

“Oh, I’m all about progress.”

He says it flippantly but allows just the right amount of sincerity seep into his tone so that Wilson won’t call him out on it. After all, if there’s one thing he’s learned, is that there’s always a way to make things better.

Which is also the theme of the homework the doc piles on them: it’s all corny stuff like catching themselves and each other in negative self-talk or thinking, trust falls, mindful touching… but hey, if it’s gonna lead to Peter actually trusting him and letting himself be happy, then Tony can stomach all the corniness Wilson is able to come up with.

* 

Peter was worried about visiting Steve and Bucky at the building that used to house No Bones but finds himself relax the moment he crosses the threshold to the dining area.

The place looks nothing like it used to – all furniture has been sold already and the first round of
restoration is underway.

“Shit gets done fast if you throw enough money at it,” Bucky explains.

It earns him a stern glance from Steve, who’s leaning on what’s left of the bar, papers spread along the length of the counter filled with sketches – obviously their plans for the space.

“Harold wants us to open sooner rather than later,” Steve says, with enough panic in his tone that Bucky wraps a soothing arm around him.

“And we’re almost done with the concept.”

“Really?” Peter says, which prompts Bucky into an animated presentation of what they’re envisioning for their bakery.

“A state-of-the-art coffee bar, that’s for sure,” Bucky begins, “but Steve here doesn’t wanna be stuck in the back all day, so we’re adding a show baking station so he can be among people during the day. At least that’s what he says; I think he just wants to show off.”

Steve rolls his eyes but that doesn’t deter him from putting a few more touches to the sketches while Peter lets Bucky’s monologue wash over him. Then they both agree to play guinea pig for Bucky’s coffee making skills.

“Don’t get me wrong, I make a mean latte, but the foam art’s still a work in progress.”

“It’s not that hard,” Steve says. “You’re just biased.”

“Yeah, cause latte art is way too hipster for us.”

Peter pointedly looks at Bucky’s bun.

“Shut it, Parker. No, don’t shut it. What’s that thing on Friday you wanted to drag us to?”

“Um, a showcase of a friend. My best friend. She’s a drama major.”

Bucky arches an eyebrow while steaming milk on the interim coffee machine sitting proudly on the shelf that used to be occupied by cocktail ingredients. Steve, however, breaks into a smile, which is all it takes for Bucky to crumble like a house of cards.

Years of social withdrawal due to their insane hours apparently means that even student theater seems enticing.

“Stark gonna be there, too?” Bucky asks.

Peter promptly blushes.

“Oh? So things are good?”

Peter hesitates. When both Bucky and Steve narrow their eyes and shift their stances, he rushes to say, “No, yeah, they’re good. Really good. Um… We’ve been… doing trust exercises? And I’ve started PT and turns out Tony’s done his fair share of that so he’s helping me with the stretches.”

“He give you massages, too?”

Peter feels his blush deepen. After laughing their way through trust falls they’d progressed to more deliberate touching, all with their clothes on and stopping as soon as Peter could feel discomfort rise
in his chest. Then, last night, Tony had offered another massage and Peter was surprised to find he felt ready to agree.

It was the first time Tony had touched Peter’s bare skin since the Hamptons, and somehow it had loosened a bit of the apprehension in Peter’s stomach. No matter how often Tony assures him he likes touching him, actively experiencing it is different.

“Forget I asked, mate,” Bucky snorts, pulling Peter back into the present.

Steve smiles. “How about you tell us a bit about what your uncle likes to eat instead?”

Peter jumps at the change in topic. He still can’t quite believe that Ben is being released from prison tomorrow. That in less than twenty-four hours, he’ll be with him again.

May and he are picking him up, then taking him to brunch at the Tower with Tony – catered by Steve and Bucky, of course – where he will then share a set of guest rooms with May… It’s surreal. Peter doubts it will truly hit home before he is allowed to hug Ben outside the prison walls.

Peter is in the middle of explaining Ben’s stance on eggs (over easy or soft scrambled, never boiled and never medium or hard scrambled, spicy versions are appreciated) when his phone rings. It’s Tony.

“I didn’t want you to find out from a news alert or from Twitter,” is the first thing he says, “but Rumlow took a plea deal.”

“What?!”

“Yeah, agreed to five years in prison and to never run a business ever again, but they settled.”

Peter tries to process. Ben was innocent and he got life, but Rumlow’s gonna be done in just five years?

“Four for good behavior. Yeah, it’s fucked up. Want me to pick you up? You still with Julian Child and manbun?”

*

One moment Tony’s jumping into one of his cars, the next he’s drinking espresso martinis with Peter, Steve and Bucky.

Well, really just Steve and Bucky, cause Peter doesn’t take more than a sip from his before handing the glass off to Tony, who kisses him on the cheek before he has a chance to consider whether it’s okay to do that in company.

Yet when Peter actually shifts closer to him, he figures he’s good.

They’ve taken up residence in a boring-as-fuck break room (which, as Tony’s happy to hear, will get a massive make-over in the Grand Restaurant Remodeling of 2018) and discussing the abysmal state of New York’s legal system.

“That Ortiz guy’s still gonna go to trial, though, right?” Bucky asks. “Or they planning to offer him a deal, too?”

“No way,” Tony says. “DA’s set on persecuting him. Might take a while till it starts, but he’s not gonna get away with what he did.”
“Good,” Bucky grumbles, and Steve drains his glass in agreement.

Peter breathes a little easier as well, Tony notices, but that might just be because Tony has put his arm around his shoulders and started running his fingers along his upper arm.

Bucky smirks when he notices. “You planning to keep that up tomorrow during brunch?”

Tony doesn’t let his movements falter, but he still tenses. He’s about to vow chastity when Peter says, “You should. They’re – Ben and May – they’re tactile people. it’ll probably put them at ease.”

_Huh._ Tony never thought of that.

“And if not, you’ll find us in the kitchen, devouring leftovers.”

“Bucky!”

“What? Stark said to make enough to feed an army; ’s not like we’re gonna run out.”

“I’m sure the leftovers are meant for his employees.”

“Hate to break it to you,” Tony interrupts, “but I’m technically your boss, so you’re totally my employees. And for the record, I ordered as much as I did so you’d be able to enjoy it, too. Fruits of your labor, and all that.”

The look on Steve and Bucky’s faces is delightful, but what surprises Tony most is Peter leaning in and sneaking an arm behind his back. Warmth spreads in his chest and he can’t resist catching Peter’s eyes. He’s never seen the kid smile like that – soft and sincere, nothing fake about it. It’s different from the excited grins he gets in the workshop, or the timid twitches of his lips, or the broad, beaming smiles when Peter wants him to know how awesome he finds something.

He misses most of Bucky’s reply to trying to figure out what it means, but he doesn’t care. They’ve reached the bottoms of their respective glasses anyway and Steve’s been pointedly yawning behind his hand, so it comes as no surprise that they disband soon thereafter.

“You sure you’re okay to drive?” Peter asks when Tony guides them to his car.

“What, why?”

“Well, you had, like, three espresso martinis.”

“Which means I’m not even halfway to buzzed yet. And if you don’t trust my judgement, JARVIS has the right to circumvent my biometric ignition system when I’m too far gone. And see?”

Tony presses his thumb against the button on the car keys and – _tada_ – the Audi unlocks.

He assumes that’s that when Peter ducks his head and hurriedly takes his place in the passenger seat, but when he turns the car onto Park Avenue, Peter clears his throat.

“I do. Trust you.”

Tony’s head whips around so fast that he’ll probably regret it tomorrow, but never mind that cause – “You do?”

The light ahead changes to yellow. Usually, Tony would floor it but tonight, he lets the Audi roll to a stop so he can look at Peter instead of their surroundings without putting both their lives at risk in late-night Manhattan traffic.
“I… I think so,” Peter says, the lack of certainty coming off him in waves. “I’m beginning to, anyway. Progress, right?”

“Yeah. You know –”

An annoyed HONK cuts him off.

“Okay, hold that thought. We’re being jostled by a fucking Prius,” Tony grumbles, and the way Peter laughs at that almost makes the humiliation worth it.

The atmosphere remains strange, however, all the way back to the Tower and into the elevator. Peter’s confession has charged the air between them, there’s no other way to explain it – but it’s the good kind of tension.

Tony has barely pressed the number for Peter’s quarters when he feels lips against his and familiar hands on his shoulders.

By now, Tony has a mental database of Peter’s kisses. He’s catalogued the differences between the soft, sleepy ones when he’s tired from physio or just woke up, the measured way he kisses whenever they’re somewhere even semi-public, or the calculated, graceful movements of his mouth that make Tony pull back immediately cause they’re veering into autopilot territory.

This kiss is neither and all at once: soft but confident, measured but with an edge of sloppiness.

It’s a heady combination that gives Tony the courage to finally suggest what he’s been planning ever since Peter told Wilson he wants to be physical again.

He breaks the kiss long enough to whisper in Peter’s ear, “How’d you feel about a blowjob?”

Peter startles. Yet rather than verbalize a reaction, he presses his body closer. The elevator doors open with a ding and Tony walks him backwards to the hallway, licking into his mouth as he does, and thank the genius who assigned Peter the room closest to the elevator (i.e. Tony) since that means they’re inside his quarters in no time.

Next thing he knows, Tony’s back connects with the wood of the door and Peter’s getting to his knees.

“Not what I meant,” Tony says, keeping Peter on eye-level with a strong grip on his arms. “The other way around.”

“You – you want…”

“If you’ll let me.”

There’s that puzzled expression again, like Tony’s introducing Peter to concepts he’s never considered before.

“I really hope you’ll let me. I’m gonna blow your mind, pun definitely intended, I’ve been thinking about this for so long –”

“Really?”

And yeah, the surprise in Peter’s tone just won’t do. Tony could probably explain it till he’s hoarse before Peter understands, so he goes for action, pulling Peter into a slow, sensual kiss. He maneuvers them into the bedroom without ever breaking contact and stops inches before Peter’s legs hit the bed
When he looks down Peter’s front, his interest in the proceedings is obvious.

Tony slides to his knees with the grace of a twenty-something (and makes a note to never, ever complain about his workout routine ever again) and is rewarded with an expression full of lust and awe as well as a cut-off whimper.

“Oh please, let me hear you,” Tony says, then tackles the buckle of Peter’s belt.

“I – I’m not gonna last long...”

“Ain’t an endurance sport, Peter. Besides...” Tony adds as he slowly slides the zipper down, “this won’t be the last chance, if I’m lucky.”

He vividly recalls thinking he’d love to spread Peter out, withhold permission to come and see how often he can bring Peter to the edge before he breaks. But that was a gazillion months ago, before they really knew each other. Now, Tony knows better. The last thing he wants is to deny Peter any pleasure he’s able to receive. On the other hand, Tony doubts getting him off as quickly as he can will send the right message either.

After all – and sue him if it sounds corny – he wants to make love, to show Peter how much he appreciates and cherishes him. Chasing the finish line is anything but.

So Tony goes slow. Careful. Reverent, even, when he frees Peter’s cock. Merely ghosts his breath along the shaft, noses gently at his testicles, rubs soothing circles into his hipbones until Peter’s rock hard in front of him.

Still Tony doesn’t touch him. He gently helps Peter get out of his socks, jeans and underwear, tells him to lie down, get comfy – “You got nothing to do except enjoy.”

Peter uses the moment to pull off his tee, too, leaving him completely naked while all Tony’s toed off are his shoes. The contrast strikes him – as well as the visceral evidence of trust. Peter’s more relaxed than Tony’s ever seen him, and that includes their very first night together.

Rather than build on what he thinks he learned then, Tony starts completely anew, kissing a path from Peter’s knee up the inside of his thigh, then – finally – licking a slow stripe up his cock. He labs up the droplets of precome at the top, then carefully takes the tip into his mouth.

A little suction makes Peter gasp, pressure on the frenulum has him whimper.

Tony wipes all memories of Peter’s likes and dislikes, simply dives into the experience with boundless curiosity. He tries delicious licks with his flat tongue, hollows his cheeks and adds his hands, always mindful to stay clear of any part behind the testicles.

This isn’t foreplay, meant to get Peter to loosen up – it’s the main event.

And Tony treats it as such. Damn, it’s been so long since he got to reduce anyone to a writhing, desperate mess, and the fact that it’s Peter makes it all the more riveting.

When Tony eventually manages to take Peter in deep enough so he can feel the contraction of his throat, a hand suddenly lands on his head, fingers gripping his hair.

“Oh god, sorry, I’m sorry, I didn’t –” is as far as Peter gets before Tony has found his hand and guided it back to his hair again.
He sends Peter his best ‘It’s fine, go on’ look, but he thinks the message might have gotten lost on the way to Peter’s brain cause he just sort of stares down – oh, yeah, Tony’s still got his lips around his cock.

He curls them into a smirk and hollows his cheeks. Peter deserves a show. Peter deserves everything.

The first jerk of the hips takes Tony by surprise, but when Peter can’t contain the second one either, he’s adjusted his position, relaxed his jaw and moans around Peter’s cock.

“Oh shit,” Peter gasps, but he doesn’t stop thrusting, doesn’t stop gripping Tony’s hair, not until he’s right there on the edge.

Tony takes him as deep as he can and relishes every drop that Peter spills down his throat.

Then hands are pulling him up the bed and above Peter who kisses him in a way Tony’s never experienced before. It’s filthy and wild and gentle and just so freaking intense that he feels his own erection throb in the confines of his pants.

So he reaches down and opens his buttons, but as soon as he’s pulled his cock out, Peter’s hands make to join him in his endeavor.

“Wait,” Tony says, even though every fiber of his body wants Peter’s hands on him.

Peter stops. Meets Tony’s eyes.

“You mean it? You really want to?” he asks, voice low and free of judgement.

He can see Peter almost lets the ‘yes’ slip out but bites it back at the last moment.

“I…”

An array of emotion flitter across Peter’s face, there and gone again an instant later. When his expression settles, it’s apologetic, yet Tony feels the extent of the moment. He makes sure that Peter sees the pride in his gaze before spreading his legs further.

“Just watch, darling,” he says, and takes himself in hand.

A thrill works itself up his spine. Tony’s no stranger to masturbation, not in the slightest, but usually it’s a solo activity. Now, though, with Peter’s eyes on him, half-lidded from his orgasm, Tony feels put on display, exposed… and it’s incredibly hot.

It becomes even hotter when he realizes that Peter’s smiling – that Peter likes this.

Urgency suddenly forgotten, Tony smirks back at him and slows the strokes of his hand. He teases himself on every upstroke, gentle swipes of his thumb across his slit, works up a leisurely rhythm as the haze in Peter’s eyes gives way to an intrigued fascination.

Wait, has the kid never watched anyone getting themselves off before?

Tony’s heart clenches and his rhythm stutters, but only for a moment. Then he’s back with a vengeance, pulling out all the stops he doesn’t even remember being aware of. Pleasure builds at the base of his spine, increasing exponentially when Peter shifts closer on the mattress.

He doesn’t remember ever being kissed by a partner while getting himself off, but now he realizes he’s been missing out. Or maybe it just feels so great because it’s Peter who’s kissing him, enthusiastic and intense, and damn, this is so much more intimate than anything he could have
wished for.

He doesn’t last long after that.

When his surroundings return, he feels Peter’s forehead against his own and gentle hands on his biceps.

Tony lifts his head. Catches Peter’s eyes and has to bite down on the three words that are threatening to spill out.

Yet from the way Peter’s expression mellows, Tony thinks he heard them loud and clear.

Chapter End Notes

Only one more chapter to go...

... which will be up before Far From Home slays us all with feels, I promise.
WE MADE IT! FINAL CHAPTER!
What began as a way to cope with the bleakest and worst bout of depression I ever experienced somehow evolved into an empowering journey for both my characters and myself. I find it quite poetic that, like Peter, I am worlds better than I was when this story began.

Special thanks to merlenhiver, the best beta and handholder and consultant I could ever have wished for! And a heart-felt THANK YOU to everyone who’s commented and left kudos – your kind words and support mean more to me than words could ever express.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You ready, sweetie?”

Peter nods but doesn’t move to unbuckle his seat belt. He feels paralyzed, which makes no sense, especially after he spent the hours leading up to their trip upstate buzzing with energy and trying to make the clock move faster.

Now that they’re finally outside the prison building, he can’t move a muscle.

“I...” He swallows.

May lets out a long breath. “Doesn’t feel real, does it? Like when he was convicted, I couldn’t wrap my head around it. But we got used to it, and we’ll get used to this, too. Okay, sweetie?”

Peter nods. What else can he do?

“Come on. I didn’t make a kick-ass sign to miss my chance to use it, Mister.”

Peter bites back a groan. When May had asked him to help, he’d quickly cited the need to prepare for his internship, but that didn’t stop his aunt from creating a cheesy cardboard square that reads, in loud block letters, ‘WELCOME BACK, BEN!’

The worst thing? It’s huge.

“Where’d you even get cardboard that big?”

“Oh, Tony had some and said I could use it,” May says, opening her door.

Peter has no choice but to follow, cause “You realize he probably had JARVIS order it with same-day-delivery the moment you said something, right?”

“No, he stole it from Marketing.”

… which doesn’t make it better. Peter senses the PR department won’t be too happy with that.
He just hopes no one will catch on to the fact that he’s dating the guy whose name is on the building when he starts his internship. Although that ship has sailed when it comes to both Dr. Banner and Mr. Lehnsherr, Peter is pretty sure they won’t try to use their connection to get Tony to reply to emails faster or something. Not that Peter thinks he could, really.

He leans back against their car and stares at the front doors of the correctional facility while his aunt lifts the cardboard. Peter checks the clock.

“We still have ten minutes.”

“And Mr. Prather said they’re going to do their best to be on time. I don’t wanna miss it.”

As if to underscore May’s point, there’s movement near the entrance. The double doors open and a figure takes tentative first steps onto the concrete path.

It’s unmistakably Ben – standing tall in the clothes they brought by during their last visit. The cotton pants fit him well and the shoes look comfortable, but the shirt’s a bit tight around the arms.

Shit, they should’ve gotten him a few different sizes, shouldn’t they?

Ben’s grinning, though, grinning from ear to ear and laughing when next to Peter, May cheers and waves the cardboard. As soon as Ben has cleared the perimeter of the prison, she drops the sign and sprints towards him. He catches her with open arms and immediately kisses her full on the lips.

Peter looks away, blinking.

Fuck, he’s had weeks to prepare for this, why is he tearing up now?

‘Well, he’s been in jail for what, over two years? Course you’re gonna get emotional,’ a voice says in his head. It sounds suspiciously like Tony.

“Hey, slugger.”

Peter looks up. Ben’s smiling at him, cheeks dry but fighting for composure, too.

His feet won’t move. His throat’s closed up. He can only stare at his uncle, trying to get his body to accept that they’ve won, they did it, everything was worth it, but his joints remain locked and it’s getting harder to breathe —

Suddenly, Ben’s arms wrap around him and he’s pulled against Ben’s chest for the first time in twenty-six months. He feels his uncle’s face pressed against the side of his head, nose bumping against his ear like it always did for a while when Peter was little, right after his parents died, and something in him finally shatters.

He returns the embrace with equal force, presses closer and can’t even care about the sobs that escape his throat.

*Ben’s free.*

He did it.

All the late nights, all the efforts, the humiliation, everything he did – it was worth it.

When Peter eventually thinks he’s steady enough to pull back, he feels Ben’s hand against his face. A thumb brushes the remaining tears off his cheeks and Peter lifts his gaze. Ben doesn’t say a word, and yet his emotions are written loud and clear into the lines of his face: guilt, relief, and bone-deep
gratitude.

A moment later, Ben has schooled his features again. He’s smiling when he says, “I believe you guys promised me brunch?”

The tension breaks, and they’re all chuckling. Peter can’t stop grinning the entire car ride back to the city.

“Stop hovering or I’ll gut you with this spatula.”

Tony freezes. Barnes really isn’t kidding – he’s brandishing the utensil like a knife. Which are the only items Tony recognizes, really, which should make him worry cause it’s his kitchen and apparently it’s stocked with everything two guys can possibly need to whip up a perfect brunch, but hey, ’s not like Tony’s much of a chef, cut him some –

“Mate.”

“Yeah, yeah, one order of no hovering, coming right up,” Tony says and retreats (cause it’s totally a retreat, completely strategic, Starks don’t flee).

He finds Steve one floor below his penthouse, removing floral arrangements – wait, what?

“What did tulips ever do to you, Rogers?”

Steve doesn’t look up. Probably heard him coming. “Nothing.”

“Then why’re you trying your hand at interior decorating? Not that these bouquets don’t look just as stunning on top of shelves, but they’re sorta intended for the brunch table.”

“Mr. Stark,” Steve sighs in that tone he’s become quite familiar with. It’s Steve’s ‘No, we don’t need marble inlays. We’re a bakery-café, not Eleven Madison Park’ tone he used to shoot down some of Tony’s more over-the-top suggestions for the remodeling. “It’s his first day out. You don’t wanna overwhelm him.”

“That why you veto’d the Bacon Cheese Popovers?”

Steve’s flat look is answer enough.

The dining table looks sorta sad without the flowers, but Tony decides to bite his tongue. Pissing off the people preparing the food you’re about to eat is never a good idea.

“Chill out, man, we got this,” suddenly comes Bucky’s voice and he passes by with a big bowl of fruit salad. “This ain’t our first rodeo.”

“I doubt brunch at No Bones really compares to this shebang, Barnes.”

“I meant first meal post-release.”

Oh. Right. Tony keeps forgetting that minor detail. Well, it’s kinda hard to focus when you’re trying to talk yourself out of socking the freshly released uncle of your partner in the jaw at first sight.

He steers clear of Barnes and Rogers after that, fusses with his hair a bit and changes for the gazillionth time, only to settle on the blue polo he was going to wear all along.

“Sir,” JARVIS says just as Tony adjusts the collar, “the Parkers are in the elevator.”
Alright. He can do this. He’s survived weeks in an Afghan cave, he can do the meet-the-family
dance.

Ben Parker, when he steps out of the elevator, wears the exact same look of awe that all people do
when they take in the space for the first time. Tony vividly remembers Peter’s face, his guard down
for the briefest of seconds, and the contrast to seeing the kid today, giddy with excitement and
moving around the floor with deep familiarity, is striking.

Tony’s feet carry him towards Peter a second later, cause he’s obviously been crying and Tony’s got
to make sure he’s alright. He squeezes Peter’s hand and kisses him on the cheek, if only to whisper a
low “You okay?” in his ear.

He feels Peter nod against his skin and when he catches his eye, Tony can see the sincerity in his
gaze.

Only then does Tony turn towards the others. He hugs May, cause dating her son apparently means
Tony gets the same affectionate treatment as Peter, only Tony appreciates it a lot more (not that he’d
ever admit to it).

“Tony, this is Ben. Ben, this is Tony,” May says, making room for them to greet each other.

Ben Parker is taller than Tony imagined, and the bulk in his shoulders would make him seem
towering, yet Tony has rarely met a less threatening person in his life. To think this guy tried to stop
a robbery is mind-boggling. Then again, no one looking at Peter would think the kid has the balls to
stand up to a drug lord, either. Seems to be running in the family.

“I’m the guy you ask if you need anything,” Tony says as he shakes Ben’s hand. “Except towels;
housekeeping’s moving them to different places every week ever since the Bathwater Incident of
2012.”

Ben blinks but catches himself a second later. “Thank you for your hospitality, Mr. Stark,” he says,
“and your generosity. We’re truly indebted to you –”

“No, nope, first rule of the house, you get a one ‘thank you’ limit. You’ve spent yours, you’re
welcome, let’s move on, there’s coffee.”

“Coffee?”

Tony grins at the longing in Ben’s tone and leads the way to the table where Steve and Bucky are
waiting to explain the spread. Peter takes over introductions and soon, they’re all seated and
watching Ben positively inhale his first cup of real-world java.

“There’s more where that came from,” Bucky says with a wink. “And something tells me your
room’s gonna be stocked with the stuff, too.”

Tony feigns indignation. “What d’ya take me for, Barnes? I’d never deprive anyone of the good
beans.”

“Hope your machine’s fool-proof, though,” Ben says after a beat. “We never had one of those fancy
ones.”

“Oh, it’s intuitive, really,” Tony says, which makes Peter laugh, then raise his hand at Tony’s
affronted expression.

“No, yeah, totally intuitive.” Peter turns to Ben. “After you’ve used it often enough.”
Which prompts an eye-roll from Tony and a short speech on the lack of sophistication in commercial coffee appliances, which somehow leads to Peter and Tony arguing about their surprisingly diverging definitions of what constitutes user-friendliness, and somewhere in between Tony forgets this brunch is about Ben, not about how the simplification of interfaces is leading to progressively dumber generations of consumers.

The man of the hour, however, doesn’t seem to mind. He asks questions that prompt long answers and does his best – from what Tony can tell – to eat slowly and savor the food. Bucky had warned him, in no uncertain terms, about commenting on it, which isn’t difficult when Peter has launched into an excited monologue about his upcoming internship.

“Anyone up for taking leftovers off our hands?” Bucky asks when clearing the plates.

“Of course, that was delicious.” May kisses Ben on the cheek, then motions for Peter to join her. Tony doesn’t get a kiss, but the warm hand on his shoulder feels equally wonderful.

When he realizes this means he’ll be alone with Ben, it’s already too late.

For a few moments, the only noise are the voices from the kitchen and the clangs of pots and pans.

Then Ben says, in a measured, careful tone, “I wasn’t sure what to expect when he told me about you. Decided to reserve judgement till I saw you together.”

“And?” Tony prompts when Ben doesn’t go on. “What’s your verdict?”

His heart shouldn’t be beating so fast. He shouldn’t be nervous. He doesn’t need the approval of Peter’s guardian – but he still holds his breath while Ben holds his gaze.

“I’ve never seen him so… so happy. Not since before his parents died. And the way he looks at you – I know that look. That’s how I was looking at May when we got together. I’m glad he found you.”

…and yeah, they’re officially in sap territory. Tony guesses he should be relieved prison didn’t rob Ben of his romantic side.

“I’m glad I found him, too,” he says, cause he doesn’t want the guy doubting who’s the lucky one in this equation for one second.

Apparently that was the right thing to say cause Ben gives him a nod. Tony finally feels his shoulders relax.

He’d say his first-ever ‘meet the fam’ was a success.

* 

**Four weeks later**

Peter frowns at the results on the StarkPad in Dr. Banner’s hands.

“Could it be a false reading?”

“I ran them myself. Twice.”

Peter rereads the table again. The fastcuring rate is higher than even Yuki and his most optimistic calculations estimated, and if their theories on the control of polymerization heat evolution will prove correct, then –
“Banner, stop hogging my intern.”

“His workday ended thirty minutes ago,” Dr. Banner replies smoothly, pushing his glasses back up his nose before turning towards Erik Lehnsherr, who’s scowling at them from the doorway to the lab. “Meaning he is free to take a meeting with StarkMedical on his promising research.”

“His workday ends when I say it ends,” Lehnsherr says, shifting his attention to Peter, who has to contain his glee despite how tiring the reality of Lehnsherr’s attitude is.

“Sir, this won’t take long, I promise. Dr. Banner just wanted to talk through the latest trials and I thought it’ll be alright, seeing as I already handed in my analysis –”

“Which is what I intend to go over with you. You get five minutes.”

With that, Lehnsherr turns on his heels and stalks out.

Dr. Banner chuckles. “Care to revise your earlier statement?”

It takes Peter a moment to recall what he’s referring to, but when he does, a huge grin spreads across his face.

“Never,” he says, and unlocks the tablet’s screen again.

Seriously, no one in their right mind would complain about Peter’s current situation. When he started his internship, he expected a lot of long, grueling hours, mostly filled with setting up meeting rooms, synching devices for briefings and fetching lunch so that other engineers would let him watch them work.

Yet nothing could be further from the truth: sure, he’s done his fair share of coffee runs, but after the first week of getting his bearings and the feel of the Engineering Department at Stark Industries, Lehnsherr himself had taken him under his wing.

“Ha, no, he’s not favoring you,” Tony said when Peter had raised his fears. “No one considers Erik’s attention to be good fortune, really. I swear everyone’s pitying you cause you got the most demanding bastard of a mentor anyone could ever have.”

Three weeks later, Peter has come to realize just how accurate Tony’s explanation was.

Erik Lehnsherr is brilliant, however, and Peter’s had years of practice meeting the highest expectations in fast-paced workplaces, so no matter how exhausting it is to have Lehnsherr breathing down his neck as he watches and learns and assists and analyzes, nothing will ever wipe the grin off Peter’s face.

“No reason to smile, Parker,” Lehnsherr tells him when he enters the man’s office, “not until your calculations are flawless.”

Peter’s face falls. “Where’d I go wrong?”

Despite his long-suffering sigh, Lehnsherr walks him through exactly how he screwed up, and has him correct his mistake right then and there in the office, like he always does when he finds an error in Peter’s work.

“Next time you fuck this up, I’m sending it back to you without comment.”

“Of course, sir.”
Though Peter’s quite certain he’ll never make this mistake again. For all his gruff attitude and arrogant vibes, Lehnsherr is a surprisingly good teacher… as long as you’re able to keep up with him, that is.

“When can I expect notes from R&D?”

“When Shonda gets ‘round to it, Parker.”

“Oh, sorry, I –”

“You just thought you’d rush one of the world’s leading structural engineers cause you want to see if you scored a golden star on your homework assignment. Now, I heard you’re requesting tomorrow off?”

Peter blinks. “Um, I did. But Muñoz is out sick for a week and Janos asked me to fill in, and it’s about the new StarkJet and – it’s fine, sir. Really.”

Lehnsherr’s lips curl into a smirk that reminds Peter why everyone’s comparing the man to a shark.

“*Stars and Stripes* opens tomorrow, doesn’t it?”

Peter nods.

“Then I’ll make you a deal: do me a favor and I’ll tell Janos he’ll get you all of Monday.”

Peter fears he knows where this is going. “What do you need, sir?”

“Stark’s thoughts on the latest campaign proposals.”

*Bullseye.*

“Deadline tonight?” Peter ventures, not at all surprised when Lehnsherr nods.

“Consider this your final task of the day. Get it done, you get a long weekend. Fail, you’re reporting to Janos at eight o’clock tomorrow, sharp.”

Peter barely refrains from hitting his head against the wall.

To think he had such high hopes.

Well, granted, it’s only Lehnsherr who’s using the fact that Peter’s dating Tony to his advantage, and he hasn’t told anyone else. Probably enjoys the fact that he has a new way to ensure his boss shows up to meetings and replies to correspondence on time for a change way too much to share his secret.

Besides, it’s not like Peter minds – Tony and Lehnsherr’s back-and-forth is way too entertaining as well as a great insight in the workings of a Fortune 500 company. Peter’s starting to think him playing messenger for two of the most brilliant minds in the field of engineering is merely another facet of Lehnsherr’s teaching methods.

So really, it’s him who’s doing Peter a favor.

He finds Tony in the workshop, buried elbow-deep in a car-sized contraption Peter has never seen before, legs moving to the *Black Sabbath* blasting from the speakers.

Before he met Tony, he never thought people could actually dance to heavy metal, but Tony does it with the kind of bone-deep appreciation Peter finds captivating.
Which is probably why he ends up watching until Tony has finished up whatever he was doing to the machine’s interior and motions for JARVIS to turn down the volume.

Peter clears his throat.

Tony startles, but doesn’t drop the rag he was about to wipe his hands with. Instead, he turns a smirk on Peter, which drops the moment Tony has caught a glimpse of his expression. “Mr. Stark,” is as far as he gets before Tony cuts him off with a groan.

“Ugh, no, what now? I went to his stupid meeting on Monday, I looked over the new specs for the Jet, what else can that bastard possibly want?”

“Um, your thoughts on the proposal from PR? Due tonight?”

“Oh, right. That.”

Peter smiles at Tony’s pouting since by now he can spot whenever Peter is in ‘Intern Mode’, meaning he’ll maintain professional distance until he’s achieved whatever assignment Lehnsherr tasked him with.

It still amazes Peter how quickly Tony concedes to his fate.

“Ugh, fine… J, pull up whatever it is that I’m meant to be improving.”

Thirty minutes later, Peter is petting a happily chirping Dum-E when Tony calls his name. He didn’t even hear Tony approach, but now the man’s standing in front of him, a tablet in hand and a glint in his eye.

“Wanna give it a read?” he asks, and it takes Peter a moment to realize he means the proposal on the StarkPad.

“But I don’t – uh. Mr. Xavier said I’m not allowed –”

“And I’m saying you are. You’re the target demographic, I’d be stupid not to get your thoughts on this.”

“I don’t know anything about Marketing.”

Tony cocks an eyebrow.

Peter feels himself blush.

While he might not have much experience, he has been on the end of more than one of MJ’s lectures on how the advertising industry is exploiting psychology to manipulate consumers. When he recognized the same tactics in one of SI’s campaigns to promote the next generation of StarkPhones, all he did was point out that most of his peers were fully aware they were being played.

‘We don’t appreciate being manipulated,’ he said.

He’d expected Tony to shrug it off or maybe chuckle – not review the campaign himself, then demand Marketing to come up with something better.

Anyway, that means he has no ground to stand on, not really, so he accepts the tablet and starts reading.

He doesn’t have much to say, but Tony listens to each word, then either tells JARVIS to make the
necessary annotations or argues with Peter, who… well.

The extent of the trust Tony has in him, the amount of respect it takes for Tony Stark to not only ask his opinion but also take it seriously…

It’s staggering. Almost overwhelming.

Peter has never felt anything like this. He feels… it’s hard to describe, even to himself.

There’s a light tremor in his hand when he hands the tablet back to Tony, but Tony’s mind is already on returning the file to Marketing, so he doesn’t notice.

He also doesn’t seem to notice that he just let Peter hand him something.

If Peter thought Tony’s shown how much he trusts him before, it’s nothing compared to now. He thought he felt it sometimes when they were in bed together, basking in each other’s company after trading hand jobs, and while it warms Peter to the core, he has never had such a visceral reaction to it.

As he watches Tony dictate a snide email to JARVIS, it’s like every cell in Peter’s body comes to life with joy.

No, not joy – love.

The realization strikes him like great ideas do sometimes, leaving him floating on elation and the potent cocktail of hormones in his brain, yet this time it’s ten times more intense.

In that moment, the distance between Tony and himself feels like a physical wound, and he closes it as soon as he hears JARVIS send off the email.

Tony’s gasp of surprise is enough to grant him access to his mouth, and Peter pours everything he can into the kiss that follows.

He can’t remember ever kissing anyone like this. It’s hard and insistent, cause he couldn’t restrain himself if he tried, but at the same time he wants to be gentle, to show Tony how much he returns the sentiment even if he can’t actually give voice to it yet.

When they part, Tony looks as dazed as Peter feels.

They’re both smiling like idiots.

“What do you want?” Tony whispers.

One hand cups Peter’s jaw, thumb stroking his cheek, and Peter can’t help but imagine what it would feel like if it were Tony’s cock instead.

The impulse is foreign, but it’s there.

Peter feels his smile widen. He takes Tony’s hand from his face and uses it to guide him towards the well-worn sofa against the wall. He can see a trace of apprehension seep into the lines of Tony’s shoulders as he gently nudges him to sit down, so he leans in for another kiss.

Tony shifts like he expects Peter to straddle him, like they’ve done frequently over the past weeks, but the thought holds no appeal right now.

He pulls back enough to catch Tony’s eyes.
“I’m sure,” he says.

Then he drops to the floor.

The last time he kneeled for Tony was in the arc reactor room – a lifetime ago. This feels nothing like it. It’s surreal, almost, how striking the difference is to Peter himself. His mind is calm, not running through the options, wondering which strategy will get Tony off fastest or contemplating how much force his throat can take.

His hands are steady when he brings them to Tony’s thighs. He traces a leisurely path up the fabric of his jeans, skirting around the crotch and to his belt buckle instead.

The apprehension has lessened, but it’s still there. Peter isn’t worried, though. He knows he wants this for the right reasons. Tony will catch on soon enough.

He takes his time, cause he’s not in a hurry. He likes the weight of Tony’s eyes on him, the flutter of his abdomen when Peter pushes up his T-shirt to have better access, the soft huff of breath when he unbuckles the belt.

There’s a row of buttons underneath, no zipper, which means Peter can draw this out even longer. One button, then a brush of knuckles against Tony’s crotch. Another, then trailing a finger along the length that stiffens at his touch.

By the time the last button is open, Tony is almost fully hard.

“Lift your hips for me?” Peter murmurs.

He hears Tony swallow, but a moment later, he does.

Peter pulls down both jeans and underwear, lets them pool on the floor around Tony’s ankles, then runs his hands up Tony’s legs, over his knees and the inside of his thighs.

It’s the easiest thing, then, to keep going, to caress the side of Tony’s cock.

He pauses at the tip, gently rubs the slit, then reverses his path on the other side. He maps every inch of Tony’s erection like that, teasing him to full hardness, and only then mirrors his fingers’ actions with his tongue.

The taste is nice, even the drop of precome he catches, or maybe that’s just cause Tony finally makes a noise.

Peter looks up and meets dilated eyes, filled with arousal and the sort of awe that makes Peter’s pulse flutter.

It gives him the courage to finally take the tip into his mouth.

He’s careful, mostly for his own sake, cause the last thing he wants right now is to slip out of the present, but the more he experiments with licks and kisses, the bolder he gets.

It helps that Tony’s growing loud again: soft gasps alternating with low moans, the latter especially when Peter labs at the sensitive skin of his testicles while continuing to stroke Tony with his hands.

Peter works himself up to taking half of Tony’s cock in his mouth, but that’s as far as he dares right now.

It’s okay, though, since he discovers that he can drive Tony positively wild by working the underside
of his cock with his mouth. Strong presses with his flat tongue make Tony moan, massaging it with the tip has him keen, a certain amount of suction and his hips buck.

He’s so immersed in discovering the varied reactions that Tony’s warning catches him by surprise.

“I’m – fuck, Peter, I’m close.”

With one last, lingering suck, he pulls off and smirks up at Tony, but he’s sure to keep one hand on Tony’s cock, stroking in a fast rhythm while angling it away from his face.

Later on, Tony will tell him that’s what pushed him over the edge – the natural, confident way Peter signaled he doesn’t want him to come in his mouth.

In that moment, Peter honestly didn’t think about it. All his brain power was dedicated to drinking in the sight of Tony’s climax, committing the guttural groan to memory… and noticing that he was hard inside his pants.

He managed three strokes with his hands before Tony joins him on the floor and swallows him down.

Tony’s mouth is lax and sloppier in his post-orgasmic haze, but he still knows exactly what will make Peter shout his name in record time.

The cold of the workshop floor is seeping into Peter’s skin even though he’s still wearing a button down, and he thinks Tony rolled onto the wet spot when he flopped down next to him, but Peter has no desire to move. Not when his head is cradled on Tony’s shoulder and there’s a hand stroking his hair.

They’ll have to get up eventually, of course. Steve and Bucky are expecting them for last-minute tweaks before the grand opening tomorrow, and they both really need a shower beforehand.

For now, though, Peter lets himself melt against Tony’s side. Anything else can wait.

*

The bakery, when he gets there, is controlled chaos.

It’s 10.40 am, only twenty minutes before it officially opens for the first time, and the team’s been one person short for the past hour.

Which is why Peter positively jogged from the Tower to the cab JARVIS was nice enough to hail for him after a frantic Steve had called: One of their employees was in an accident and now they’re in desperate need of a runner.

The sense of déjà-vu slows him down for a moment when he punches in the code Steve told him and lets himself into the employee area.

It intensifies when he reaches the kitchen.

Sure, it’s been converted to suit Steve’s baking needs, but there’s only so much that needed changing. The stainless steel color scheme remains, as does the energy-efficient lighting. And it looks like what used to be Rumlow’s office still serves the same purpose. For a moment, the entire room is alive with memories, of whispered names and key cards subtly slipped into his pockets, of –

No.
Come on, Parker. Deep breaths.

It’s all in the past. He’s just filling in for the weekend until Bucky, who’s taken charge of any and all hiring decisions since Steve figured out he hates declining people’s applications, can vet and hire a new runner.

“Thank fuck, mate, you’re here,” Bucky sighs when he spots Peter mere seconds after he entered the restaurant-turned-bakery-cafe.

The man’s wiping down his coffee bar while, past the show baking station, a tall lady with dreads is polishing the glass of the display case already half-filled with pastries, rolls and loaves. Steve, meanwhile, has returned from the front, where –

“Woah.”

“Less gawking, more restocking,” Steve says, gesturing for Peter to follow him back into the kitchen.

Good thing he knows the space as well as he does, since he can’t tear his eyes away from the line of people that has already formed outside the front doors as well as the shutter hiding the concession window.

“How long have they been there?”

Steve grimaces, then shoulders into the kitchen where he proceeds to pile Peter’s arms with trays upon trays.

“Since nine, I think.”

“That’s awesome!” But Steve only looks more pained. “Isn’t it?”

The refrigerator door clicks shut.

“Of course it is,” Steve huffs. “I’m just… What if they don’t like my baking? Or the prices? And I’m starting to think we should’ve had table service after all, the space is so big, we can’t ask them all to walk up to the counter every time they want –”

“Sure you can!” Peter interrupts. “And hey, if people were willing to shell out forty bucks for one of your desserts under Rumlow, they’re gonna be okay with four dollars for a muffin. Especially one of yours.”

That makes Steve’s lips quirk. “Bucky’s been saying the same thing.”

“Bucky’s a wise man.”

Steve full-on chuckles this time, which Peter counts as a win, and leads the way back into the Stars and Stripes. Once both display cases are filled to capacity and Peter has changed into his very own bakery T-shirt, he checks the dish trolleys, ensures he knows where to find additional napkins, and familiarizes himself with the menu.

He recognizes most of what’s on offer from the taste testing Steve and Bucky hosted last week, right after their kitchen was finished. Several items, however, are entirely new.

“Results of more than one sleepless night,” Bucky says, joining Peter in front of the counter. “Not sure what’s wrong with the classics, but apparently simply offering perfect croissants and bagels ain’t gonna cut it. Guess we can always adjust, once we see what folks are actually gonna buy.”
Either Bucky had as little sleep as Steve, or the stress of today has lowered his guard, since there’s a decided edge of nerves creeping into Bucky’s tone. Peter can’t hide his smile.

“You’re gonna do great.”

“We’d better. Ain’t got no plan B.”

Peter has no reply to that, so he keeps quiet. Bucky’s eyes flick to his, then down to the miniature Stars and Stripes logo stitched onto the front of Peter’s staff tee.

“Anyway.” Bucky clears his throat. “Thanks for doing this, mate,”

“I would’ve been here anyway.”

“Yeah, to eat our stuff, not clean up after customers. Figured you’d be only too glad to be rid of this place.”

“I am,” Peter says after a beat. “But this isn’t about the past. It’s about the future.”

His reply clearly takes Bucky by surprise, yet a moment later the man is grinning and giving his shoulder a grateful squeeze.

The grin is still in place two hours later, albeit more frayed around the edges, when Bucky’s trying to keep up with the steady stream of customers that have descended upon the Stars and Stripes during their first-ever lunch rush.

And a rush it is – Peter used to think working at No Bones was exhausting, but an upscale restaurant that seats maybe 60 guests at most is nothing compared to a walk-in bakery that also has a concession window.

Peter thinks that by the time the day is over, he’ll have cleared more tables within a day than he did during an entire week under Rumlow.

He’s not complaining in the slightest, though. Steve hasn’t stopped smiling since the doors opened and despite the sweat on Bucky’s brow, Peter has caught him exchange radiant glances with his partner more than once.

“Missing the service industry this much, Parker?”

Peter clears the last plate off the corner table before turning to MJ, who…

Oh, shit.

“I take it you won’t be joining me for that coffee you invited me to?”

Peter ducks his head. “Sorry. I was gonna text you once it calmed down a bit, but it’s been like this practically ever since we opened.”

MJ surveys the cafe. All tables are filled with students, workers on their lunch break, tourists and people Peter figures just wanna be able to say they were there on the very first day, given the amount of publicity Stars and Stripes is bound to get. At least Rumlow entering a plea deal was good for something.

“Need a hand?”

Peter blinks.
MJ’s totally sincere, from what he can tell, and even if she were only acting the part, Peter’s too relieved to care. Should the buzz remain this high, Bucky’s gonna have to hire not just one, but two new runners.

Another pair of hands goes a long way in the hours to come. It even allows Peter to take care of the dirty dishes in a semi-regular manner, and in the final hour before closing, he’s dancing around Bucky behind the coffee bar to restock cups and glasses.

That’s the only reason he notices when a – thankfully empty – espresso jug misses the sink cause something near the door startled Bucky.

“That’s the reporter chick.”

Peter follows Bucky’s glance. Sure enough, there’s whatshername, Egeton? Egerton? Well, there’s the business reporter from the *New York Times* who did a full-page spread about *Stars and Stripes*. She’s probably responsible for about half the people who came to devour pastries today.

Before she reaches the counter, Bucky manages to wipe the panic off his face. It’s replaced with his most charming grin.

“Mrs. Egerton,” he says, “what a pleasant surprise. You shouldn’t have cut your appointment short on our account.”

“And I didn’t,” she replies. “Apparently Tony Stark is just as eager to get here as the rest of Manhattan.”

Tony? Why would… Oh, right. It takes Peter a moment to remember today’s the opening of the Munroe Group’s new waste processing unit.

“I figured I deserve a treat before returning to the copy desk.”

“Well, you’ve come to the right place!” Bucky says and proceeds to walk her through what’s left of today’s products.

Tony himself arrives half an hour later, grinning like the cat who not only got the cream but also the hidden can of tuna.

“Waste management seems to have grown on you,” Peter teases, just as Tony removes his sunglasses.

“Nah, but anything that’s gonna make Toomes furious is a win in my book. Now, how’d today go?”

By the time Peter has filled Tony in – between tidying up his section and informing the gawking patrons who’re lingering over coffee that they’re closing soon – more guests have joined them. The caterers arrive at six on the dot and set up along a wall while Peter wrestles the final load into the dishwasher, and soon the shop is officially closed for the day.

“… and to a marvelous opening!” is the only part he catches of Harold’s toast when he returns, yet judging by Tony’s long-suffering expression, he didn’t miss the speech of the century.

The instant he’s in grabbing distance, Tony slides an arm around his waist. Peter lets himself be pulled close without a second thought. He tenses when he remembers that they’re in the middle of a dinner party, surrounded by selected guests…

But most of them already know. Peter spots Dr. Banner’s soft smile as well as Colonel Rhodes’
smirk. Even Lehnsherr isn’t scowling at the moment.

Granted, that might also have to do with Bucky and Steve stepping into the middle of the circle that has formed, looking exhausted but deeply happy.

“Thank you, Harold,” Steve says. “and thank all of you for coming.”

Peter leans back against Tony’s chest as the rest of the toast washes over him. It’s not long before Bucky opens the buffet (‘Nope, we didn’t make it, so if it sucks, complain to Stark. He picked ‘em.’), and the party is officially under way.

He keeps a close eye on May and Ben, but his uncle seems to be doing well enough despite feeling visibly overwhelmed. Peter promised MJ to introduce her to Dr. Banner should he ever get the chance, so he does that and immediately flees again. Fortunately, Lehnsherr has found the architect in charge of the remodeling, meaning Peter is spared awkward small talk with his boss and gets to search for Tony again.

He finds him standing near the counter, staring at a table, spaced out like he’s deep in thought.

“Tony?”

The intensity of Tony’s gaze takes him by surprise. Peter steps closer. The only warning he gets is Tony’s eye darting to his lips before Tony tugs him against his chest and kisses him, short and soft and totally at odds with the look in his eyes.

“What was that for?”

It’s the most clichéd question, but Peter honestly has no idea.

Tony grins, then nods at the table he was staring at. “That’s it, right?”

“Huh?”

Peter blinks… but then it hits him.

They’re standing in the exact spot where they first met.

“Wow.”

“Yeah.” Tony clears his throat. “Hey. We can leave any time, if you’ve had enough.”

“No, no, I’m…” Peter stops, cause fine’s not the right word.

He thinks back to that evening, to stumbling over his words when he recognized the man at his table was none other than Tony Stark, most gifted engineer in the Northern hemisphere, and to the stupid bit of wishful thinking that led him…

Right to where he is now. Helping his friends live their dream. Dating the most wonderful man he can imagine. Having daily talks with his uncle after two years apart. Attending weekly therapy sessions and doing corny exercises that actually help. Interning with the most prestigious program in the country. Possibly becoming a contractor for StarkMedical and colleague – colleague! – to Dr. Bruce Banner.

The elation Peter felt last night in Tony’s workshop returns with a practically intoxicating vengeance.

Yeah, no. He’s not fine.
“I’m glad.”

A moment after he says it, Tony’s lips curl into a smile.

“I’m glad, too,” he says.

They both know that ‘glad’ is an understatement.

THE END.

Chapter End Notes

THANK YOU FOR READING! If you enjoyed this, I'd love to hear from you, no matter how long ago this fic was completed.

For the record, I'm afraid I do not intend to add to this fic... as opposed to Raising Hybrid Puppies. So I'll return to the RHP verse soon, depending on how "Far From Home" affects my Muse :)

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