Summary

It's been months since the events of Civil War, and the Avengers are doing their best to remain a team, having promised to forgive and forget. Unfortunately for them, Tony Stark's latest invention has been stolen and recovering it causes tension to reappear.

Meanwhile, in Queens, Peter Parker has two main priorities on his plate — complete his midterm finals, and track down a fishbowl wearing criminal that may or may not lead him
right into the hands of the Avengers.

Somehow between all of this, Spider-man's identity is revealed to the Avengers, Steve and Tony's friendship may permanently be damaged due to continued hidden secrets, and Happy struggles to buy a youth-sized casket for Peter's funeral.

Things were a lot easier when they were fighting over Bucky Barnes.

(Or: The Avengers welcome Peter into their crazy superhero family and will do anything to protect him.)

Shameless Peter whump and Protective Tony Stark.

Notes

Follow your muse, and it'll take you where you want to go.

*waves* Hello. I'm not sure why I want to say this, but I haven't written fan-fiction for Marvel since I was a wee 'ol teenager, way before the MCU, just as Sam Raimi was popping out his Spidey films. What I mean with that is - I am a HUGE comic book nerd. So I hope you welcome me in and I hope you love this story as much as I'm loving writing it, because my heart belongs to these characters and sharing this story - this world - with you makes me so giddy.

Tom Holland is, without doubt, the best Spider-man ever. And I think him simply acting as Peter has given me a lot of inspiration for this fanfic, god bless his heart.

A lot of things will be explained as the story goes on, but I'm always willing to answer questions as well. This story is not cannon to Infinity War or Far From Home, as it was written directly after the first and way before the latter. There will be *no* Mary Sue's/original characters. Everything is pulled from the comics.

The biggest thing to know right now is: Civil War has ended, Tony helped Steve get the remaining Avengers out of the Raft, and they've decided to reassemble in an attempt to reform the bonds they once had. After Spiderman: Homecoming, Peter has rejected his spot on the Avengers, choosing to "stay on the ground" a little bit longer and focus on maturing his skills as a superhero. As such, the Avengers are unaware of his true identity. Bruce's location will be explained later on, and it may or may not tie in with the canon of him being in Ragnarok.

There will be an abundance of characters in this fanfic, but I will not be including everyone. And sometimes, someone may pop up for one scene, or one line. Just like the movies, of course :) Your main focal characters are here to shine with the aid of those around them. I am a sucker for the Tony Stark&Peter Parker mentor&father-son nonsense, so I won't be shying away from their awkward interactions.

And lastly, things will start out a bit fluffy, and the tone will progress from there. Be aware: it does get dark. My chapters are very, very, very long - but I do not write unnecessary scenes. Everything is plotted and detailed in a timeline long before even I get to see the finished work. Everything falls into the final piece of the puzzle, so strap in!
With that said, ENJOY!! I look forward to seeing you each chapter, and hope you'll take a second to review. :-D

See the end of the work for more notes.
Prologue

Identity Theft
“I call it — the Chameleon.”

Tony Stark extended his arm out wide, the helmet dangling perilously from the center of his palm. Its unsaturated white glimmered from the reflection of the sun basking through the glass ceilings of the Avengers compound, sending rays of light bouncing off the walls.

Steve cocked an eyebrow. “Like the animal?”

“Better.” Tony tossed the helmet briefly in the air, catching it with his other hand. “The microchip, nanobot technology scans and recognizes up to one-point-four-billion facial features, analyzing the appearance of any moving, walking, talking thing to duplicate via electrical impulses through its sensors.”

“It just looks like one of your many Iron Man helmets,” Clint wryly said.

“Kind of looks more like Vision,” Natasha remarked, unenthusiastic to the conversation. Her eyes focused only on the magazine down in her lap, her fingers nonchalantly flipping through the pages.

“I agree,” Wanda stated, her Sokovian accent thick on her tongue. “And I do not think it is wise to create another Ultron.”

Before Steve could respond — which Tony could sense he was going to, his lecture so obviously burning on his tongue — he quickly spoke up.

“No — no Ultron. This here is state of the art replication engineering. The nanites utilize holographic technology that allows the user to change his,” Tony turned to Natasha and Wanda, “or her, appearance at the push of a button.”

“Why?” Sam asked, elbows on his knees as he shrugged. “Just…why?”

“Why?” Tony gaped, feigning dramatic offense. “Why have the upper hand on your enemy? Why make undercover tactical missions twice as easy on the team? Think about it, Wilson. We need to get somewhere, preferably sneak somewhere, and what’s our biggest hindrance, what gets in the way more than anything else?”

The room burst into responses, voices all speaking at once.

“SHIELD,” Wanda stated.

“Hydra,” Clint said.

“Your ego,” Rhodey muttered, his arms crossed.

“Our faces!” Tony’s tone was sharp and his eyes cold on Rhodey. “Our faces have become our biggest roadblock. Even our second faces, as gorgeous as the Iron Man suit truly is, are world renowned. And…while still painful to admit, mistakes were made with the Accords.”

Tony looked around the room, the common area of the Avenger’s compound, remembering that the building had only just recently become occupied with its tenants again. Steve, Rhodey, Sam, Clint, Wanda, and Natasha all sat around him, lounging on the sofa’s while Vision stood in the back corner of the room, observing and storing away information without particularly engaging.

The sight was confounding — he had a feeling it would be for some time to come. If you had told
him a handful of months ago that this would happen, that the team would be together like this after all they had gone through, it would be doubtful that he'd believe it. Hell, even now he still struggled with the fact.

The road to recovery wasn’t an easy one, and he was reminded of that every day. They were like cracked and dried up glue, barely holding on by a foundation that once was.

Tony cleared his throat, returning his focus to the conversation. “Mistakes were made, and we can’t escape that. The headlines were read, the stories were spread, and if we want to continue to do our job — preventing another New York incident or worse, then we need to step it up.”

“And...I’m sorry sir,” Vision finally spoke, his red hand slowly raising in the air like an unsure schoolboy. “How does…pretending to be other individuals help us with such an issue?”

Sam wagged a finger his way. “I’m with the Android on this one.”

“No...no, I think I understand Stark with this.” Natasha looked up, her interest piqued. “The ability to hide our identity’s outside of masks and armor could greatly play into our hand.”

The room fell silent. Natasha adjusted herself on the sofa, going to sit on her one leg as she turned to look at Steve. “Imagine if you could have disguised yourself as Ross to get everyone off the Raft.”

Steve shook his head, lips pursed. “No, I wouldn’t —”

“No, we didn’t need it — I didn’t need it,” Steve insisted. "Everyone got out. Scott Lang is home with his family —”

“Speaking of which,” Clint drily interrupted, “I promised my wife I’d be home for dinner at six.”

“Whipped,” Tony muttered, spinning the helmet around in the palm of his hand.

Steve continued, “Sam, Clint, Wanda — they’re all here. They’re safe. We didn’t need to assume someone’s identity and ruin any possible reputation they’ve spent their lives working on to make that happen.”

Natasha paused. Her eyes locked on his, both staring at each other with purposeful intent.

Steve bowed his head just slightly, trapping a sigh in his lungs that he refused to release. She was right — it took weeks. There were measures he resorted to that his pride otherwise wouldn’t have allowed — he needed Tony’s help, and in hindsight he was shocked to have received it. But with it, General Ross was left clueless as to how the remaining Avengers escaped, and they began to put the entire nightmare behind them.

Realistically, Steve knew that the chances of making that escape by himself were slim to none. They had tried, many many times had they tried, but the raft was sealed tight. Tony’s technology — more specifically, the ability to disable technology, played a large part in getting the others out. He didn’t even gloat about it; in fact, few remarks were made in their exchange. Their team had been disassembled at their own hands, and deep down inside, they both knew it was time to repair the damage they had done.
Within months they had the Sokovia Accords repealed and out of their hair. Without the Accords, and with Barnes slowly but surely exonerated, there weren't any crimes committed to keep them from returning home. And so they did.

It was a truce of sorts, a white flag to the whole disaster that left them broken and empty inside. A way of saying ‘let this be a lesson, but this doesn’t have to be the end.’

His technology saved them back then, so it was hard to admit that history wouldn't repeat itself again. Maybe he was putting too much doubt in the helmets possibility's.

“It’s not morally right,” Steve insisted, his fingers rubbing harshly at his temples.

Tony rolled his eyes. “I’m not suggesting we start assuming the identity of your local senator and get them into their latest sex scandal, Rogers. I’m saying that sometimes, taking on the face of the bad guy can be a good thing.”

“We are not the bad guys.” Wanda appeared confused, her expression torn. “We are the good guys. Why would we want to become bad guys?”

“I do not believe Tony is implying we change sides, Wanda,” Vision explained. “I believe he is saying that in dire times we may need to assume the face of the enemy to gain access to their trades, secrets, possibly even locations for our own purposes.”

“Hey — I knew I did something right with him.” Tony laid the helmet down on the glass coffee table below, standing upright with a clap of his hands. “So who wants to know how I created this beauty?”

Groans, moans, and sighs were all received at once. Tony's expression fell flat, an insulted frown resting on his lips the moment he heard their reactions.

“Aw hell no, I’m out.” Rhodey stood up from the sofa, his leg braces squeaking at the movement. “You know your scientific mumble jumble gives me a migraine, Tones.”

“Oh — what — come on, Platypus!” Tony exasperatedly whined, watching as he and the others began to leave. “Natasha? You seemed interested, I can tell you all about how I got the nanobots to —”

“Sorry Tony,” Natasha not-so-apologetically said. “I’d pretend to care, but you and I both know we’re past that.”

Wanda perked up. “Oh. If we do not need to be polite, then I will be retreating to my room.”

“I will follow you,” Vision calmly said, following her into the hallway.

She smiled softly. “I would like to be alone, Vision.”

“Okay.” He didn’t falter in his steps. "Then I will be alone with you.”

As the others left, Sam and Clint regrettable realized they were the only two remaining. The wide, almost toothy grin on Tony’s face was all but terrifying — a sign of what was to come, a never-ending explanation on his latest technology they wouldn’t be allowed to escape from.

Sam leaned over into Clint’s ear. “You think your wife would mind setting out an extra dinner plate?”
“Oh, screw you guys,” Tony snapped, bending over to retrieve the helmet from the coffee table. “You know, I don’t need you. I have plenty of people who are actually interested in this remarkable, amazing, life-changing invention.”

Clint scoffed. “Like who? ’Cause I think Bruce is a little preoccupied to answer his cell right now.”

“I have more than just Bruce. I know other people,” Tony defended, his voice faltering in a way that made the other two men raise an eyebrow. “I do. I have many other people I can talk to about this. In fact, I know someone who’ll be extremely impressed.”

“Oh my god, Mr. Stark, this is like, the coolest thing ever!”

Tony rolled his eyes and rubbed his forehead, a tension headache brimming behind his eyeballs.

“I know, kid. You’ve said that about thirty-six times now.”

“No, no no, it’s not that, it’s just…dude, this is the coolest thing ever.”

Peter held the helmet in his hands as if it were gold, his eyes bright and wide and his feet bouncing with excitement. There was a sparkle of wonder that lined his expression, so intense it could nearly light up the room. It was an element the kid always brought with him whenever Tony invited him to work in the lab. He had come to enjoy it over the years time, finding that the pure, raw glee managed to brighten his otherwise sour mood.

But while he wasn’t necessarily expecting an in-depth discussion regarding the scientific findings on his latest project, he also wasn’t expecting a broken record to play on repeat.

He massaged his forehead harder.

“You say the word ‘coolest’ and ‘thing’ and ‘ever’ one more time Parker, and I assure you this will be the last time you and DUM-E get to play patty-cake together.”

Peter’s head snapped up like a broken rubber band, and slowly he put the helmet back down on the work desk below him, his lips quivering with a delayed response.

“Wha-why-what…no. No, I want to — I just thought…” he repeatedly cleared his throat and nervously straightened his back. “Okay, so, I gotta know…how did you get the holographic chip to store facial data recognition?”

Tony scoffed with amusement. “Jesus kid, that’s the best question you can come up with? That part was borderline child's play.”

“Yeah, well, no, it’s just —” Peter stumbled over his words, scooting his stool closer to where Tony sat. “Facial recognition typically uses bio metrics for its body measurements and calculations, to—you know, refer to metrics related to human characteristics, but its used in access control, never memory stored control. And I can’t imagine a simple storage unit could hold all this information and relay it back to the recognition program in time to provide results, so… what was your trick?”

Tony hummed, giving a short and sharp nod. If there was one thing he could always count on, it
was that Peter could talk his head off when it came to science. And while there were days he sometimes doubted having supplied the kid with so much technology to support his vigilante heroism, it was moments like this that renewed his confidence in the young lad.

He wouldn't admit it aloud, but it made him proud.

Or some mutated form of the emotion, he hadn't quite figured it out yet.

“Impressive, kid — smart thinking. But whacha think about multimodal biometric systems?”

Peter paused, his eyes darting back and forth like his brain was working a mile per second. Suddenly, and all too characteristically, he jumped up with newfound enthusiasm.

“Oh my god! Oh jeeze, that’s — wow, that’s — dude, that’s genius!” Peter stammered with excitement, his voice momentarily squeaking with glee. “So you installed multimodal biometric systems to use multiple sensors to overcome the limitations of unimodal biometric systems?”

“And what can multimodal biometric systems do that unimodal biometric systems can’t?” Tony used the moment as a teaching opportunity, his tone resembling a professor pushing their student to explain the answer they already know. It was funny, he never once imagined he would ever have the patience to teach anyone anything, but something about Peter brought that out of him.

“They aren’t limited by identical limitations. They can obtain sets of information from the same marker or different bio metrics.” Peter bounced in his seat. “Oh man, that means fingerprints, skins, eyeballs — oh, even vocal chords can be stored away no matter what its integrity is. That is —”

Tony held up a finger. “Don’t say it.”

“—so cool!” Peter snatched the helmet into his hands. “So when do we get to try this bad boy out? Hey, I saw this really old movie last night, Blade Runner, maybe we could try downloading—”

As if on cue, a low but audible beeping came from Peter’s Jansport backpack. He set the helmet down and scrambled for the bag, retrieving his cell phone that rang furiously with the alarm he had set for himself.

“Aw man,” Peter moaned.

Tony took the helmet from the table. “Not tonight, kiddo.”

“What? No!” Peter gawked, carelessly and quickly stuffing his things into his backpack. “We can try it before I leave. I’ll be quick — uh, we’ll be quick, I mean —”

“Nope, you know the deal. I get you back home when Aunt Hottie wants you there, and you get to keep wearing that unitard of yours around town.” Tony walked across the lab and locked the helmet away. It stayed sealed in a case similar to his many Iron Man suits, protected beneath layers of clear glass. He briefly turned back around to Peter with a finger wagging in his direction.

“And we are not repeating the infamous homecoming fiasco. I have spent my life around some intimidating powers that be and none have come close to your aunt after she found you in your blue and red underoo’s.”

Peter’s head dropped to the floor and he swung his backpack over his shoulder, dragging his feet to the front door like a beaten puppy.
“Yes, Mr. Stark.”

Tony raised his hand in the air, his back still turned to the kid. “Hold your horses.”

Peter paused just as the automatic doors to the lab slid open, turning around confused yet slightly excited at the possibility of staying. He watched as Tony walked towards him, a small stack of papers held in his hands.

“Reading material for the ride home.”

Eyebrows furrowed, Peter reached out and took the pamphlets from him. His eyes skimmed over the papers before his shoulders fell with a heavy sigh.

“Mr. Stark, I told you —”

“Ah-ah!” Tony interrupted. “I don’t rehash old conversations.”

“Yeah, I know, I—I just…I…I can’t.” Peter took a couple of steps forward, his arm outreached with the brochures in an attempt to return them.


“No, no it’s not that, it’s —” Peter dropped his arm back to his side, the pamphlets still tight in his grip yet his posture showing how unsure he was of himself.

Tony's lips drew tight. “It’s not? Then you’ll need to explain what it is, because I’ve never had someone turn down a free ride to MIT before — gotta say Pete, this is a first.”

“I just…I don’t know, Mr. Stark.” Hesitantly, he set the brochures on the work table they were previously sitting at, stepping back with caution. “I can’t leave New York. What about Spiderman, protecting the little guy? I can’t do that from MIT. And—and I can’t —”

“You can’t what?” Tony snapped in a way that was purely controlled, a vibration of intimidation that shook Peter’s core. If looks could kill, he’d surely be six feet under from the piercing glare the billionaire was giving him.

It was something about Peter's response stirred a reaction he hadn’t been expecting. Maybe it was the fact the kid was fifteen years old and worried more about the entire world than himself. Maybe it was the fact that he was being told 'no' yet again — first a spot on the Avengers team, now his college education — it was like the kid wanted to test his patience.

Peter bowed his head, his eyes locked on his dirty Nike shoes.

“I can’t leave Aunt May.” His words were quiet, his hand rubbing the nape of his neck. “She needs me, Mr. Stark. I can’t just leave her...not yet.”

Tony’s shoulders dropped. The squeak in the kid's voice was the final straw. He could feel his frustration melt away despite how badly he wanted to hold onto it — and boy did he want to hold onto it. Frustration was easy to control, he knew that emotion like the back of his hand. Sympathy and comfort was a world he hadn’t yet learned, and tonight was not the night he’d be experimenting with it.

“God, you’re going to be the death of me,” Tony mumbled, waving his hand to the door. “Go. Scadaddle. Happy’s waiting for you outside.”
Peter pulled at the strap of his backpack. “Can I come back? To see how the Chameleon works?”

His question was so innocent it almost angered him, his hand repeatedly shooing him out the door while the other squeezed the bridge of his nose.

“Go. I’ll call you, or text you, or — gosh, just go before you manage to give me a stroke.”

Peter smiled and sprinted out into the hallways. Tony almost crashed into a table chasing after him.

“And do not go through the east wing! I don’t want the others knowing I’m hanging out with a pubescent teenager!”

Peter raised his hand in the air as an acknowledgment. “Thanks, Mr. Stark! Sure thing, Mr. Stark!”

His footsteps faded out of earshot and Tony didn’t hesitate to return into the lab, collapsing onto the stool he had previously been sitting in.

Looking at his watch, he realized it was still relativity early in the night. Still, the idea of further work left a sour taste on his lips. He mindlessly tossed his screwdriver in the air, barely taking note of when his phone let out a *ding* followed by a message brightening his screen.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stark Wifi</th>
<th>10:06 PM</th>
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<td>Messages</td>
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Mon. Mar 27th, 10:05pm

Got the kid

Heading back to Queens

His foot began to tap the ground. His eyes diverted to the MIT brochures that were placed too close to his cell phone, too much in his eyesight for him to deal with right much. It was the third time now Peter had shot him down, though only the first he provided a genuine explanation. His stubbornness was resilient, and subconsciously Tony wondered if Howard Stark was laughing at from beyond the grave.

‘Karma,’ he thought. *This has to be karma.*

He quickly responded to the text on his StarkPhone, his fingers gliding across the screen with speed.
Tony sighed. School night — for Christ's sake the kid was fifteen. When he was fifteen, his biggest concern was where he could find the nearest booze and how much money he could blow in one weekend. It was never how he was going to keep the city safe, or when he could join the a team of self-sacrificial wanna-be heroes. It left an unfamiliar pain in his chest, a part of him that was worried he was stripping the kid away from his youth. He was only slightly comforted at the knowledge that even if he took away all the suits and gadgets the kid would still swing around in his damn pajamas.

Homecoming — God, what a disaster. He swore to Peter and to himself he'd never let something like that happen again. As long as he was around, he'd be there to protect the kid. After all, it was him that started this crazy world of superheroes for the next generation to look up to. In a demented way, he sort of owed it to the kid.

The day was wearing thin on him and upstairs was a tall, slender redhead awaiting his company. He stood from the stool with purpose, ignoring as his phone vibrated again, deciding the messages could wait.

“FRIDAY, lock up for me, will you?”

“Of course, boss.”

The lights turned off behind him as he exited the lab.
Mon, Mar 27th, 10:05pm

Heading back to Queens

Mon, Mar 27th, 10:07pm

good. don’t let him con you into pitstops. school night.

Mon, Mar 27th, 10:08pm

Sure thing, Mom
“Pssttt…I have an idea.”

Rhodey turned around and away from his book with curiosity, Sam’s less-than-subtle whisper catching his attention.

“This a ‘we’re going to better ourselves and society’ kind of idea, or ‘we’re going to get in a shit load of trouble’ kind of idea?”

Sam paused, briefly deliberating on his answer.

“Could be either one. I’m leaning more towards the latter. Definitely the latter.”

Rhodey huffed a sigh, setting his book down on the coffee table and removing his heavily braced legs from the ottoman they rested on.

“Meh, whatever, I could use some fun.”

A couple of hours later and the common area was no longer occupied. The Avenger’s compound was fairly quiet, even with of the bouts of employees wandering the main sections of the building. It was rare that the facility was ever not buzzing with flourishing activities. Outside SHIELD soldiers trained, mechanics worked on jets and helicopters while normal day-to-day activities kept pace, meetings filling up conference rooms and techs working at their computer stations.

It was the type of quiescence that Natasha relished in. The noises could get too stressful, her muscles growing tense at the apprehension of a possible fight approaching. The calm never came often but when it did, she made the time to enjoy it.

Still, she never let her guard down. In the kitchen making a fruit salad, she could hear heavy footsteps long before they entered the room. Chopping her strawberries with delicate ease, she never even raised her head when she spoke.

“Tony.” Another chop of the blade. “I didn’t expect to see you around here today.”

Tony straightened his suit jacket and pulled his shoulders back, strolling into the room with exaggerated confidence. Though she only looked through the corner of her eyes, it was obvious he was trying harder than usual with his demeanor.

She had known the man long enough to discover Tony Stark spoke solely with his personality, one larger than the Hulk’s. His physical appearance didn’t mean anything to him as long as he held onto his overly strong persona. He could be wearing a potato sack for clothes and still own the room.

“Aww honey, I’m hurt.” Tony approached her, standing at the edge of the kitchen island. “Disappointed in my glorious presence?”

Her neck remained low to her chest while her eyes quickly shot over to him. The chops of her blade began to slow.

“I’m sorry, did you just call me ‘honey’?” Natasha didn’t hide her sharp tone.

Tony smiled — a cocky, goofy grin that sent goosebumps up and down her arm. He leaned
casually and yet awkwardly against the kitchen island, popping a strawberry in his mouth with ease.

“Come on sweet cakes, what’s the problem?” he asked, forcefully licking his lips. “You don’t want some of this billionaire thickness?”

Natasha let loose one hard chop on her fruit before almost losing grip on the knife. Her mind sputtered, disconnecting with her vocal chords, at a complete loss for words.

Looking over, Tony continued to grin, the corners of his mouth pulled tightly to each of his ears.

“Uh, Tony.” She forced herself to swallow, hard. “Is there anything I should be made aware of? Maybe something the team should know? Perhaps a lab accident involving chemicals that may have killed your remaining functioning brain cells?”

Rather than answering, Tony crept closer to her, one inch at a time. She found herself tip-toeing to the side to avoid him, knife still in hand but the fruit disregarded.

“No, nothing that I can think of,” he said, his voice low. “But why don’t you and go I someone more…private. You can sit on my lap, and we can discuss the first thing that pops up.”

Natasha found her cheeks turning red. She couldn’t decide if it was from embarrassment or anger. Turning, she looked him straight in the eye.

“I’m sorry, I’m not much for small talk.”

He didn’t miss a beat. “If you wait, it’ll grow on you.”

Her patience ran thin — in fact, it completely dissolved within the millisecond. Natasha found herself raising the sharp-edged kitchen knife towards him with hot anger.

“Okay Stark, what the fu—”

“Whoa whoa whoa!” Tony stumbled back, hands defensively in the air.

Natasha froze. While she realized she was holding a weapon against one of her team members and leaders, she didn’t even twitch with an attempt to lower it. Tony’s eyes, on the other hand, had gone wide with panic.

“Chill for a second, Nat. It’s me,” he insisted.

She rolled her eyes. “Yeah, I know it’s you, Tony. And you’re acting like a complete douc—”

The hysterical laughing coming from down the corridor broke through their conversation. Natasha furrowed her brows, finally lowering the kitchen knife with anger that hadn’t yet resided.

“No, no — it’s me, Nat.” His hands went to the side of his head and he pressed firmly on the bone behind his ear.

Natasha watched with confusion as his figure began to flicker and blink, colors of blue, pink and purple fading away in a light show that looked all too similar to one of Tony Stark’s many inventions.

Inventions.

Of course.
She knew long before the holographic image dissipated what had happened, and while the laughter still howled from the hallway, she found her anger turning to rage.

Sam clicked off the sides of the pure white helmet, lifting it from his head with a shaky smile.

“Just me, Nat. Just a prank.”

“Oh my god, that was worth it!” Rhodey hollered, stumbling into the room bent over, grabbing his stomach in fits of laughter. “Oh god, I wish I had recorded that.”

“Be glad you didn’t,” Natasha hissed in his direction. “I’d have to kill you if you had.”

“Oh lighten up.” Sam extended the helmet out to her. “You’re free to have a turn with it. It’s actually quite a hoot.”

“Quite a hoot?” Natasha repeated. “No, thanks, I’m good. Besides, something tells me you didn’t acquire that with permission.”

The two fell silent, Rhodey’s laughter dying off while Sam self-consciously tucked the helmet under his arm.

“It’s fine. Tony won’t be back until later tonight. He won’t even know it was gone.” Sam defended, his lack of eyesight telling her that not even he believed his own lie.

Natasha hummed. “Well, that explains why you were involved,” she said, her words directed towards Rhodey.

Rhodey knew better than to respond — innocent until proven guilty, after all. But they both knew he had the codes to get inside Tony’s labs, after all he couldn’t access his War Machine armor without them. He decided to turn the other cheek from her comment.

Still, they were right. Tony had other business to deal with and from the memo’s sent out, he didn’t plan to return to the compound until late in the evening. Natasha found her temper cooling off, realizing that there was no harm done. Still, she couldn't quite choke back the boil of embarrassment that settled in her stomach.

The memo’s seemed to set off her memory — in the handful of exchanged schedules she remembered that Barton had made them aware he’d be by today for sparring. And he still owed her for eating the leftover sea urchin cauliflower pappardelle she had stored away from Carmine’s.

She smirked. “Actually, you know…let me see that for a minute.”

World History was his least favorite class.

It used to be P.E, but the spider-bite fixed that dilemma.

Peter chewed on his lower lip, flipping through the pages of his textbook and typing the occasional note on his laptop next to him. The sun was setting outside of his bedroom window, and his foot tapped with the anxious desire to sneak out and patrol the city. Studying about Caste, Helot and the treaty of Kanagawa was a snooze-fest after fighting a sixty-five-foot tall Ant-Man and defeating a gang of alien tech smuggling criminals.
“Man, I am so over this,” he mumbled, shoving his books away with an overly exaggerated groan.

Aunt May finding out his secret was both the best and worst thing to happen to him. At least now he didn’t need to sneak around and stress over her discovering the truth. The downside was — well, she knew the truth, and it was harder to sneak out and skip school work whenever she was around.

“You keep your grades up.” May pointed a sturdy finger in his chest. “I see anything below a B- and you bet your little bug-boy-butt that I’m taking away that suit.”

“Yes, May,” Peter promised.

“School work comes first!” she insisted. “Your finals are more important than crime fighting. Let Stark and the rest of them handle any problems that come up. You get your diploma first.”

“I get it, I get it,” he groaned, swinging his backpack over his shoulder. “Jeeze, if this is what I have to hear, I don’t even want to know how bad of a lecture Mr. Stark got.”

“Oh, you don’t want to know the half of it.” May grabbed his cheeks and, despite his protests, kissed his forehead. “You know I love you, right?”

He couldn’t help his smile, nodding his head. “Yeah, I know. Love you too, May.”

Not long after and he discovered just how bad of a lecture Mr. Stark ended up sitting through. Embarrassing didn’t properly describe how it made him feel — humiliating, maybe, but even that barely touched the surface of his desire to crawl away and hide in his bed for the rest of life. He had all but expected to never see the billionaire again after that, only to be pleasantly surprised when his invites to the compound suddenly turned into a weekly thing. Him and Mr. Stark were spending more time together than he ever thought imaginable.

So yeah, May finding out certainly had its pluses and minuses. Keeping up his grades for her wasn’t hard, in fact, science and math came easily to him. It was the boring subjects like damn friggin’ World History that frustrated him. He couldn’t retrain that information to save his life.

As if on cue, his wandering mind was interrupted by the pestering beep of his cell phone, text messages lighting up his screen. He wearily reached out to grab the device, nearly knocking over a half-empty cartoon of Thai food in the process.
Peter furrowed his brows, typing furiously with one thumb on the touchscreen.

Messages

Guy in the chair

Tue, Mar 28th, 6:28pm
dude i know we got finals and all

and i know u told me not 2 bother u 2nite

actually nvm

A beep arrived with the next stream of messages.
Peter shot up in his seat.

weirdest thing. there's this magician looking dude causing trouble in times sq
moms watching the news
it's getting kinda bad

Peter shot up in his seat.

it's getting kinda bad
what?!?!?

it's live on yt.
Immediately opening the link, the live footage from Times Square began to play through his phone’s speakers. He panicked as the volume came through full-blast, quick to slam on the buttons that lowered the sound. He did double take behind him at his bedroom door to make sure May hadn’t heard.

" —— you’re just tuning in, we’re live from Times Square, New York where it appears police are currently at a stand-off with some sort of...I’m not too sure, Kelly, he looks to be costumed character? The run-of-the-mill Elmo and Power Ranger performers that work Times Square say they’ve never seen this magician before. Whatever he wants, he seems to be hostile enough that the NYPD have stepped in."

"Mark, be careful, we’ve received word that this magician is indeed not an employee and very well could be a threat to the civilians surrounding you."

Ned wasn’t lying. In the middle of Times Square was a man causing havoc, the police having no luck in detaining him. He was surrounded by uniformed officers, all holding their guns high and ready to take action if needed. It was the sparks and fog that had Peter worried. Whatever tricks the guy wanted to perform could injure the innocent civilians the newscasters talked about.

He stumbled into his red and blue suit as quickly as he could, his feet tripping over sprawled t-shirts and boxers that laid neglected on his bedroom floor. With one smack of his open palm he hit the spider emblem in the middle, the fabric constricting tightly around him.
He moved as stealthy as possible opening his bedroom window, leaping out with a strand of webbing that swung him into the streets of Queens. One after another the spider webbing connected to buildings and glided him along for the ride, the sun setting behind him. All the while, his phone continued to vibrate within his backpack.
“This is your final warning!” The police officer shouted with his gun raised high in the air, held tightly between his two hands. “You are under arrest! Drop any and all of your weapons — surrender yourself immediately!”

Times Square was already a place of chaos; between the tourism, businesses and packed people, there was never room for casual strolling or window shopping. To make matters worse, now frightened civilian's began huddling behind police barricades, some using their cell phones to record the scene unfolding, some just trying their best just to get away.

“What do you think, gentlemen?” The costumed man asked, his voice slightly muffled behind the glass helmet that rested on top his head. “Did I make a grand entrance? The legend before me always said — make a memorable entrance!”

“NYPD, you are under arrest! We will fire in 3, 2—”

Before the police could even consider pulling their triggers, a blanket of smoke fell over the ground and spread high into the air. Women screamed and pulled their children back with fear and the police began to shout orders into their radio’s. It didn’t take long for everyone to realize it wasn’t hazardous — though the on-goers screeched in panic, not even one citizen felt the need to cough.

“Whaaaatt? No way, a free magic show? Just when I thought my night was boring!”

Spider-man came swinging from the sky, latching onto the digital Coca-Cola screen and dropping to the ground with practiced ease.

“But, you know, I think you need a permit to perform out here. You might want to —”
Before he could finish his quip, a fist-sized ball was tossed his way. Peter quickly shot a web from his right hand, catching it and swinging it far into the air where it exploded into a vast lightning storm.

He watched in awe as sparks combusted in the sky, raining down a flicker of electricity from where the bomb exploded.

"Spider-man, we have this under control!" an officer yelled.

"We got this, Spider-man!"

Peter bit his tongue, using every ounce of self-control he had not to yell at the officers that they so clearly did not have this under control. His mouth gaped open beneath his mask as the lightning storm from above simmered away, his mechanical eyes blinking twice.

“Dude, if you want an audience for your show, you might want to make sure you don’t kill them first.”

“Ahhh, Spider-man. I’ve heard quite a lot about you.” The man emerged from the thick mist, his arm in the air and the other gripping his wrist with profound self-assurance. “You seem to be the latest trick here in New York. But I shall have you know that I have a few tricks up my sleeve as well.”

Before he could say a word — ‘cause c'mon, that deserved a well thought quip — the strangely dressed man tossed four playing cards out in his direction. Each stuck to the ground around him — front, sides and back. Peter went to shoot a web into the air but all around him his surroundings started to change — Times Square disappeared. He was locked in a cage, all made of glass.

“Wh—...what...huh!?” He spun around, only seeing reflections of himself. The eyes to his suit went as wide as they could go, only white with a trim of black around them. “Karen, what is this!?”

“It appears to be an illusion, Peter,” she answered.

“An illusion?” Peter squinted, focusing on the false walls around him. “Like a magic trick?”

“Possibly. From what I can tell, the walls are somehow projected via the cards on the ground. I believe if you eliminate those, your surroundings will reappear.”

“Smart thinking!” Peter stretched his arm out, shooting four individual web grenades on the ground. Each latched onto the cards like a glob of glue, and when they did, the glass walls shattered around him.

Times Square reappeared. He quickly took in his surroundings, spinning in a circle as he noted the handfuls of NYPD surrounding him and, of course, the strangely dressed magician. It was disturbingly hilarious how the caped man only wanted people to watch him perform his magic tricks.

“Not bad, fish-bowl dude.” Peter strolled forward, pointing towards his own face. “I gotta know, are there actually fish in there? Because I don’t think that’s the best living situation for them. I once had a gold fish that I kept in a Mountain Dew bottle and—”

The low growl was warning enough, but his spidey-sense tipped him off before anything occurred. Shooting a web to the digital billboard in front of him, he leaped out of the way before the next projectile could hit. It exploded into a cloud of fog around the police officers.
As he swung over the billboard into the clouds, Peter stretched both his legs and feet out long, colliding into the chest of the man and knocking him flat on the ground. Gripping onto the nearest wall with his fingers and toes, he turned his head and watched as the fish-bowl wearing magician tumbled onto his backside. He almost wanted to laugh when the man nearly got tangled up in his own cape.

“Peter, my senses are picking up a unique neurotoxin within the gas that is being emitted,” Karen spoke through his mask.

His eyes went wide, the whiteness enlarging. “Neurotoxin!? Holy — we need to get everyone out of here!”

“The neurotoxin does not appear to be harmful. The vitals of the surrounding civilians are within normal range for the standing circumstances. However, I would proceed with caution and continue to evacuate the area.”

Spider-man jumped down from the billboard, stumbling over to the police officers with haste.

“You guys gotta get everyone out of here! This dude’s gas could be danger—”

A white light flashed across his eyes and he stumbled back in shock. First an electricity bomb, then a fog bomb — of course this dude had to go all extra and release a flash bomb. Peter's enhanced senses couldn't handle the sudden exposure. His pupils dilated and his eyes burned, struggling to readjust as the world slowly reappeared to him. Blinking furiously — the eyes of his mask copying what he did — he only noticed the clenched fist coming towards him before it was too late.

One hit to the jaw.

A pile of mist, and then a hit to the back of his head.

Another cloud, and a hit to his stomach.

The fog was becoming thicker and no matter how hard he strained his eyes, he couldn’t see through it. His senses were dulled, almost muted, and a swell of worry began to fill his stomach.

'Where's my spidey-sense? I need my spidey-sense!'

Peter stumbled, failing to grasp his surroundings. He looked frantically for any sign of where his attacker was coming from. Each time he turned his head, the guy was suddenly somewhere else, somewhere different.

“This dude is really playing it up!” he said incredulously and to no one in particular.

Karen chimed in, “He seems to rely on the element of surprise.”

“Yeah, ya think?” Peter huffed, rubbing his jaw. “Very mysterious.”

He could hear each gas bomb — mist ball — whatever it was called, drop on the ground. They shattered like glass but left no residue, only emitting a heavy blanket of fog in its wake. His mind began to feel hazy and filmy, his normally heightened senses failing him.

“Peter, my —— are cutting —— overloaded and —— failing to ——function.”

The AI’s voice began to cut in and out, a heavy static filling his ears before going completely silent.
“Karen!?” He tapped both sides of his head, watching as the HUD display in his mask began to flicker and dim out. “Karen, what’s going on?”

“NYPD, I repeat, can you hear us? NYPD, come in!”

"Oh my god, this is YouTube gold. Is anyone getting this? Is anyone filming this?"

“Dude, my cell phone won’t turn on!”

“Look at the billboards! Holy shit, everything is shutting off!”

Peter listened all around him to the multiple conversations, taking note of everything occurring. The police radios were down, cell phones weren’t working, and Times Square was quickly becoming dark. One by one each large electronic billboard shut off until there was nothing left but darkness.

To make matters worse, each gas bomb this maniac let off clouded them in a thickness of fog that even he couldn’t see through.

Things became eerily quiet, twice fold without the technology to hum around them. His skin stayed cooled and his nerves calm — nothing was alerting him to any danger.

So when fish-tank man emerged through the dense mist, his voice caused Peter to visibly jump, surprised.

“You put on some show, Spider-man.” His voice echoed with effect through this glass helmet. “I admire that.”

Peter spun around, his eyes squinting with frustration.

“Yeah, well, you’ve given me some migraine, and I don’t admire that,” he retorted, pointing to the crowd of officers behind him. “Why don’t you give up the mysterious act and turn yourself in?”

The man laughed.

“Quieres defender a la pequeña araña inocente?” he asked, the words rolling off his tongue.

Peter cracked his knuckles. “Ohh, Spanish practice! I could use this. Estás causando problemas. Deja ir el misterio.”

The area began to get darker, not even a street lamp to brighten his view. Slowly the man’s figure disappeared within the fog, his salute barely visible in the clouds. Peter shot web after web to grab hold of him, each a wasted attempt.

“Til our next show, Spider-man.”

“Hey, wait! Dude, wait!” He continued to shoot webs, each one falling to the ground with nothing in the air for them to stick to. By the time he reached where the man had stood, he had long since been gone.

"Damn it!” Peter muttered, letting his arms smack down by his hips with exasperated agitation. His HUD screen began to flicker and fizzle, the lights and billboards around him following suit.

“No, he got away. I repeat, he got away. Location unknown. Spider-man intervened and let him get away.”
Peter shot his head behind him where the police officers began speaking into their radios, each response panicked and flustered. With the smog dissipating, others began resuming cell phone recordings of the incident. He could see himself on multiple screens, he could hear the muffled laughter and more than anything, he could hear the frustration from officers and civilians.

"Wow. I can't believe that just happened."

"I can. That's what we get for letting these spandex freaks stick their noses where they don't belong!"

"Oh come on, he was trying to help."

"Did a great job at that, didn't he?"

“Oh, are you kidding me…” Peter face-palmed into his gloved hands.

Deciding it was best not to stick around for the aftermath, he shot out a web and jumped into the air, leaving Times Square in a hurry. As he swung sky-scraper to sky-scraper, his suit began humming back to life. It wasn't long before his HUD was back in full-view, mapping out his way through New York.

“Hello again, Peter,” Karen spoke up. "My systems are back online."

"Awesome," he miserably replied. "Just in time. I'm going back home."

“Oh. Does this mean that you won?”

“No Karen,” he despondently said, sighing. "Can’t say I did."

“Avengers — gather ‘round! I have a very, very important message to give you.”

The team sat around on the sofa’s and chairs of the common area, some snickering while others full-fledged laughed. ‘Nick Fury’ walked towards them in the middle of the room, his long leather coat flapping behind him.

Even Steve managed to smile, arms folded across his chest. “Yes, sir?"

“I wanted you all to know.” ‘Fury’ cleared his throat. “That I — Nick Fury — am the most useless person on this planet.”

Natasha feigned a gasp. “Sir! You absolutely are not!”

“No, hear me out.” His hand lifted in the air. “I truly am. I am arrogant, harsh, cruel and demanding. I respect the hell out of you Avengers, you guys going out there and doing things I could never imagine myself doing. Why, I would break my back doing such things! You all are wonderful, amazing, talented heroes.”

Bouts of laughter bounced around, Clint going as far as to slap his knee with such amusement. The group leaned back in their seats, drinks in their hands, food spread across the tables. The air was light and the humor was abundant, a friendly vibe between them that hadn’t been felt in a long time.
Rhodey shook his head. “I’m not buying it,” he said, taking a swig of his beer.

‘Nick’ furrowed his eyebrows. “Not buying it? Why?”

“I don’t know, it’s not…” Rhodey shrugged. “Black enough.”

Clint choked on a laugh. “Oh shit.”

“What the hell do you mean it’s not ‘black’ enough?” he exclaimed. “You’re telling me it’s not black enough?”

Rhodey set his beer on the table. “Man, I’m not trying to insult. I’m just saying —”

“I’ll fix that for you. I got a solution for that.” ‘Nick’ audibly cleared his throat again, straightening his back as he went on to say, “I respect the motherfuc—”

“Now now, language, sir.”

The voice cut through their laughter like a sharp knife. Immediately, the room fell quiet. ‘Nick Fury’ spun around just in time to see Tony at the entrance way to the room, his shoulders held back and posture tense.

“We don’t want to offend the Captain here, do we?” Tony cocked his head to the side, hands in his blazer pockets as he walked towards the group, his feet heavy on the floor.

‘Nick’ shook his head, “Tony, we were just—”

“Take it off,” he demanded, his voice low and highly strung.

There wasn’t any hesitation. Pressing his finger behind his ear, the helmet was released. The image of Nick Fury flickered away in a brilliant light-show, leaving Sam to stand in front of Tony like a dog with his tail between his legs.

“Look man, we were just having fun,” Sam defended.

Tony snatched the helmet from his hands, his eyes cold and angry.

“Having fun? That’s what this is to you?” Tony looked back to the others. “This was locked away. Mind telling me how it got here?”

Rhodey sighed, leaning forward on the couch. “Tony…”

“Yeah. That’s what I thought,” he bit back with a shake of his head. “This isn’t a game for you to play with. It was locked away for a reason!”

Steve pursed his lips, setting his drink on the coffee table and standing from the couch. “Tony, no one meant any harm, really. I wouldn’t push this —”

“It’s my stuff, Steve. It was taken without permission, and quite frankly I’m shocked you even went along with it,” Tony snapped.

Steve held both his hands out placatingly. “I had no idea it was taken without your permission.”

“Of course you didn’t. Little Mr. Perfect over here.” He rubbed his temples with one hand, setting the helmet down on the console table near the entryway. “You know, if you’re going to —”
“Boss, there’s been an attack in Manhattan near 46th street,” FRIDAY’s voice boomed through the ceiling.

Clint set his drink down, standing up with a frown. “Times Square?”

The group exchanged concerned looks, curious as to what type of attack could be happening. Most of anything that they were alerted to would set off the facilities alarms, yet all was calm around them.

Tony rolled his eyes. “Great. And here I was hoping we didn’t need to use the Quinjet today. Let’s —”

“You may want to review the incident before getting involved, sir. It appears the NYPD is already on the scene, and Spider-man arrived not long ago.”

Tony groaned; he didn’t know if that made things better or worse. Manhattan was a bit out of the way from Queens, where Peter insisted he’d stay local. Yet again, the kid never listened to what he said. He began typing on his smartwatch, bringing up live footage of the attack before enlarging it with his fingers for the others to see.

The holographic video played out in front of them, a fight between the spandex wall-crawler and some freak wearing a fish-tank for a helmet.

“They just keep getting weirder and weirder,” Rhodey mumbled under his breath.

“We should get down there,” Tony insisted, his eyes darting between the two fighting figures on the screen.

Steve shook his head, intently watching the live footage. “I don’t know Tony, looks like Queens has it handled pretty well.”

Tony kept his mouth shut, watching the video with bated breath. Steve didn’t know that Queens was actually a young teenager and at Peter’s request, it needed to stay that way. He wanted to trust that the kid had it handled, but something inside of him said that this fight was outside of the kid's capability of handling.

Unfortunately, one masked freak was way below the Avenger’s pay scale. Even though both the police and Spider-man struggled to detain him, it still wasn't an incident they'd typically get involved in.

Not long after they began watching the video, the lens of the camera was engulfed in a thick fog, and cut off in a fit of static.

“FRIDAY?” Tony asked, tapping his watch.

“It would appear that the smoke emitted has put all of Times Square in a pure blackout. There are reports of cell phones malfunctioning and on-the-scene police radios are currently down.”

He didn’t waste a second.

“Alright, well, I’m checking it out.” Tony was fast on his heels, heading out the door before Rhodey could even consider following him.

Steve, on the other hand, was quick to follow close behind.
“Hey, hold up, Tony,” he called out. “Since when do you go after small things like this?”

Tony turned around to face him. “Small things? You call all of Times Square shutting down a small thing?”

“Okay, not small, but Queens has this handled,” Steve argued. “You’re the one that recruited him, right? Don’t you trust him?”

Tony locked eyes with him, his mouth sealed shut. Even if Peter’s identity wasn’t a secret from the team, he truly didn’t know how to answer the question. He trusted the kid enough to send him in battle with a suit that had Stark written all over it, but he was still inexperienced. He still needed help. It wasn’t that he didn’t trust him, it was that he was possibly, kind of, somewhat…worried about him?

Tony didn’t like entertaining that concept. Luckily for him, FRIDAY cut through their conservation before he could dwell on it any longer.

“Sir, radio feed and video circuits are coming back online.”

Steve cocked an eyebrow. “See? Queens had it handled all along.”

“The perpetrator got away.”

Tony glared at him, the stress lines around his eyes growing deep.

“Who knows how thick that fog was,” Steve defended, shrugging slightly. “It could have happened to any of us.”

Tony didn’t bother responding, turning his back on him and briskly walking away. He whipped his cell phone out of his pocket and hit speed dial on the only phone number that mattered.

“Not to him,” he muttered.

Peter took his time swinging back home, sluggish and sulking from his defeat. Normally a long web-swing would help clear his mind, a form of mediation he had come to love. But by the time he had reached his apartment in Queens, a pounding migraine had formed against his temples, his head feeling like an over-used stressed ball.

Each thump of his heart pulsated behind his eyes, and the rush of gravitation from his swings started to make him nauseous. He could feel the watery saliva moistening his mouth, a tell-tale sign that his stomach was ready to relinquish his dinner. Or lunch? He couldn’t even remember the last time he had eaten.

“God, Karen, my head is killing me,” he mumbled to the AI.

“Your enhanced senses struggled greatly to see through the man’s fog,” she answered. “The strain appears to have given you a migraine. In this predicament, I would recommend rest.”

Peter groaned, attaching his last web onto his apartment complex, pulling himself forward in the air. “Trust me, that’s my plan.”
Sticking to the brick wall of the building, he snuck his way to the eighteenth floor where he and May lived, his window still cracked from his earlier exit. All he wanted to do was plop down in his bed, forget his problems and call it a night. If luck was on his side, May would bother him about the Times Square incident after he got some sleep.

“Peter, Mr. Stark is calling you. Would you like me to patch him through?”

A beat went by. Peter ultimately shook his head, knowing that the AI couldn’t see the movement.

“No thanks, Karen,” he answered. “I can talk to him later—”

“Mr. Stark has patched himself through.”

Peter’s eyes went wide. “What!? No, I said — ohh, heyyyy, Mr. Stark.”

Tony’s face brightened up his HUD screen. While Peter wasn’t expecting him to look happy and gleeful, the anger that spread across his expression was a little daunting.

“Tomorrow’s headlines: Spider-man thwarted by local street magician.”

His greeting was harsh and cold, but not unlike him. Peter sighed, leaning against the brick wall behind him, held up by the tips of his toes and back of his fingertips.

“Listen, Mr. Stark, I can explain —”

Tony was walking down some hallway, his face bobbing in and out of view. “What the hell, kid? You get tossed around a little bit and suddenly that’s enough to let a criminal get away?”

“I didn’t let him get away!” Peter insisted. “I couldn’t see, he just vanished and —”

“‘You couldn’t see? So you’re telling me whatever Party City paraphernalia this crook has can cut through your sixth sense — am I still talking to the guy who said his ears, eyes and nose were dialed up to eleven after some radioactive spider bite?’” Tony retorted.

“Yes — yes, Mr. Stark, and that’s the problem! Normally I would totally be able to see through all that stuff. It’s never been an issue before. I don’t know, whatever he was using…it was strange. It knocked out all the power — everything,” Peter explained.

“And your freaky sixth sense? What’s that all about that?”

“Spidey sense,” Peter corrected.

There was a pause, Tony taking in what he heard with eyes that threatened to roll into the back of his head. “I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear that.”

“It wasn’t going off,” Peter said. “Everything was just…muffled. I tried catching him, but—”

Tony sighed, shaking his head. “Kid, you can’t let those type of people get away. He’s obviously got some form of technology that could be dangerous, especially if he can knock out all of Times Square. And I don’t know what his gimmick is with the fish-bowl helmet, but it could be a clear sign of psychosis.”

“I didn’t let him get away, Mr. Stark. Karen went down and —”

“Leave him up to the big kids now, got it?”
“What? No! I—I can handle him, I—”

“I’m serious, kid. He shows up again, you let the Avengers handle it,” Tony reprimanded.

Peter fumbled, considering his next words. “Well, I’m kind of sort of an Avenger, so…”

“Uh, no,” Tony was quick to correct him, his index finger taking up half the screen. “You explicitly said ‘no’ to my offer, and ‘no’ to my suit, and can remain your friendly little neighborhood Spider-man while the big boys take care of the big bads.”

“Mr. Stark —”

“It’s past your bedtime, Pete. Goodnight.”

The video feed cut off before Peter could even take another breath, let alone say his own goodbye. Frustrated, he mumbled a few curses under his breath as he snuck in through the window to his bedroom, very quietly climbing the walls as to not worry May.

Not that it would matter. She’d see the news eventually, and he’d get an earful anyway. It seemed as if Mr. Stark wasn’t criticizing his work, May was upset that he even did the work.

He’d never win.

Too tired to change into proper pajamas, Peter hit the spider emblem on his chest and shrugged his suit off, kicking it under his bed with neglect. He knew he should be treating a multi-millionaire dollar suit with better care, but he just didn't have the energy right now. He plopped down on his twin mattress, clad only in his boxers, and pulled his blankets up to his neck with a moan.

His head was killing him. Like a little bomb trying to implode from the inside, hitting directly behind his skull. He moaned into his pillow, all but ready to sleep away the stress and humiliation of the day.

Briefly opening his eyes, he was greeted with the sight of textbooks and his laptop, ‘World History: Patterns of Interaction’ open in an almost mocking way.

“Ugghh!” Peter flopped over to the wall, shoving a pillow over his head in an attempt to block out the world around him.

He’d deal with the repercussions tomorrow. Right now, he just wanted to sleep.
Tony stared at the tablet with a sense of confusion he hadn’t felt in a long, long time.

“...and the florist only does fruit baskets instead of flower baskets, the venue in Greece is booked three years ahead, which completely alters which reception area we need to rent, and —”

Pepper's words became an incoherent mess, barely entering one ear before immediately exiting the other. He could listen intently in business meetings, memorize every word of a scientific lecture but something about this — this went way over his head.

Tony handed the tablet back to her, his brows knitted tightly together. “Pepper, don’t we have a wedding planner for all this?”

Pepper took a much needed breath. She paused briefly, her expression flooded with skepticism.

“Yeah,” she said, dumbfounded.

Tony raised an eyebrow, waiting expectantly for more to follow. There always was with Pepper.

She huffed and blew into her bangs, mildly annoyed. “I don’t trust her. She almost booked our wedding in Greece - for 2021!”

Tony shrugged and smiled, his eyes crinkling at the corners. “What’s wrong with that?”


“Hey, I’m kidding — hey.” He grabbed her hand and pulled her close to his waist, wrapping his arm around the small of her back. “I got this. I fix things — remember, it’s what I do. I’ll fix this.”

He winked, his open eye glimmering with a charm that only he could manage to pull off.

Pepper squinted her eyebrows, her expression doubtful but her body language loving, leaning into his grip with a soft hum. “Mhmm… I don’t know how much I trust you, either.”

“Well, I trust you,” Tony said, earnestly. The palm of his hand caressed her freckled cheek. “You are the most capable, qualified, trustworthy person I have ever met. Whatever you feel you need to do to make this day special — do it.”

He put heavy emphasis on his last two words, ensuring that the point was made and heard. Pepper blushed, a glowing appreciation shining on her face.

“Yeah? Well, I have something in mind to make tonight special,” she leaned forward to whisper in his ear, her breath hot against his skin.

Tony couldn’t help the grin that washed over his face, the butterfly’s in his stomach bouncing around as strongly as his first day with the women. He gripped her waist tighter.

“You do now, do you?”

“I do. I think we’ll —”

“Mr. Stark — hey, wait right there — Mr. Stark!”
The commotion from the hallways startled Pepper. She wiggled herself away from Tony's with a short, harsh gasp whereas Tony barely blinked, exaggeratedly rolling his eyes. He stood motionless, more annoyed than anything as the voices got louder and more persistent, yelling commands and directions that were clearly being disobeyed.

“Sir, stop right there! Sir, don’t make us —”

“Will you get off me? Can’t you see I need to get to Tony —”

“Sir, we need proper identification before you can —”

“Oh my god.” Pepper gaped, stepping away from Tony and quickly jogging towards the door. “Bruce?”

Tony practically spun around on his heels at the name, his head whipping around so fast it made his vision blur.

Walking into the room, multiple security guards gripping his arms in an attempt to detain him was none other than Bruce Banner. For a quick moment his expression fell flat, shock etching deep into the contours of his face. His heart barely skipped two beats before realization dawned on him.

“Take it off, Wilson,” he demanded.

“What?” Bruce furrowed his eyebrows, shaking off another guard. “Tony, we need to talk—”

“Real funny, ha-ha.” He sarcastically slow-clapped his hands, taking casual steps towards the chaos at the entrance of the room. “You must have downloaded, what — a thousand, two thousand photos to get such great body replications? Maybe you aren’t as dim-witted as I pinned you to be.”

Pepper shook her head. “Tony, I think…”

“I’ll admit, Fury was funny. This though —”

“Tony, it’s me,” Bruce insisted, slapping away the hands of multiple guards.

“What do you take me for, some kind of —”

And that’s when Tony noticed it. The waver in his voice, the ripped pants, twice over-sized jacket with no shirt underneath, the slight tremble to his entire figure — tilting his head to the side, in the right light his skin almost had a twinge of green to it.

On his long list of unexpected things to happen today, tomorrow, and for the next month, this surely had to be at the very bottom.

“How would you explain your work on anti-electron collisions?” Tony was quick to ask.

“Well that’s...that’s complicated, that’s...” Bruce stammered, pulling tightly at the long trench coat covering him. The security guards enclosed around them, only held off by Tony’s hand when his palm shot upright, telling them to back off.

Looking around, Bruce dropped his shoulders with a resigned, heavy sigh.

“Okay, well, two electrons have a charge of minus two E, so the end product must as well. Lepton number conservation is required, and we have Le equals two within the equation. At this level, it looks difficult to produce additional particles which satisfy just these two conservation laws. If you work in QED the only vertex is the photon one—"
“I’ve heard enough,” Tony interrupted, shooing away the guards. “Go — get. Do something useful.”

Bruce fought the urge to stare when the group of security guards backed away, some retreating into the halls, some leaving entirely. His attention was ultimately diverted back to Tony when the man took long, fast steps in approaching him.

“Wilson couldn’t quote that even if he stayed up all night rehearsing it,” he mumbled, gripping Bruce’s face with both his hands. They patted his cheeks, pulled at his earlobes, moved his neck side to side —

“T’ny...” Bruce’s words were garbled, barely audible as Tony pulled at his bottom lip. “Wha’....'re 'yu d'ing?

“Just checking to make sure it’s really you, buddy.” Tony said, far from enthusiastic, a drop of venom lacing his tone. “What’s it been? A year? Year and a half?”

Bruce frowned, wiping away the taste in his mouth from the sudden and intrusive physical exam. They both knew he had that coming. It wasn’t a happy reunion, he had left the Avengers on harsh terms — he left Tony on harsh terms. Natasha was a whole other story they both didn’t even want to touch.

Pepper tilted her head to the side. ”Bruce, are you alri—"

“We have a problem," he blurted out.

“Yeah we do,” Tony retorted. “You’re standing in the middle of my foyer half naked. You don’t expose a lovely lady to that kind of obscenity — Pepper, look away dear.”

Pepper stepped forward, less than amused. “Tony. Hear him out.”

Tony kept his composure, shoulders held back tight and posture tall. He dug his hands deep into his blazer pockets, eyebrow cocked up as if to say ‘well, go ahead.’

Bruce looked back and forth between them both, his pale face adding to his already distressed expression.

“Something bad is going to happen.”

Sixth period sucked.

Peter dialed the code to his locker combination, wondering if there was any way he could get the door to open faster without straight-up ripping it off its hinges. After an hour spent in Anatomy and Physiology, he was ready to die — swing into a building and knock himself out cold, never to wake up again. All because Flash decided that learning about male anatomy was a perfect time to make fun of him.

Now half of the student body was laughing about how much his head resembled a penis. It was nonsense, if only for the fact that his head could never resemble such a thing.

And he should know, considering he had one to look at.
Switching textbooks from his locker, he grabbed what he needed and shut the door with a loud *thud*, turning around to the surprise of a cell phone directly in his face.

He had to squint at first, the screen so close to his eyes he could feel the heat from the device. When his vision cleared, he began to wish he hadn't even looked at all.

---

Peter ducked his head low, shaking it with frustration as he held his books close to his chest.

“Mr. Stark's not going to let me live that one down…”

Ned winced, swiping away the article with pad of his thumb. He followed Peter as they took off walking down the halls. “At least they aren’t calling you a menace anymore,” he tried to deflect.

Peter huffed air out of his nose. “Menace or failure? Which one is worse?”

His head stayed low, paying attention only to his books and his dirty Nike's that he wore on his feet. The entire situation had been eating him up, stripping him of his confidence and self-assurance. It seemed no matter what, he couldn’t win. It wasn't just YouTube watching him now, it was the entire world. And they criticized every move he did.

It seemed every time when he tried to help, he walked away defeated.

Ned frowned, pulling at the strap to his backpack. “Dude…what happened?”

They turned a corner where Peter apathetically kicked the wall, sulking with frustration. It gained the attention of faceless students walking by, a few teenage girls stopping to stare and giggle. He barely looked up as they watched, more annoyed at their gawking than anything else.

“I don’t know!” he admitted. “The guy is like, crazy mysterious. He had all these tricks and gadgets that he kept throwing at me. And there were these balls — these strange balls that he kept tossing around, and I couldn’t sense when they were coming. And when they broke it released a neurotoxin mist.”

Ned’s jaw dropped. “Neurotoxin!? Like…effects the nervous tissue neurotoxin?”

Peter nodded, lowering his voice when he spoke. “That’s what my AI suit lady said. But no one was bothered by it.”

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**DAILY BUGLE**

J. Jonah Jameson

@DailyJJJ

Masked vigilante defeated by local street magician! Say NO to this vigilante and YES to reinstating the Accord! 

#WeWantTheAccordsBack Who will keep US safe while they protect THEIR identities!?  

11:09 PM - 

† 2,144 ❤️ 2,901
Ned scratched his head. “Maybe there's a delayed reaction? Maybe everyone will get sick later?”

“No one has reported anything yet.”

“And you say you couldn’t sense it?”

“That’s what I said.”

Ned sucked in a lungful of air, whistling as it came out. “Crazy.”

Peter scoffed. Crazy wasn’t the half of it. Between the fish-bowl helmet, the magic tricks, the gas-smog-mist-fog-whatever the heck it was, he had no clue where to start with this guy.

Toomes had a motive, Toomes was easy to pin down, they at least knew what Toomes was doing. He couldn’t tell you left, right, up or down what this weird-o wanted. Aside from attention, he and all of New York quickly figured out that the guy craved attention.

Peter readjusted his hold on his books, wishing he hadn't lost his backpack — again. “Oh, and he spoke to me in Spanish.”

Ned frowned, his lips pursed outward with confusion.

A beat went by.

“Why?”

Peter shrugged, turning another corner. “No clue. It’s like he plays up this mysterious act he’s got going on.”

“Spanish mystery.” Ned chuckled, nudging his shoulder against Peter's. “I going to call him Misterio.”

“Better than Bird-man.” Peter kept his tone light-heated, the corner of his lips pulling slightly.

Ned froze mid-step. “I thought that name was cool!”

Peter rolled his eyes. “Liz’s dad was one hundred percent using Vulture wings, Ned. He was so The Vulture.”

Ned shrugged it off. “Eh, whatever. Misterio it is.”

And just like that, the problem was dropped. That’s what Peter loved about his friendship with Ned — their conversations never had to drag on once the point was made. The worst issue he had encountered was about his spider-powers, something that to this day was still brought up on a constant basis. It would never fail that Ned's Google searches would bring new and odd questions to the table.

It made Peter thankful for the small things, he supposed. Like how he didn't have to lay eggs or how his head wasn't fused with his thorax.

They walked into homeroom, both slamming their textbooks and backpacks down on their designated seats.

“So what are you going to do next?” Ned asked, his voice nearly drowned out by the overheard bell.
Peter shrugged, slipping into his desk. “Mr. Stark says I need to stay away. That if he shows again, I need to ‘leave him to the Avengers.’”

Ned sat down, confused. “Aren’t you an Avenger?”

Peter stared at his desk for a moment.

“Yeah, pretty much.”

Ned blinked, his confusion growing.

“So why doesn’t he want you involved?”

“I don’t know man.” Peter gave a half-hearted shrug. “I guess ‘cause I messed up the first time or something. I’m probably just a failure to him.”

The shrill of the schools bell came to an end just as their teacher slammed the classroom the door behind her.

“Alright class, page one hundred six in your review book, fifty eight in your exam review! Finals in two weeks, let’s prepare!”

As Peter flipped through the pages to his textbooks, Ned leaned over to his desk, his chair legs practically ready to tip over.

“So, are you going to stay away?” he whispered.

Peter craned his neck, looking at Ned like he had grown six heads.

“No,” he said, his tone resonating the word ‘duh’ all over it.

A beat went by, and he looked up from the books again, dumbfounded.


Tony rubbed at his temples, both of his index fingers pressing harshly into his skin. He sat across from Bruce in the conference room of the compound, leaning over in a chair and gingerly massaging away the headache that formed behind his ears.

“Okay, let me get this straight.” Tony sat up straight in his seat. “You were in space?”

Bruce nodded. “Yes.”

“And Thor was with you?”

“Yes.”

“And now you’re not in space.”

“Correct.”

“But Thor still is.”
Bruce paused, mentally double checking his answer before saying, “...yes.”

“And when you returned...from space—”

“Yes, Tony, I was in space!” Bruce snapped, his arms thrown high in the air before smacking down on his thighs. “I was in space, on a planet called Sakaar with Thor. A group of people rescued us — well, one person. Two? Definitely one, the other was a green woman, and there was a talking raccoon...and tree...and bug lady...”

Tony held his wrist to his lips, speaking directly into his smartwatch. “FRIDAY, send in a med team.”

“No!” Bruce jumped up from his seat. “No, listen to me. I’m not mental, I —”

Tony didn’t need to respond; the disbelief on his face was enough. As if to make matters worse, Pepper, who was silently leaning with her back against the wall, had a similar expression

Bruce sighed, sitting back down in his chair. “Okay, I’m still mental in...that way. Personally though, I wouldn’t call it that. Just hear me out, please.”

With every fiber of his being, Tony wished things could be relatively normal in his life. Between aliens, space, kids with radioactive spider bites, men transforming into giant green creatures, a sentient being Android — hell, the more he thought about it he realized that he wouldn’t remember what normal felt like even if it returned and slapped him in the face. Sighing, he spoke back into his smartwatch. “FRIDAY, cancel med team.”

He looked up at Bruce, leaning back in his chair and crossing his legs. “Okay? So you were rescued by a group of people...and things, and then...?”

Bruce continued, “And then this portal opened, a bright, orange portal. A man came out of it and he told me to give you a message.”

There was a pause, a heavy moment of silence that filled the space between them.

Stunned, the only thing Tony could do was repeat what he heard. “A bright orange portal opened and a man came out of it—”

His response was condescending, drowning with sarcasm. Even Pepper held her forehead in the palm of her hand.

“Tony, listen!” Bruce insisted, frustrated at his disbelief. “I know it sounds crazy — hell, everything I’ve been through sounds crazy. Hulk was in space for over a year as some sort of gladiator warrior but — but listen, the man told me you needed to know something. That I needed to return to Earth to deliver the message to you.”

Tony sighed. “Alright, I’ll bite. What does magic-portal-opening-man want me to know?”

“He said a war is coming for you.” Bruce's expression softened. "That it’s personal, but could lead to your demise, and that one day you’ll be needed for greater things.”

Tony smiled, looking behind him where Pepper stood. “You hear that?”

Pepper groaned. “As if that’s not going to swell your ego.”

It didn’t break his grin, his finger pointing at his chest with a sense of pride. He was ready to go on
about saving the earth — again — or saving the planet — again — and hell, how overall awesome he was, especially now that he was being told he'd be needed for bigger and greater things. He never had the chance to speak his mind.

“Warn your team, nothing is what it seems.”

Tony turned his head back around, his lips drawn into a frown. “What?”

“It’s what he said,” Bruce explained. “Warn your team, nothing is what it seems.”

It was almost unsettling to hear such words from the man who he hadn’t seen in nearly two years. Tony locked eyes with Bruce, as if to make sure he was being serious. The gleam of concern that reflected back to him was enough of an alibi to his story.

He broke the tension in the room by asking, “Did he say anything else, besides some cryptic line from a tween’s dark and emo poetry book?”

Bruce scratched his nose, thinking back with a shake of his head. “Uh, no…just…just that he was Strange.”

Tony scoffed. “Uh, yeah, strange is a great way to wrap up his personality.”

“No. Strange,” Bruce corrected. “It was his name.”

Pepper stood from the wall she had been leaning against, her heels clicking on the floors as she walked towards them. “His name was Strange?”

Bruce nodded towards her. “He was the one who brought me here. Opened another…orange portal thing…and here I was, surrounded by your guards.”

Intrigued, Tony crossed his arms over his chest. “No more information than that? He just sent you here with some dramatic message about not trusting things and me being a great asset in the future and blah blah blah?”

“I—I tried talking with him, Tony, I really did,” Bruce insisted. “But he wasn’t having it. I don’t think he wanted to give me any more information. He sent me here before I could ask anything else.”

“Hm.” Tony tapped at his chest, a subconscious habit he had picked up from his arc reactor days. Though there was no longer a hole in the middle of his sternum, he still found himself doing the act when in deep thought.

Finally, he looked behind him where Pepper stood. “I wonder if this has anything to do with Fish-bowl freak?”

Pepper shrugged, whereas Bruce furrowed his eyebrows.

“Fish-bowl freak?” he asked.

Tony jumped from his seat, encouragingly patting Bruce on the back when the other man followed suit.

“Oh Bruce-y Bruce, we have a lot to catch up on. Come come, follow me.” Tony slung his arm around Bruce's shoulder, directing them both out of the conference room. “So how is the god of thunder these days?”
Web swinging really did make him feel better.

The rush of air against his body, the adrenaline from the drop, the excitement as he swung — it felt as if all his problems were on standby, the only focus being him and the skies.

Peter sat on top of the George Washington Bridge, his legs dangling over the edge as he munched on the sandwich between his hands. In front of him the sun was setting, the radiant orange and yellow colors reflecting off his Spider-man mask that he had pulled up to his nose, making room for each bite of food he took in. His evening had been quiet; no one had laughed at him yet and no one blamed him for causing any trouble. He considered that a good day in his book.

The water below him was still and the bridge’s lights were beginning to light up. He’d be best heading back to Queens soon, especially if he wanted to study for his mid-term final. There was something so calm about being so high up though, a sense of peace he never got to feel anywhere else. Certainly not at school, and while he loved May, he worried too much about her to ever not be panicked around her.

Here, now, just him and the city in front of him — that’s where he felt himself.

“Karen?” he asked through a garble of food.

“Yes, Peter.”

He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Does my mask have a camera in it?”

It felt like forever ago that he took scenic pictures. It used to be his favorite hobby, especially getting shots of New York’s famous bridges. But since Ben died...

“There is indeed a photographic feature to your lens.”

“Whaaa?” Peter stopped slouching, pulling his mask back down and over his face. “That’s so cool. How does it work?”

“The camera is designed to take still images of what you see. Simply program your word for initiation, and it will be stored within the Baby Monitor protocol.”

He couldn’t help his eye roll, the sense of skepticism from Mr. Stark all too obvious. Maybe one day he’d have the suit to himself, no restrictions and no monitoring. It was like no one had any confidence in him, always questioning his every move. He could stop a bus for crying out loud — he deserved a little trust.

“Okay, well…how about…” he hummed to himself, his legs dangling faster. “Oh, I got it! Program it for ‘cheese!’”

“Photographic feature programmed to the word — Cheese!”

Peter stifled a laugh at the AI’s false cheerfulness, the words almost sounding foreign to his ears. While he and Karen had fantastic conversations, and she provided support when he felt at his loneliest, she was still only a computer. But even with that fact, he’d never deny her company.
“Alright, Karen, on the count of three.” He aimed his eyesight out to the vast water’s below him, the cityscape sparkling in the background. “One, two…”

Distracted, Peter never got to three. Rather he focused on what was below the bridge, noticing that down near the edges was a mass of fog. It was too confined to be from the weather or the rivers. It moved slightly, slowly, like a boat traveling across the waters.

He stood up, crouching on the bridge and balancing himself with the pads of his fingertips.


“Mysterio?” Karen repeated.

“The man from last night, at Times Square. He must be using that crazy fog to sneak away… maybe out of the city?”

“Peter, Mr. Stark has advised you to stay away from this particular criminal.”

He webbed his backpack up to the bridge. “Yeah, but Mr. Stark isn’t here right now, I am. I’ve gotta take this chance to get him before he gets away again.”

“There are five-hundred-and-sixty-four outcomes of this scenario that results in Mr. Stark reprehending you for disobeying his request.”

Peter paused for a moment, considering her words.

“Well, that’s…pft…that’s nothing.”

“If alerted now, Mr. Stark could arrive in sixteen minutes and eight seconds.”

“From upstate!?” Peter blinked, the shutters to his lens whirring at the movement. “Damn, that’s fast.”

“Shall I alert him then?”

“No! No Karen, no. I’ll just…uh…” He thought for a second, fidgeting with his web-shooters as he stood up from his crouched position. “I won’t fight him. Mr. Stark told me not to engage him, so I’ll just track him.”

Emerging from the middle of his chest, a spider-shaped tracker buzzed in the air, replicating the movements of a fly. He watched as it swooped down to the waters and soar out of sight.

“Fly little drone-y,” Peter encouraged.

Within seconds, the AI spoke again.

“Drone successful attached.”

Peter pumped a fist in the air.

“Sweet!” He shot a web out in the air, waiting for the feel of attachment before swooping down from the bridge. “Let’s follow him.”

“Peter, I would not advise —”
“Oh don’t be such a party-pooper, Karen. YOLO!” He chuckled, his body flipping in the sky before his web attached to the nearest building.

“I am not familiar with this phrase ‘YOLO’. ”

“You only live once!” Peter ran up the side of a building with smooth speed, each movement he made getting him closer to the mass of fog.

“That is, indeed, correct Peter. Your species only have one life.”
Peter swooped down from the sky and stuck to the wall of the nearest building, his eyes following the blinking Spider-man logo on his HUD screen.

“Karen?” he asked. “Where are we?”

He had been swinging along the edge of the Hudson River for miles, losing track of time and distance along the way. The sun had long since set, the moon bright overhead from the skies above.

“You are approaching Glenmont, New York, Peter.”

The eyes of his mask enlarged into white saucers. “Glenmont!? That’s upstate…you think he’s heading to Canada?”

“It’s a possibility. However, if he wishes to continue the use of the Hudson River, his journey will end as he exits the state.”

“Yeah, good point,” Peter muttered. “And hey, if he decides to go to Jersey, you can count me out.”

He shot out a web, swinging himself into the air.

“What is wrong with New Jersey?” Karen asked, her computerized tone innocent.
Peter fumbled over his words, wall-hopping and scaling up another building. “Uh, nothing. It’s just…well, New Yorkers and New Jerseyans don’t really get along, and —”

He paused, his train of thought suddenly interrupted. “Wait a second…”

Pieces of the puzzle started to fit together one at a time, and he could feel his mind racing to catch up with all the possible scenarios.

“Yes, Peter?”

He blinked once, and then again. “Karen, how far are we from the Avengers compound?”

“At the route and speed the boat is going, it will take approximately ten minutes to arrive in Albany, New York, where the Avenger’s facility is located.”

“Oh shit!” Peter cursed. With a new found energy he darted up the building as fast as his arms and legs would take him. "I think he’s heading there! You gotta call Happy — get Happy on the phone!”

“Calling Happy Hogan.”

Rhodey had been staring at the scrap piece of paper for a few minutes now, Tony’s chicken scratch handwriting becoming embedded in his brain. Finally, he folded the note back up into the small square it was and set it down on the coffee table with a long, loud hum.

“Well, that’s just…”

Tony — who was pacing the room — spun around to face him.

“Inscrutable? Melodramatic?” he asked. “Incomprehensible?”

Rhodey shook his head. “Weird.”

“Strange, actually,” Tony replied, finger wagging. “His name was Strange.”

“His name was — Christ, Tony, do you ever remember living a normal life?” Rhodey rubbed at the edges of his temples, his eyes watching Tony cross the room back and forth like a ping-pong ball.

“Not in the slightest.” He lifted his glass to his lips, taking a swig of his iced drink.

Rhodey eyed him carefully. “Thought you were laying off the alcohol?”

“Hm? This?” he asked, pointing to the mountain glass. “Not alcoholic, can’t decipher cryptic messages from magical wizards when I’m drunk.”

It was true, so Tony could at least say he was being honest with himself. He had become obsessed with figuring out what the message meant since Bruce's arrival earlier in the day, even more so determined to know why it was directed to him.

It always had to be him.
He scrubbed at his eyes, his frustration evident. It seemed in the past decade there was always some global, worldwide threat out to destroy them. He didn’t know where to start with something so personal. He didn’t want to think about something bad happening, to him, Pepper, Rhodey, Happy — any of the few people he kept close to him.

“What does Bruce think?” Rhodey’s voice cut through his thoughts.

Tony shook his head. “No clue what to make of it. Don’t blame him, big guy hasn’t been around us for over a year, can’t wrap his head around the Accords —”

“What was the Accords,” Rhodey corrected.

“He’s amazed we’re still a team after that whole ordeal. So am I, to be honest.” Tony swiped his nose with the tip of his thumb, sniffing heavily. “He’s laying low for right now.”

It wasn’t until he had given Bruce the cliff-notes of the past year and a half that Tony realized just how much had occurred. It seemed there was no rest to be had, any resemblance of semi-retirement always a distant thought when someone wanted to bring him back into the fight.

Rhodey leaned back into the couch. “Nat know he’s back?”

Tony viciously shook his head.

“No. No no no no. There are relationship issues, and then there’s big-green-guy relationship issues.” He took the last swig of his drink, setting it down on the nearest surface. “I’d like to stay away from both while I can.”

Tony collapsed onto the couch next to Rhodey with a heavy sigh, kicking his legs up onto the coffee table while picking up the folded square piece of notebook paper.

“He’ll make his appearance known in a couple of days.” Absentmindedly he found the note bouncing between the empty space of his fingers. “Until then…”

Rhodey crossed his arms, looking over at his friend with a smirk. “Nothing is what it seems?”

Tony could have laughed, had he felt the situation to be more humorous. He settled on a half-cocked smile.

“Gotta love that feeling of impending doom.”

“You’ve reached the voicemail box of:” Happy's monotone voice came through, "Happy Hogan.”

“Dial again, Karen!” Peter’s voice was panicked, his vocal chords squeaking in pitch as he jumped from one rooftop to the next. “Just keep calling him, we gotta warn him about what's gonna happen!”

The phone rang and rang — ring ring followed by ring ring. Peter landed on the top of a storage facility within the Avenger’s property just an automated voicemail began to speak.

“You’ve reached the voicemail box of:” Happy's monotone voice came through, "Happy Hogan.”
He looked out ahead, the moonlight glistening off the glass windows of the extended, multistory facility less than half a mile away. Further out of his site was the cloud of fog he had been tracking, coming to a complete stop at the river bank.

“Crap.” Peter crouched down low, knees bent as he walked across the rooftop. “We gotta get to him before hedoes anything dangerous.”

“Peter,” Karen spoke, “may I suggest calling Tony Stark?”

Pressing his finger pads to the steel roof, Peter hummed in thought, letting his other hand nervously rub at the back of his neck.

“I mean, I’m not supposed to be here…and he wanted me to stay away from the guy, so I don’t think…”

The cloud of fog that had originated near the edge of the river bank began to thicken, quickly spreading out. If he didn’t know better, he’d pin it on the weather. It almost seemed like the mist was natural steam from the water alongside the river banks. But it started to extend over the entire compound, more than just a pocket of fog. Even the large A on the building began to disappear within it.

Peter shot up and ran, arms swinging frantically.

“Okay, okay! Call Mr. Stark!”

He bolted down the steel roof, his legs pounding against the ground and his heart thumped in his chest.

“Call — Stark— unable —”

Karen’s voice started to break up. His HUD flickered between darkness, normal screens and pure static.

“Call failed. Shall I try —”

Her voice — and his tech altogether — cut out at once. He shot out a web and pulled himself into the air, soaring high before tumbling onto the ground with a somersault, quickly gathering himself and sprinting forward.

The fog made it too difficult to see anything past his arm on the wall, dense and thick, leaving no visibility in front of him. He looked all around, desperate for some outline of anything that would lead him in the right direction.

His instincts kicked in when he saw his reflection looking right back at him, clear like it came from a glass mirror.

“Follow the crystal ball…” Peter muttered.

The reflection, and the man with it, suddenly vanished.

‘He had to have found a way in...maybe through that bottom window?’ Peter thought, stealthily sneaking forward. ‘There’s no way he just poofed himself inside. Right?’

His assumption was proven right when he noticed the bottom window cracked open. There was just enough space that he could shoot a web onto it and pull it all the way up, letting him sneak
inside. Months of practice sneaking into May's apartment finally came in handy.

The moment he entered the building, he knew where he was. The smell alone was familiar enough to recognize.

'Palladium. It was the workshop of the facility, more specifically Tony’s workshop. He had been here enough times over the summer to map out each turn of the hallways.

“At least I know my way around here…” Peter whispered to himself.

He stuck to the ceiling and followed the fog, watching as it traveled down the hallways and around the corner. It was late at night, so he wasn’t surprised to see a lack of personnel wandering around. On the oh-so-awesome times that Mr. Stark would invite him to tinker in his shop, he’d leave late at night when there would only be a ghost crew of security workers.

Peter wondered if that would change after this.

The fog disappeared behind the entry door to the main workshop but a layer of it remained floating in the halls. Karen was still offline, and looking up in the corners of the ceiling, Peter imagined the security cameras watching them weren't working as well. All of them stood still, none tracking his arachnid-like movements.

The workshop was locked, accessed only by security code. Peter looked around him, wondering what his next course of action would be. If he left now, he could find Mr. Stark in a timely matter and they could catch the guy together. Or, staring at the ceiling duct ahead, he could sneak inside and capture the guy in the act.

His decision was made for him when alarms began to blare and the ceiling lights shut off, leaving only the strobe of red to white to flash across his eyes.

“Now or never!” He pushed the vent up and to the side, crawling into the duct with ease. With a *THWIP!* of his wrist he shot out a spider-web, straight out, directly in front of him. Laying on his back, he yanked himself forward and slid across the bottom like a slip-and-slide. Once far enough long he immediately kicked out the vent below him that accessed the workshop.

He landed on the ground with a *thud*, balancing himself with his fingerstips.

“Hey there, David Blaine!” Peter stood up and pointed ahead. “B and E stands for more than just bacon and eggs, you know. Breaking and entering is a crime — hey, hold up!”

The fog increased by tenfold and he barely caught himself in the reflection of Mysterio’s helmet, only seeing his spider lenses wide and his fingers frantically shooting out webs. He leaped forward, tackling him to the ground.

"Don't move — hey — stop!"

Peter was positive that they had knocked something over in their tumble. Subconsciously, he could only hope it wasn’t anything important. Glass shattered and the sound of metal rolled around on the ground, all accompanied by the immensely bright strobe lights and piercing alarm that blared through the speakers. His heart was beating so fast he could have sworn it was about to jump out of his throat.

Each punch he threw landed on the cement floor below them, and every time he went to grip something — anything of Mysterio’s to latch onto, he had squirmed himself away. His opponents moves were fast and precise, and Peter quickly found himself out of breath. This was *way* above
the skill set Mysterio seemed to have the other night.

“Hands in the hand — hands in the air!”

The fog began to clear away, a white wool blanket that receded from in the air down to the ground. Peter could see a rush of security guards burst through the gray clouds, into the room with their guns held high.

“Oh thank god. I got him guys, he’s right — aack!” Peter screeched when someone grabbed him from underneath his arms, forcefully yanking him back. He could feel a burning tension as his tendons were pulled in the wrong direction, grunting at the feel of his bones scraping against each other.

He kicked his feet wildly. “Wrong guy, you got the wrong guy — let me go!”

Looking around frantically, Peter was surrounded by formally dressed security officers, the dark blue uniforms blurring together. It made it so when each Avenger cut through into the crowd, they stuck out like a sore thumb.

Natasha was the first, her own gun pointed at him along with the others.

“What happened?” she demanded to know.

“I caught him breaking in,” a loud, bold voice said behind him.

Wait, behind him?

Peter craned his neck to better see. The strobe lights turned off and the alarms died down. The fog slowly cleared away, giving sight to who held him in such a painful position.

‘Shit.’

Looking down at him with a raging glare that could kill was Captain-friggin-America. Or more specifically, Steve Rogers, clad only in khakis and a black t-shirt.

Something told him he had never been fighting Mysterio all along. He wasn't sure if that made him angry or if it just embarrassed the crap out of him.

“What the hell is going on!?” Sam shouted, storming into the room.

“We got an intruder,” Natasha answered, her gun never wavering.

All of a sudden, every hair on Peter's body stood up straight. His ears began to pick up every sound in the room — all at once — as if his spider-sense had been muted and someone suddenly found the on button. He could hear the radio communication between the guards, the pounding of footsteps down the hallway, someone saying that Tony Stark was on his way —

‘Oh, well that’s just dandy.’ Peter groaned. He could hear Vision and Wanda come running down the hallway, stopping near the door and talking with the others. It was almost sensory overload, the muted sensation from the fog leaving him with overly sensitive awareness in its wake. Cap's body wash was suddenly too strong against his nostrils, the lights from above were too bright — it was like Times Square all over again.

“Should we be concerned?” Vision asked, standing towards the back of the room and out of the way of the security guards.
Peter wiggled in Steve’s grasp, uselessly trying to break free.

“I didn’t — it wasn’t — crap, I didn’t do anything!” he insisted, wincing when he pulled his arm in the wrong direction.

“Stay quiet,” Steve demanded, his tone low and serious.

“Who else is with you?” a guard barked.

Peter blinked, nodding his head behind him. “But he just told me to stay quiet.”

“I said, is anyone else with you?!” the guard repeated, his voice booming over the surrounding commotion.

The grasp on his arms tightened, pulling him back further into Steve’s hold. Peter could have kicked himself — he never kept his mouth shut when he needed to.

Suddenly, a voice came shouting from the hallway. “I know I pay you to do more than stand around and gawk — now move!”

Tony pushed through the crowd of guards, bringing with him the sound of whirring armor, the red and yellow Iron Man repulsor attached to his right arm. Rhodey followed his tail, weaponless.

“Can someone explain to me how a high-tech, secure facility can be broken into by —”

Having busted through the encompassing security, Tony stopped mid-sentence at the sight that greeted him. In the middle of the room was Steve, on his knees gripping — in a tight nelson hold — none other than the red-and-blue clad Spider-man.

Peter blinked twice, the shutter lens of his mask mimicking the movement. He hoped Mr. Stark knew that meant ‘sorry’. Somehow he doubted it. The longer they stared at each other, the redder Tony’s face got.

“We caught him breaking in,” Steve explained.

Peter gaped. “What? No! No — no, I didn’t break in — well, I mean I did break in, technically, but it’s not like that!”

“Sir,” a security guard spoke up. “You’re missing one item. The case is unlabeled — what was it?”

Tony didn’t need to investigate what the guard was talking about. Looking up, not far across the room was the employee pointing to the empty glass case, the wires that had kept the item secured and alarmed now dangling loosely inside. Oddly enough, none were cut or ripped out. It was as if the item was phased directly out of its case.

“What’d you steal, punk?” Steve asked.

“Punk? Did you —” Peter bit back a laugh, turning to the crowd circling around him. “Did he just call me punk?”

Natasha unlocked the safety to her pistol. “What did you take?!”

The sound of a trigger being released from her gun sent shivers up his spine. He shook his head, so fast and panicked that it caused his vision to blur.

“I didn’t take anything! I don’t have anything on me — nothing, see!?”
“Yeah, we can see a lot,” Sam scoffed. “The spandex gives it all away.”

It was a good thing Peter had his mask on — his cheeks were turning as red as his suit. There wasn't long to dwell on the matter; the hairs on the back of his neck stood up straight for what seemed to be the millionth time in the past three minutes. He could feel the rush of air behind him as Steve released one of his arms.

The tingling of his spider-sense gave him fair warning. It was a swift movement — Steve released one arm and went to yank off his mask. Peter ducked low and twisted around. Though his other arm was still held tightly, the sudden movement caused Steve to switch grips from his bicep down to his forearm.

He tried to run or leap, to dart away as quickly as he could. Steve yanked him right back like a puppy on a leash.

The sudden movements created a ruckus between the guards and the Avengers. Shouts and commands of 'stay down!' and 'don't move!' filled the room.

"Do not move!"

"We mean it, we will shoot!"

“Sorry sorry sorry…” Peter apologized, holding his free arm in the air to show his compliance. “It’s just…the mask is there for a reason, ya know?”

Steve shook his head. “Whatever the reason it is, it needs to come off. Now.”

“Uh…sorry.” Peter winced, shaking his head. “No can do.”

“It was The Chameleon?” Vision’s monotone voice spoke up, his presence across the room suddenly noticed. They all looked his way, where he examined the empty case with fascination. “The appearance changing device you created. That’s what was taken?”

Tony gave one sharp nod, his arms folded across his chest and his lips pursed tightly. "Seems to be that way."

“Alright, Queens.” Steve stood up, gripping both his hands behind his back. “You’re coming with us.”

“No no no — I didn’t take it, I swear!” Peter insisted. “I’m not the bad guy — I was trying to catch the bad guy, really!”

Natasha remained unfazed. “And why should we believe you?”

“You…you guys know me. I-I’ve fought with you before,” Peter poorly reasoned.

Sam huffed. “Against us. You fought against us.”

“You were on Tony’s side during that fight,” Steve remembered, keeping his grip strong as he looked over at Tony. “You recruited him, right?”

Once again, Tony gave a sharp nod of his head.

“Yep,” he said, the P at the end of his answer making an audible pop.

Peter looked between the two, behind him at Steve and over at Tony.
“You vouch for him?” Steve asked.

There was a beat of silence, a thick tension quickly filling the room. Peter could hear his own heart beating erratically in his chest, his breathing suddenly too loud, too heavy, to the point where he wondered if the others could hear it as well. Sweat dripped down his forehead and stuck to the inside of his mask, the angry glares from like shooting daggers against his skin.

Ultimately Tony sighed, letting his arms drop down to his sides. “Yeah, unfortunately, I do.”

Rhodey furrowed his brows with disappointment. “Tony —”

“You gotta be kidding me,” Sam grumbled.

Natasha never lowered her gun. “Yeah, well, I don’t have reason to trust him.”

“I didn’t take anything!” Peter practically begged to be heard. “I don’t have anything on me, I swear!”

“That might be true,” Steve said, “but you’re still wearing a mask.”

Tony had heard enough.

“Oh, enough with the dramatics! Sheesh, it’s like a soap opera in here.” He waved his arms to the surrounding guards, gesturing them to leave. “Go — get, do your job. Sweep the compound, God knows this isn’t the only place that could have been broken into.”

The room began to empty out one person at a time, some personnel speaking their confusion in body language or expressions, others staying silent altogether. Only one looked directly at Tony, pointing towards the now empty enclosure that had become their crime scene.

“Sir, we need forensic to swab the room —”

Tony spun around. “And I need you to give us some damn privacy. So if you want to keep your nightstick and flashlight after tonight, I would advise coming back at a later time.”

The guard kept his mouth shut, the insult prompting him to leave in a hurry. It didn’t take long for the rest of the room to clear out afterward. Once it did, Tony locked the otherwise automatic doors behind them, leaving only the present Avengers to surround the red-and-blue vigilante. Natasha began to lower her gun. Steve never let go of his grip on Peter’s foreman.

Tony turned around from the door and looked straight at the restrained Spider-man. “What’s your story?”

The room watched him with interest, awaiting his answer.

Peter took in a deep breath. “There’s a man — he came here, and I followed him. Its the guy from Times Square, the weird fish-bowl dude, and he released this fog that I couldn’t see through, and he must have taken the helmet before I could stop him because when I went to tackle him, I guess he wasn’t there anymore and ‘cause every time I tried to stop him he moved and I’m actually pretty sure I was fighting Cap but —”

“Whoa whoa whoa.” Rhodey raised his hand in the air. “Slow down, take a breath. You followed someone here?”

Peter nodded.
“Why follow him?” Sam asked. “Why not alert someone instead of breaking into this place?”

Tony rolled his eyes. “It’s not like our phone number is listed on Google, Wilson. Who would he contact?”

Peter knew that Tony looked to him on purpose when asked the question. His eyes reflected a rage he hadn’t seen in the man probably ever - not even after the Ferry, not even when he took his suit away. The look said ‘what the hell kid, you have my phone number!

In that moment he found that he was suddenly very aware of the fact he was only fifteen-years-old, a kid who snuck into a highly secure superhero facility, surrounded by men and women much older than him. The self-awareness did nothing for his already dwindling confidence.

“I uh, well I tried — or I thought about, it’s uh…” he stumbled word after word.

Tony interrupted, forcing out a defense the best he could. “It sounds like he meant well.”

Steve shook his head. “It sounds like he can’t get his story straight. And as long as he’s hiding behind that mask, we have no reason to trust him.”

“Are you for — Rogers, I recruited him,” Tony snapped. “Have a little bit of faith in me, would you?”

Steve locked eyes with him. “Criminals wear masks, Tony.”

“You wear a mask. I wear a mask.” His response was as smart-assed as a Stark could get. “Are we criminals?”

“That’s not my point,” Steve bit back.

“Then what is? Because all I’m gathering from this is that Underoo’s wanted to save the day and got caught up in some mess that he should have stayed out of.”

Once again, Peter didn’t miss how Tony directed the words to him. He began to wonder why the man used such a powerful, dangerous machine like the Iron Man armor when all he had to do was look at someone the way he was looking at him now — that alone could kill.

“You’re missing dangerous technology, and he was here when it happened. That should be enough cause for concern,” Steve said.

Tony gave a half-hearted smirk. “I guess ‘wrong place, wrong time’ won’t work for ya?”

Peter felt himself getting dizzy looking between the two, their persistent arguing showing no signs of letting up. Eventually he decided to hang his head low and stare at the ground instead. He wondered if this was what it felt like when parents fought over something. He never had the chance to really experience it himself, never with his late parents or Uncle Ben and Aunt May.

Listening to the two men practically bicker back and forth, he became silently appreciate of that fact.

Steve remained serious. “You tell me, Tony, it was your tech that was stolen.”

“When did Captain goody-two-shoes become a cynical asshole?” Tony asked.

“When I started having reasons not to trust people,” Steve bluntly answered.
Tony threw his hands in the air, letting out a deep and defeated sigh. There was a beat, one that made Peter flinch with tension. He never turned back around, though everyone saw as he kneaded at his forehead like it would wipe away all his stress.

“Alright kid.” Tony never even turned around when he spoke. "Take it off.”

Peter's head whipped up fast enough to give them all whiplash. He momentarily speechless, staring ahead in shock.

“What?”

“You heard me.” Tony turned to face him. “Unless you want to spend the night in a prison cell, take the mask off.”

Peter couldn't believe what he was hearing. “I—I…I can’t, you know I—”

“Kid, you either trust us, or you don’t. And until Capsicle sees those brown Bambi eyes of yours, he definitely won’t trust you,” Tony argued.

Peter looked around at the group, frowning beneath the mask. He could have sworn Mr. Stark had his back on this, that they agreed his identity would be kept secret until he decided to join the team. Looking at the billionaire, he realized there were conditions to that promise he never realized existed. Like not breaking into the Avenger's facility, for starters.

“But…Mr. Stark, I…”

Tony quirked an eyebrow, waiting.

Peter dropped his shoulders, defeated. This sucked — there was no argument to be had, he really didn't have any ground to stand on and the longer Mr. Stark stared at him the more he realized that the man had come to that conclusion a while ago.

Peter didn’t know which was worse, the internal debate over the decision or the knowledge that the choice was already made for him. There was no way he was walking out of this with both his identity kept secret and his freedom attached.

This really, really sucked. God, he screwed up big time.

He gripped the back of the mask, bunching it into his palm as he pulled it up and off of his head. His curly brown locks came falling into his eyes and he had to sweep them away with his free hand when he looked up at the team.

“Hi. I’m Peter,” he said, sighing. “Peter Parker.”

Chapter End Notes

Woooottt! You guys are so, so awesome. Have I said that yet? Aw screw it, I'll say it every chapter!

That concludes segment 1 of the story - we've got the ball rolling! I love getting the first segment out, because as you can tell that's basically the introduction phase of the fic. By the second, things pick up so fast and are so much fun to write/read. Some
things for you to look forward and stay tuned to:

Steve and Tony fight like an old married couple over Peter.
Breakfast with the Avengers.
Mysterio's plans are revealed, along with their (wait, THEIR?) reason for obtaining the chameleon helmet.
Peter's first real fight WITH the Avengers.
Nobody give Peter alcohol -he's underage.
Oh, and chapter 9 will blow you away.

See you next time!
Chapter Summary

Fun nerdy facts:

131964 is a throwback to Mysterio, who first appeared in issue #13 of The Amazing Spider-man in year 1964.

‘Stinger’ is actually a reference to Cassie Lang, who is indeed The Stinger in Marvel comics.

'Malysh'/Малыш' means 'baby' or 'kid' in Russian.

I know 5 chapters into this there may be some confusion on what's going on, but I want to rest assure that *everything* I bring up WILL be resolved or answered going forward. We're just starting this crazy ride; hang tight and it'll get good!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The silence in the room was heavy. Peter was sure that if the others couldn't hear the frantic
thumping from his heart before, they certainly could now. His skin was hot and flushed from the sudden bout of nerves, sweat sticking to the inside of his red and blue suit like gum.

They all just stared at him, every one of them speechless. It made Peter all the more nervous, his fingers gripping his mask tighter the longer the seconds passed.

It was Tony who ultimately spoke up first.

“Jesus, kid.” He rolled his eyes. “I didn’t say you had to give your full name.”

Peter’s jaw dropped. “But you —”

Tony turned around with a wave of his hand. “What next, you want to give Natasha your social security number?”

The group briefly looked to Natasha, her face one shade whiter than it had been a minute ago. She had since clicked the trigger back on her Glock and stuffed it deep into her belt, her attention solely on the floor below. No one needed an explanation on why — her eyes held anger and shock over her actions, clearly disturbed that she had violently threatened a young boy.

Sam, on the other hand, burst out laughing.

“Holy shit!”

Steve released his hold on Peter, so suddenly it was like the grip burned his hand.

“Language,” he mumbled.

Having been controlling the room with a sense of authority, it didn’t go unnoticed when Steve stepped back, confounded. His demeanor had been stripped down to something that couldn’t be conveyed. He watched Peter like a hawk, his eyebrows knitted tensely, shock unhidden and evident like the others. He was obviously unnerved over the revelation, certainly not expecting the fresh-faced, young teenager underneath the mask.

Sam bent over and slapped his knees, his laughter breaking through the tension in the air. “Hot damn, we recruiting the **Micky Mouse Club** now?”


“No, no, this is great,” Sam insisted. “We should get Scott Lang’s daughter in next — give her a little ant-person suit and call her ‘Stinger’ or some nonsense.”

“Sam…” Steve quietly admonished.

Sam didn’t pay much attention to the tone that said the unspoken ‘don’t start’. He shook his head in laughter, which only intensified every time he looked up at Peter.

Peter, despite wearing the suit from the neck down, suddenly felt more naked than ever. He rubbed the nape of his neck nervously, sensing Vision staring at him from the side and noticed that the woman he was with — a girl with long, red hair flowing past her waist, was eyeing him with a strictly suspicious expression. If there were ever a time he felt like an object on display at a museum, this was it.

He briefly considered how bad the consequences would be if he jumped back into the air duct and made a sudden escape. It couldn’t be too hard to start a whole new life at his age, right? There was
Who was he kidding? He was screwed. Of all the ways the Avengers could have found out his identity, this had to be the worst. Peter was beginning to regret not taking the offer to join the team earlier in the year. At least then he’d have some dignity in the revelation.

“Tones…” Rhodey stood near Tony, whispering to stay quiet. “What’s this about?”

Peter noticed that Wanda had begun to slowly approach him, looking at him curiously, her eyes never diverting from his. For each step she took, Steve took one back, distancing himself from the spandex-clad hero.

“This…” Tony lifted his arm in presentation. “Is Spider-man.”

Peter forced a smile and an awkward wave.

“No, no.” Sam laughed. “This is Sesame Street right here.”

Peter's smile instantly dropped.

Natasha shook her head. “Cut it out, Sam. It’s not funny.”

Her tone was low and solemn, holding less power and control than usual. Maybe it was what got through to Sam, or maybe the tension in the room had finally grown too thick. His laughter died off, leaving only silence in its place.

Tony walked past Peter, slapping his back in a reassuring but forceful way that sent him stumbling forward on his feet.

“He’s my recruit. Kid-genius, freaky enhanced abilities, likes to climb up walls and apparently in ceiling vents…”

Tony’s voice began to drown out, a peaceful yet mysterious hum overtaking him in its place. Wanda came face-to-face with Peter, and his heart beat heavily, pounding like a drum in his chest. The hairs on the back of his neck told him something was wrong — very wrong.

But he couldn’t move.

Her fingers were close to his chest, dancing wildly and in sharp movements. The vibrant red that swirled around them was memorizing, and he watched the glow with entrancement. It was beyond anything he had seen before, a red energy that floated around her, almost through her, like embers rising from flames.

Then, like a switch, the world around him returned.

“Whoa whoa whoa!” Tony shouted, pulling her away from him. “What did you do?”

Peter blinked and shook his head, looking at Tony and Wanda with confusion.

“The malysh is innocent,” she simply said.

Peter’s eyebrows shot up, and he pointed to his forehead. “Holy crap, did she just read my mind?”

“Wanda…” Vision stepped forward. “You cannot—”

“I feel violated,” Peter squeaked.
Wanda stepped back, her arms returning to her sides.

“He tells the truth. He was only trying to help.” She looked back to the others. “He stole nothing.”

“Yeah, I was trying to get to that, Maximoff!” Tony exasperatedly sighed, rubbing his eyes with both clenched fists. “I thought we were past the whole mind-assaulting phase.”

Peter looked around, noticing that no one seemed even remotely fazed at the incident, everyone remaining calm, as if it was a usual occurrence for them. He wasn't too sure what to think of that, trying his best to shake it off and ignore the odd feeling that sent shivers down his spine.

Chase a wanna-be magician with supernatural powers, reveal himself to the Avengers, have his mind read by some creepy Sokovian woman…the day was turning out to be a lot worse then he imagined.

‘Why didn’t I just stay home and study…’

“I think it would be best if we leave, Wanda,” Vision advised, gently reaching out for her hand.

The arm stayed outreached to her and he patiently awaited her response. For a moment, Wanda stared at Peter, her eyes locked with his. He nervously looked away, finding himself counting ceiling tiles one by one, uncomfortable being the center of everyone’s attention.

Finally, she took his hand. “That is fine, Vis.”

She began to leave the room, Vision ahead of her as they departed. Peter didn’t miss the over-the-shoulder glance she gave him before exiting, and the smile that came with it.

It wasn’t creepy. Peter had seen his fair share of creepy smiles before, the kind that would make him want to take a shower and scrub himself for days. No, hers seemed…genuine. Kind. As if she had seen something in his head that made her sympathize with him.

He wanted to mention it but never got a chance.

“So if Dora here didn’t take your tech,” Sam spoke up, “who did?”

Peter’s head shot up. Awkwardly, he raised his hand.

“Uhm, if I may…” He cleared his throat. “It was Mysterio.”

Rhodey scrunched his eyebrows. “Mystery-who?”

“Uh, well…that’s—that’s what I call him. Mysterio. Like…Mystery in Spanish, but not…I don’t know, he spoke to me in Spanish and it was really weird and I tried —”

“Kid,” Tony interrupted, snapping his fingers. “The point — get to it.”

“Right, right.” Peter nodded. “He was here. I followed him here, from Queens. He took the Hudson River and has this…fog, this weird fog that he uses to create a technological blackout. He had to have taken the helmet, Mr. Stark, it’s the only thing that makes sense.”

Tony sighed. Rhodey shrugged his shoulders, all but ready to tap out. Natasha, on the other hand, hummed quietly, considering his words.

“The guy from Times Square…” she thought aloud. “What’s his motive for stealing that kind of equipment?”
Steve, who had been careful to keep his distance and who had been quiet for a good part of the conservation, suddenly stepped forward.

“Tony…” He looked to the billionaire. “Can we talk. Privately.”

It wasn’t a request — Tony knew it. Hell, the entire room knew it. It was an instruction, a demand. Peter decided the floor looked a lot better than anyone else around him, nervously shuffling his feet, internally wishing that spider-bite had given him the power of invisibility — ‘why couldn’t it have given me the power of invisibility!?’

Tony and Steve stared at each other for a moment. From the outside it looked as if they were communicating with only their eyes. And while Tony had the sense of pride and overconfidence that could steal an entire room, Steve’s demeanor spoke leadership, an unspoken demand of ‘I’m asking nicely, but I don’t need an answer from you’. Ultimately, Tony caved.

As he followed Steve out of the room, he shot a look over at Peter. The younger boy stood unsure of himself, fiddling with the mask in his hands.

“Down the hall and to the right, fifth door — code 131964. Wait for me there.” Tony waged a finger in his direction. “Do not touch anything.”

Peter gave a sharp nod.

With that, the two were gone, having departed somewhere down the hallway. Rhodey left with them, walking down the opposite direction and finding a security guard who he started up a discussion that they couldn't hear.

It was then Peter became painfully aware that he was still surrounded by two remaining Avengers, both staring at him as if he were an anomaly. He wasn’t sure who made him more nervous — Sam, being that the last time they were near each other he had webbed the Falcon up into a cocoon. Or Natasha, who probably knew five hundred and sixty four-ways to kill him before he could blink.

Peter pointed to the doorway. “I should…uh…listen to him…you know, go and…yeah.”

Clutching the mask tightly in his gloved hands, he tried to leave the workshop. Both stood in front of the door, unwavering. While Natasha moved away slightly, Sam hadn’t budged an inch.

He squeezed between the two, muttering ‘sorry…just gotta get by…sorry…almost through.’ as his red and blue spandex brushed against Natasha and his shoulder bumped into Sam. It had to be the most embarrassing moment of his life, sixth-grade de-pantsing in the cafeteria included. He quickly darted down the corridor the moment he could.

Sam peeked his head out the door, hand cupped over his mouth.

“Yeah, you wouldn’t want to get grounded!” he hollered.

Natasha looked at him, disgusted.

He turned back to her and shrugged. “What?”

She scoffed, shaking her head as she left the workshop, the opposite direction of where Peter was jogging down the hallway. Sam wasn’t far behind, muttering underneath his breath.

“Man, I miss having Clint around more often.” He sulked. “Dude at least has a sense of humor.”
The door to the conference room closed with an audible click. Fluorescent lights from above turned on automatically, one by one until the entire room was visible. It was quiet and secluded, the chaos from outside blocked off and hidden away.

Steve waited a moment before turning around from the door, taking in a deep breath as he did.

“Tony…”

Walking into the room with his back facing Steve, Tony casually waved a hand in the air.

“You know, it’s a pretty sad day when you can have billions of dollars worth of security and none of it stops a wannabe magician from breaking in and stealing your stuff.”

He got no response. Turning on his heels, Tony was met with a baleful expression on Steve’s face, his blue eyes holding the same stress — the same burden, as he had seen months ago.

He cocked an eyebrow. “What? You want to lecture me about responsibility? About the dangers of my technology?”

Steve dropped his head low to his chest, shaking it slowly. It stayed there for a moment, a painful moment where seconds cut into the silence that passed by, the tension palpable. By the time he looked up, a mixture of sadness and frustration had washed across his face.

Tony’s jaw locked up. The last time he had seen him look that way, they both had the Accords paperwork sitting in front of them. It was a time he didn’t want to relive, a blip in their lives that he struggled to put behind them.

As it was, their friendship and leadership in the team was a managed mess that barely held on by a thread. It was a daily struggle of walking on eggshells and working around delicate, extremely delicate emotions coming from them both. They had all but avoided an argument since coming to a truce, shaking hands over the burning Accords in his fireplace.

Barnes was safe and exonerated. He helped rescue their team, rebuild the Avengers, fight the Accords — they had made progress, damn it.

Bitterly, Tony knew it was a matter of time before they butted heads again.

He didn’t know if he had the patience in him to deal with that tonight.

Steve sighed. “He’s a kid, Tony.”

“Don’t you think I know that?” Tony sharply replied.

Steve went to speak and found only breath escaped his mouth, his chest heaving with the air that was released. He moved forward from the door, coming closer to where Tony stood.

“To be honest, I was hoping that you didn’t.”

The way he approached him — a defeated, grim frown — Tony rolled his eyes, meeting his stare with his own.
“Oh knock it off with the ‘I’m not mad, I’m just disappointed’ face, Rogers.”

“Did you know he was a kid?” Steve asked. “When you recruited him?”

Tony’s frustration had already boiled beyond what he could control, and he threw his hand in the air. “Of course I knew! Now, why the hell is this your concern right now when our top of the line, highly secured facility was just broken into!?”

He had raised his voice well above Steve’s, his shout echoing in the large conference room.

Steve, however, didn’t flinch.

“How old is he?” His voice was calm and quiet.

Maybe that’s what felt condescending to Tony, or perhaps it was the night’s events that took a toll on him — his stuff was stolen, the Spider-kid was in deep trouble when he got his hands on him, and now he felt he was being lectured.

Friendship be damned, Tony really, really didn’t have the patience for this tonight.

“Christ, Cap — he’s fifteen, okay? Fifteen. Now remove the patronizing icicle out of your ass —”

Steve shook his head. “Why would you bring someone so young into this mess?”

Tony paused, taken aback. “Because if you feel that way, at least say it’s a well organized and funded mess —”

“It’s war,” Steve harshly interrupted.

“Than I guess we need all the soldiers we can get,” Tony retorted.

There was hesitation on Steve’s end. He took an effort to think over his words before he spoke, aware of the fragile and easily breakable situation between the two of them, probably more so than Tony.

“How could you, in good conscience, recruit a fifteen-year-old boy?”

Tony snapped, slamming his hand down on the conference table next to him. “Because we had no other way to get through to you, Rogers! You were blinded by Barnes, willing to do anything and lose everything over him. We needed something - I needed something to gain the advantage, to make you realize you were relentlessly sacrificing everything for one damn person!”

The one thing that pissed Tony off the most about Steve Rogers, while simultaneously also being the one thing that he admired, was that the man never engaged in anger. Tony’s outburst went overlooked, noted but ignored. He was given time to calm down as Steve slowly, and very quietly pulled out a chair to sit in.

Steve rested his chin in the palm of his hands and stared at the walls in deep thought. He remembered his first encounter with the boy — Spider-man, Queens as he proceeded to call him. He felt the kid got wrapped up in a situation he didn’t need to be in. After all was said and done, he internally wished him the best once the storm had calmed down. He’d watch him on the news and praise him for the good acts he’d commit, happy to see others like him wanting to do good.
They knew Tony had some sort of involvement with him. But if he had known…

“I could have killed him out there — he could have died in Germany.” His tone was solemn, a sober realization that shook him to his core.

Tony shook his head and crossed his arms. “I wouldn’t have let that happen.”

“Not everything is in your control, Tony.” Steve looked up at him. “Tonight should be proof of that.”

“What I do with my recruit is none of your business.”

“It is now. You can’t just throw away a life like that.”

“I’m not throwing it away, I’m bettering it!” Tony’s temper flared, his words sharp and crisp, his skin flushing red.

Steve shot up an eyebrow. “By sending him out in the field to get hurt, or worse?”

“Whose suit do you think that is, Rogers? It’s my tech on him. I wouldn’t send him out there without the equipment to protect him — I wouldn’t send any of you out there without protection.” Tony pointed at him, his finger steady. “Just remember where that shield of yours came from.”

Steve huffed, folding his arms over his chest. “Is that what this is? Was he some Stark Industries experiment gone hay-wire?”

“Steve — Christ, no, he —” Tony scoffed in disbelief, walking away from the table.

“Is that why you feel responsible for him?”

The questions were amounting to be too much, and Tony spun around, extending his arm and pointing to the doorway. “I’ll have you know he was doing this long before I got involved!”

Steve shot up, the chair he sat in rolling across the room and smashing into the wall with a loud resounding bang, leaving a dent as it did.

“He’s a child, Tony!” Steve shouted, his voice booming in the room.

Tony rolled his eyes. “Give me a break!”

“Give him all the gadgets in the world and it doesn’t change the fact that he’s still a child.” Steve emphasized, taking long strides in approaching him. “Of course he came here tonight. He didn’t know any better!”

Tony shook his head and wagged his finger. “No, you don’t get to say that, you don’t know Peter.”

He spoke with control and ownership, a tone Steve was all too familiar with — a Stark way of speaking. And while he may have been right in not knowing Peter, it didn’t make the situation as a whole okay.

Steve took a breath in, controlling the anger that bled through his veins. He watched as Tony turned away and gripped the back of his scalp, the billionaire tugging at his hair with low growls. They both knew there wouldn't be a pretty end to their disagreement.

“I’m beginning to doubt that I know you,” he softly admitted.
Tony turned back around, his shoulders sagging low with resignation. “Christ. I can’t…I can’t do this again with you, Rogers.”

Steve didn’t let up, not even as Tony brushed past him. “The fact that you would recruit such a young boy into this world, who hasn’t even graduated high school yet —”

“Get off your high horse —”

“Come ON, Stark!”

His voice shouted so loud it finally made Tony flinch, his head jerking back in surprise. His eyes had even gone wider than average, the sudden loss of control from the Captain shocking him.

He had pushed him too far.

Steve stormed up to him, shoulders pulled back and tone low. “We’re all grown adults here — we understand the repercussion to our actions, and we’ve accepted the possibility of dying out there. But him? He’s just a kid.”

His words resounded in the room, rolling off the walls like thunder. Tony stared him down, staying quiet. It took a lot for Rogers to lose his temper, but it didn’t take a lot for Tony to know when to back down.

Their personalities never meshed, not all the time. But it’s what made them work. They were never equals, never intimated by each other. Loki, Ultron, the Accords — they had fought over so much.

Looking at Steve, Tony could tell he was fed up with the fight. All the fights. It might be the first thing they agreed on together.

“I’ve watched a lot of good men die in senseless wars. Men,” Steve stressed. “If the kid dies, that’s on you.”

Tony broke the stare, looking away and towards the ground. He didn’t want to respond. He didn’t want to tell Steve that he felt the exact same way, because then it’d add fuel to the fire of why he was letting Peter be involved. He didn't want to admit that some days, he regretted bringing the kid into their world of super-heroes. It scared the living hell out of him when he imagined the worst possible scenario's that could happen. Not responding kept that fear inside, where he didn't have to deal with it, or the repercussions of admitting it to someone else.

“Is it worth it, Tony?” Steve asked. “Is he worth it?”

Tony looked up at him, never answering.

It was all the answer Steve needed.

Without another word, he left the room, the door shutting with a loud *thud.*

Peter spun.

He spun, and spun and spun around in his chair, watching the room swirl by him as if he were on a roller coaster. Not touching the hundreds of exciting gadgets around him was harder than he
expected, like putting a kid in a candy store and then giving him broccoli to eat. Mr. Stark couldn't just lock him in a closet where he'd be less enticed by his surroundings, no, he had to come here, another workshop off the corner of the compound.

Peter sighed, slowing to a stop. He admitted defeat in going home anytime soon. Hours had passed since he was caught at the Avenger’s facility, and after texting Aunt May that he’d be staying at Ned’s tonight, and then calling Ned to cover the lie, he had nothing to do but wait.

And waiting was the worse part.

Just when he was beginning to think they had forgotten about him, the sound of electronic keys being dialed caught his attention. A few beeps passed before the door was granted accessed, opened up and revealed —

“Mr. Stark, I’m sorry, I —”

Tony glared at him, waving the door shut without turning his back. His other hand pointed a finger viciously in his direction.

“I told you to stay away, kid,” he hissed. “What will it take for me to get into that ridiculously rebellious adolescent head of yours?”

Peter gulped, frowning. “Mr. Stark, I —”

“Do I need to speak in opposites?” he asked, walking past him. “If I say ‘Yeah, Pete! Go after the dangerous criminal wearing a fishbowl for a helmet!’ will you stay away then?”

Peter stood up from his chair, turning to face him with his Spider-man mask still gripped in his hands.

“He was —”

“Once again, you have gotten in way over your head,” Tony angrily ranted. “You’re the one who wanted to stick to the streets, stay low to the ground, remain in the neighborhood —”

“He was in my neighborhood, Mr. Stark! If you just hear me out —”

Tony turned around so fast it made Peter dizzy. He could practically feel the anger radiating from him. With his hip leaning against the table, the older man crossed his arms and shot up his eyebrows, a beat passing in silence before Peter got the hint.

It wasn’t often he was allowed an explanation. He cautiously stepped forward and further into the room, approaching the billionaire slowly.

“It wasn’t like I was chasing him. I was on patrol, and I saw him…” Peter paused, realizing everything he said sounded much better in his head. “So…I followed him.”

Tony stared at him so intensely that Peter thought, for just one moment, he may have broken the man. His expression was deadpanned and his movements were still.

‘Yeah,’ Peter decided. It sounded a lot better in his head.

“And you never once thought to call, I don’t know, anyone!?” Tony wasn’t shy about yelling at this point. Peter could tell he had passed his breaking point long before entering the room. Something bad had happened between him and the others, and knowing he was the cause of that
left a sickening feeling of guilt to settle in his stomach.

“…I called Happy.”

Tony pinched the bridge of his nose, and Peter quickly went to recover.

“And — and I tried calling you! But my phone shut off, the-the suit fritzed out and —”

“And now I have missing tech with no clue on where to find it! What happens if this guy replicates himself into the President of the United States? Did you think about that, Pete? One push of a button and he can nuke a whole country. And that’s on me.”

Peter wouldn’t admit that he hadn’t thought the whole plan through. He had just wanted to do something right for once, the past handful of months being failure on failure of bad guys he couldn’t keep up with. Every time he tried to help, he always made it worse. And even when he won, he always somehow lost — May was either furious at him, the news outlets made him out to be a menace, or Tony had something to criticize him on — it never stopped.

“I just wanted to help.” Peter’s voice was soft.

Tony snapped his head over to look at him, and suddenly and so violently, Peter was back at Staten Island. The disappointment and regret that flashed across his eyes was a punch to the gut, so hard it stole his breath.

“I just wanted to be like you.”

“Well…you didn’t,” Tony snapped.

“And I wanted you to be better.”

It wasn’t his finest moment. Everything about this night had turned into a train wreck and he was half-expecting his suit to be confiscated again. It surprised him Tony hadn’t gone there yet, and he surely wasn’t going to give the man any ideas. Instead of punishing him, Tony had merely turned around and leaned heavily against the workshop counters, muttering a few choice words under his breath.

A beat of silence passed before Peter spoke again.

“You know…I should be mad too.”

The words left his mouth before he thought them through. His eyes went wide as Tony spun around with such unspeakable wrath that Peter had to take a step back.

‘Why can’t you just keep your damn mouth shut, Parker?’

“It's just, I didn’t—I didn’t want anyone to know about Spider-man,” he tried to defend himself. “You made me take my mask off —”

“Can it, kid!” Tony shouted, his lips pursed. “You put yourself in that situation the moment you snuck onto this facility.”

There was no arguing him on that. Peter frowned, knowing he couldn’t right his wrongs. The damage was clearly done for the night, he just had to move forward and fix what had happened.

“Listen, Mr. Stark, I know he stole The Chameleon, but we can find him. Maybe if we —”
“We are not doing anything, you hear me pipsqueak?” Tony snapped. “Because not only did star spangled asshole chew me a new asshole, but he’s decided we’ve regressed back to Germany and aren’t on the same side anymore. And that’s because I decided to keep your little ‘secret identity’ from the team. On top of that, some very, very dangerous tech is now in the hands of your floating fish-bowl bad guy. So I repeat, we are not doing anything. You are going home.”

Peter stood still, the mask in his hands no longer being twisted and fiddled with. He had been yelled at countless times by many adults, some being prominent authority figures to him like May, some being meaningless teachers that didn’t know the whole story.

Being reprimanded by Tony Stark was different. He was a figure he looked up to, someone he wanted to impress and do good by. When he was Spider-man he could do that. Spider-man made him feel tall and big, a figure who could help anyone.

Right now, he felt small. He hated that feeling, and he shuffled his feet on the ground nervously.

“Yes, sir,” he mumbled, knowing there wasn’t anything more he could say.

Tony had sat in the nearest chair he could find, rubbing at his temples aggressively. He didn’t even look up as the kid walked away, never even noticing as he stopped half-way across the room.

“I’m…I’m really sorry, Mr. Stark,” Peter said, waiting in anticipation for a response that never came. He turned his back again, shoulders slumped in defeat.

Just then, Tony craned his neck around to look at him, sighing with realization.

“Kid…”

Peter turned around, hope glistening in his eye.

“Security’s not going to let you out, not while we’re on lock-down.”

Peter frowned. It wasn't just from the unexpected answer; he was now confused on how he was supposed to leave the building and get home.

“Where—where should…I go…?”

Tony spun around in his chair and pointed to his right.

“Your quarters. East wing,” he simply answered. “Follow the red Android if you have trouble finding it.”

Peter hid the shock from his face and better than that, he kept his mouth shut. Internally, his head was screaming the same thing over and over again.

“That...that wasn't a test!? I have a room here!?” He awkwardly made his way out of the workshop and down the hallway, fighting off a grin that he wasn't deserving of. 'I've been here so many times before and I've never been to my own room? That's so uncool!'

Walking through the building, Peter realized that Tony wasn’t kidding — the entire facility was on lock-down. Guards were stationed at every door, each one of them looking at him like he was some sort of strange, uninvited monster. Of everything he had dealt with tonight, he was mildly thankful that walking to the East wing of the compound in his Spider-man suit, mask clenched in his hands, wasn’t the most uncomfortable thing he had encountered.
It was close, though. Especially when he needed to stop and ask the front desk security guard which way the Avengers lodging rooms were. It didn’t help that he found her to be a little cute, too.

By the time he approached his quarters, his feet were dragging on the ground. It wasn’t hard to tell which room belonged to him, seeing the Spider-emblem painted on the door was a clear giveaway. He slowly pushed it open, hesitant on going inside. That was, until, the lights automatically turned on and he saw exactly what the inside held.

Eyes wide, Peter’s jaw dropped.

“No way…"

A small smile finally tugged on his lips.

The room was huge. The size of May’s entire apartment, at best, and entirely modeled for a teenage boy. Each corner had something for him. On one side was a high-tech computer, X-Box, and Playstation. Another had a small personal laboratory, set up with things like his web cartridges and shooters. Hell, one side was complete a rock wall, surely a jab at Peter’s growing interest in climbing.

He was overwhelmed, looking at his surroundings with starry eyes.

‘I so would have joined if I knew about this.’

On top of the sleek, mahogany wooden dresser laid a pair of sweatpants and neatly folded up t-shirt. Upon inspecting it, Peter realized they were spare clothes of Tony's — the AC/DC t-shirt that smelt of iron and grease a dead give away. With nothing better to wear, he hit the emblem on his chest and stripped off the suit for more comfortable attire. He tightened the drawstring of the pants, but the shirt still hung baggy on him, about two sizes too big. It would have to do for now.

The bed in the middle of the room looked extremely inviting and he practically collapsed onto it, bouncing slightly as he did. He knew it had gotten late — or early, he didn’t even want to look at the clock. He could feel it in his bones, an exhaustion that hit him deep.

And boy were these pillows super comfortable. Peter laid his head against them, briefly noting how it felt like being surrounded by an abundance of clouds. Soft, fluffy, feathery clouds. It was a huge difference from his old, lumpy twin bed back home.

Closing his eyes, he let out a deep sigh and relaxed, ready to sleep away the rough and grating day. Tomorrow would bring something new and better — it had to.

Only he tossed and turned and huffed and groaned, ultimately plopping onto his back with an exaggerated groan.

Of all nights he couldn’t fall asleep, it just had to be tonight.

Chapter End Notes

Dear dear, Tony sure is a cranky puppy when his stuff is messed with. Worry not! Him and Steve will find happy ground again. And then it'll all be stripped away for Peterwhump. I have no shame.
I mentioned a couple chapters back that feedback/reviews/comments make my muse hop like hyperactive bunnies. And boy is that true! I had to FORCE myself to put this puppy down to study for an exam I had coming up. Thank you all so much for your support, and I'm so happy to hear the story is well received. Keep your thoughts and feedback coming!
Breakfast at Tony’s

Chapter Notes

A LOT of references in this chapter, all actually MCU related this time.

Peter’s driving test was a real thing, and I accept it as cannon:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2p93nquWkvs

Do yourself ALL a favor and watch the Rappin’ with Cap video, if you haven’t already. You will not regret it.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ohwJduwiAkk

I get a lot of my Sam-teasing-Peter motivation from Anthony Mackie himself. That dude gives Tom Holland such a hard time that it’s pure hilarity. If you have the time, I recommend watching the following video.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9MTMjHZYpfE

I fudged Clint’s son’s age. He looked to be around 9 or 10 in Age of Ultron, but there’s no official birth date for him. I’ve aged him a bit for this story, and I’ll end up doing the same for Wanda. Nothing drastic, but I wanted to mention it.

And lastly, I have to be honest - I try really, really hard to fit everything into cannon. I know it’s a Civil War fix-it, but I didn’t want to go into this story and just say “pretend everything is okay ‘cause I want it to be!” I wanted to write a realistic AU to how things proceeded, to set the tone and put you guys as the readers into a new world that you believe in.

But I cannot work with SHIELD. They are such a mess, between the movies and the TV show - I can’t see left and right with them. One moment they exist, the next they don’t, then they’re Hydra but then they’re not….for the sake of fiction, let’s just all assume they’re the ones keeping the Avengers in check, as opposed to the government like the Accords wanted. I won’t be diving into their backstory or why they still exist or what happened with them, so you don’t have to worry about the confusion there. A throw away line, at best, is all I’ll be doing. I just wanted to clear that up now.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“So then I was all like — ‘hey guys,’ and then Mr. Stark was like ‘come on Cap, don’t do this,’ but Mr. Rogers was ‘no, I gotta’. So Ant-Man went from this tiny little dude to his normal size — but oh, he turns really giant later. Like, super giant. Like, you know the Green Giant from those cans of peas? Kind of like that. But not like the Hulk, just regular dude style. Anyway, he knocked me down but I got right back up and went after the others —”

Hanging upside down and attached to a spider web sticking to the ceiling of his room, Peter spun slowly by the nature of gravity. He twirled in a lazy and gentle circle, still dressed in only
sweatpants and a greasy, baggy AC/DC t-shirt. Over his head was his Spider-man mask, letting him speak to his AI. Of course and as per usual, he did most of the talking.

“—and then, oh, this part was really awesome. I webbed up Falcon so he couldn’t move, like a butterfly in a cocoon. He was pissed! Actually I think he still is. I guess he holds grudges, I dunno.”

“What about Mr. Stark and Mr. Rogers?” Karen asked.

Peter raised an eyebrow beneath his mask. “Huh?”

“You have yet to explain why the two were fighting, as you originally set out to do.”

“Ohhh, right, right.” Peter stretched out his legs in front of him with a yawn before clapping the heels and soles of his feet together. “It was something over the Accords and Bucky Barnes, the Winter Soldier guy. Dude had an awesome metal arm!”

“And they’re not fighting anymore?”

He paused, considering her words. It wasn't like Mr. Stark had told him much after returning from Germany. He shrugged, the movement jarring his shoulders from hanging upside down.

“Yeah, I guess not. I mean, the Accords were repealed and all that. At least that's what the news said and what they're teaching us in school. Something about being an injustice of equality and whatnot. So...with that out of the way, they wouldn’t have anything to fight about, right? They all still live together. That’s gotta be cool.”

“But Mr. Stark was for the Accords, was he not?”

Peter frowned. “Yeah, I think so. Why?”

“So would he not want the Accords to continue to exist?”

“He never told me the full story. Just that there were fine lines he didn’t consider and it was a bad idea.” He gripped the web near his pelvis tighter. “It doesn’t matter as long as it’s all over with. I hate it when people are fighting.”

He considered himself lucky; during his parents time alive they rarely, if ever, fought around him. Uncle Ben and Aunt May were what he considered to be a fairy tale couple. If they ever had an argument, it was about him. Those were the rough days. They had fights over where he’d go to school, how they’d spend his parent’s social security money, what therapy he needed — he’d spend those days locked in his room, blasting music through his headphones.

To him, fighting was ridiculous. There were so many worse things happening in the world, engaging in a petty argument or school fight seemed beneath him. Flash called him a pussy. Aunt May called him a pacifist.

He didn’t know what to call himself.

“Karen?”

“Yes, Peter.”

He hadn’t slept all night, his thoughts racing a thousand miles per second, stuck in a never-ending loop of guilt and dread. Not only was Mr. Stark angry with him but he was sure the Avengers were
as well. It made him feel sick to his stomach.

“I think they were fighting about me last night.” His voice was quiet, barely heard over the air conditioning coming from the ceiling vents.

“Why do you think that?”

The tingling in the back of his neck alerted him to a change in his environment — Peter never got a chance to respond. Before he could react, his bedroom door swung open after three quick and very brief knocks.

Standing in the doorway was a tall, strawberry blond haired woman, already dressed for the day. She stood tall in her professional outfit — a tight, black pencil skirt, white button down, and heels to match.

Surprised at what she saw, she cocked an eyebrow at him and his current position.

“You must be Peter.”

Still gripping the web that hung from the ceiling, Peter was mid-spin as he was greeted. Half-facing her and half-facing the window behind them, he awkwardly waved a hand.

“Hi.”

His spin continued, painfully slow.

The chirping birds from outside filled the silence between them and she patiently waited for him to return to her direction, leaning against the doorway with a smirk.

He finally faced her and jumped down from the web.

“Hi-hi, I’m, uh, I’m Peter. Peter Parker.” He extended his hand out to her for a shake. Instead of engaging, she stared at him, eyebrow still high in the air.

His mechanical eye shutters blinked three times before he realized what was wrong. They proceeded to then go wide, the whites large and prominent.

“Oh! Right! Uhm...” He retracted his arm and ripped off the Spider-man mask, ruffling through his hair with his fingers. “Sorry ’bout that. You, uh, you must be Ms. Potts. Misses Potts? Soon-to-be-Mrs. Stark?”

She smiled. “Pepper is fine.”

Peter nervously nodded, fidgeting with the mask in his hands. “Cool, cool...so, uh, good mornin’, Ms. Pepper.”

She seemed to find a small amount of humor in his actions, swallowing her lips to fight her growing grin.

“Morning, Peter,” she repeated back to him. “Why don’t you join us for breakfast?”

Peter tossed his mask aside, giving a slight shake of his head.

“Uh, no, I’m—I’m fine. I’m good, thanks,” he sputtered. The suggestion stirred a panic in him, uneasy at the idea of encountering the possibly-still-very-angry-Avengers and what wrath they could impose on him. “I’m not really hungry ——”
The loud rumble of his stomach exposed his lie. He winced, visibly cringing.

Pepper looked at him incredulously. They both waited until his stomach’s growls faded away and once they did, she pointed down the hallway with a smile.

“Come on.” She gestured her arm out the doorway. “I’ll show you to the kitchen.”

Peter did a quick double-take behind him, the bed he never slept in suddenly looking more appealing despite the sun rising through the large bay windows in the room. As if on cue, his stomach once again decided to make itself known, twisting and rumbling and causing him to admit defeat. Besides, it wasn’t like there was much of a fight he could put up. He followed her out, realizing as they walked away from the personal quarters of the compound that he was barefoot, his exposed feet hitting the cold, marble floors.

While the kitchen wasn’t far from the east wing, it gave him plenty of time to think. Like — did they have a janitorial staff here? Would they be upset if he was walking barefoot on their clean floors? Were the floors even clean? Why was that guard playing galaga instead of monitoring the security feeds? Was it that type of poor security monitoring that caused the break-in last night? Should he tell Mr. Stark that his security guards were slacking off?

He barely noticed when they approached the eatery, Pepper leading the way inside and him following behind her. Like all rooms he encountered in the massive facility, it took him by surprise, the sleek but homey design quick to overwhelm him.

To think that he considered May’s upgraded backsplash the coolest thing ever.

The skylights let in the morning sun and he was immediately bombarded with the smell of bacon and eggs. The kitchen table and counters were covered in buffet servings of food. Sam, Rhodey and Steve already occupied the three stools at the bar. There was one empty seat at the table behind them where Vision, Wanda, Natasha and someone else he didn’t recognize sat at.

“Good morning, everyone,” Pepper professionally greeted them, a slew of mumbled ‘mornin’s’ overtaking the room.

She put her hand on the small of his back, and it was the first time he noticed he hadn’t budged an inch since they got there. He took a couple of steps forward, enough for Sam to look up from his plate and notice his presence.

“Awww,” he teased. “Is Blues Clues being dropped off for breakfast?”

Pepper squinted her eyes in his direction. “Play nice.”

“Seriously, you’re going to scare him off.” The blue-eyed, dirty-blond haired man sat up from his chair at the table and walked up to Peter, hand outstretched.

“Hey,” he greeted. “I’m Clint. We didn’t get to meet last night.”

Peter aggressively wiped his palm on his shirt — well, Mr. Stark’s shirt — ridding it of the nervous sweat that made his hands damp.

“Hi, yeah, uhm, I'm—I’m Peter.”

Clint shook his hand twice, a firm clasp that clenched down to his bone before he pulled away. One large arm wrapped his shoulder and led him to the kitchen table.
“Nice to meet ya, Peter.” They sat down, Clint having pulled out a chair for him. “How old are you, bud?”

Peter looked at his surroundings, trying to gauge the others and see if he had permission to engage in conversation. It was clear after last night that his youth made them uncomfortable, angry even. Yet now they didn’t seem to mind. Natasha scrolled through her phone while Vision and Wanda seemed to have a private conservation of sorts in the lounge area. To his left and at the bar counter, the three men occupied themselves with their own meals, unconcerned by the new presence in the room.

‘Well, he thought, it can't get any worse, right?’

“Fifteen,” he answered, and quick to correct, “Almost sixteen.”

Clint smiled. “Ah, you’re around the same age as my son.”

“Come on, dude!” Sam threw his fork down on his plate, a loud clatter resounding. “Don’t make it any weirder than it already is!”

Rhodey lifted his hand. “I second that.”

“You guys are being such grandpa’s,” Clint said. “Leave that job to Steve.”

At hearing his name, Steve looked up from the newspaper unfolded in front of him, peering over his shoulder with curiosity. “Hm?”

Natasha snickered and shook her head, quietly amused at the situation whereas Sam mumbled something about ‘young brats and old farts’.

Peter cautiously looked around, noticing that the entire team wasn’t all present.

“Where’s Mr. Stark at?”

“Mr. Stark is currently in the data control center reviewing security footage from last night.” The Irish AI answered the question for him. "He has been there since 0200 this morning."

Pepper sighed, her shoulders dropping at the new information.

“I’m going to handle that.” Her heels clicked as she walked away. “I mean it boys — play nice!”

Peter watched her leave the kitchen, never having noticed when Wanda left her conservation with Vision to gather a plate of food. He was surprised when she approached him from behind, cautiously reaching over his shoulder and gently setting it down in front of him.

“Oh. Wow.” His eyes went comically wide at the large portion of breakfast food. Eggs overlapped bacon and pancakes stacked on top of each other, drizzling with thick maple syrup. His mouth began to salivate just at the sight.

“You are growing boy,” Wanda casually stated. “Eat. We have plenty.”

“Right. Yeah…yeah.” He looked behind him, nodding. “Thank you….?”

She smiled in return, the same type of grin he had seen from her last night. He couldn’t pin what it was, but there was definitely something behind it. That was, unless, all creepy magical Russians
smiled that way.

“Wanda.” Her answer was short and straightforward, followed by her return Vision across the kitchen.

He furrowed his brows, watching as she walked away. It was strange, almost like someone had read his journal and dropped hints of the things he wrote about without directly admitting they knew. Not that he kept a journal. And not that he had any secrets, outside of Spider-man, which they clearly knew about now. Paranoia began to wash over him, making him wonder if she knew something about him that not even he knew. That wasn't possible, was it?

Peter quickly realized he was staring at the two of them, immediately diverting his attention to the eggs and bacon on his plate. He had to admit, it smelt delicious.

The rustle of Steve’s newspaper and the clanking of silverware filled the room with the occasional slurps of coffee. If it weren’t for his nerves, he would have assumed it was a peaceful silence, a calm that the team didn’t often encounter. Despite him being around, they all seemed to mind their own business, like it was just another day to be had.

And then he realized — here he was, having breakfast with the **Avengers**. It was surreal, practically unbelievable. He kicked himself for having left his cell phone in his room. This would have made a fantastic photo.

“Drive yet?”

The voice came from across him. He shot his head up and saw Natasha looking at him, her neck still low to her phone, only her eyes raised to him.

He nodded. “Uh, yeah actually, I uh — I got my permit not too long ago.”

Across at the bar, Rhodey let out a mix of a chuckle and scoff. “So you swing fifteen hundred feet in the air…but don’t have a license to drive a car.”

Peter lowered his head again, his fork pushing away eggs from butter and syrup.

“I’m working on it,” he mumbled.

And the silence returned.

Clint slurped on his coffee, Natasha made a few clicks on her phone, and Steve turned a page of the newspaper. It was like an incredibly awkward Thanksgiving dinner, only instead of Uncle Ben’s cousins and nephews, it was Earth’s Mightiest Heroes who outranked him in every possible way.

Sam spun around on his stool. “You gonna sit there all day or you gonna eat?”

He realized that he hadn’t even taken a bite of the food Wanda had offered him.

Peter gulped. “Yeah…right, uhm, sorry.”

Clint rolled his eyes, getting up from his seat to pour himself more coffee. “Ignore him, he doesn’t mean anything by it. It’s eat or have it eaten around here. You’re lucky there’s still food left. Cap only had six plates instead of his normal eight.”

Steve, not looking up from his newspaper, shook his head. “That’s an exaggeration.”

“Exaggeration?” Clint huffed. “I make sure my wife feeds me before I come here because nine
times out of ten, there ain’t any scraps left.”

“I remember my driver’s test.” Natasha changed the subject, her eyes still on her phone. “The instructor gave me the heebie-jeebies.”

“Didn’t know Stalin had a driving school,” Rhodey quipped.

Natasha’s cold stare could easily kill, leaving shivers down Peter’s spine. He was thankful that Rhodey was on the receiving end and not him, watching the two quietly as he shoved a mouthful of food into his mouth.

All he needed was one bite to realize that — holy crap was he hungry. Peter looked down at the plate and quickly forced in two, three and four more bites, the mixture of pancakes and bacon heavenly to his taste buds. It was all he could do not to sink into the chair and moan with delight.

“Oh god, my driving test…” Clint set down the coffee pot. “I drove up in this dinky-rinky 1963 Pontiac. The passenger door was a whole different color, the trunk wouldn’t stay closed, and it was covered in dents. The entire class was laughing at me.”

“You sure that’s why they were laughing at you?” Natasha teased, winking her eye at him.

He stuck his tongue out, returning to his chair.

Peter watched the interaction, eagerly chewing.

“That’s the kind of car my aunt drives,” he said between bites of food.

“Oh yeah? Kids still as harsh as they were back then?” Clint asked, taking a sip of fresh coffee.

Peter swallowed heavily. “I, uh, I actually — I didn't use that car. Mr. Stark lent me his Audi prototype for the test.”

Clint's coffee mug froze half-way to his lips. Natasha locked her eyes with Peter's, her neutral dead-pan expression falling flat as she quirked an eyebrow high. Looking over at the bar, Sam was flabbergasted, mouth gaped open and Rhodey seemed equally shocked. Steve looked to be a little confused, almost pondering a deep understanding of what he heard.

“Tony…let you borrow his car?” Rhodey asked slowly, disbelief lacing his voice.

Peter decided it was best to just nod instead of talking, worried that he might say something to further upset them. Rhodey went on to mumble about ‘bastard won’t lend me his cars’ and Sam just shook his head, bemused. He returned to eating, finding it easier to focus on shoving food into his mouth rather than have a conversation where he might slip up and say something even more stupid.

Steve, who had since disregarded his newspaper, watched Peter with intent interest. A quick glance exchanged with Natasha told him he wasn’t the only one with a sudden change in thoughts. Her eyes reflected a similar notion — realization.

Sure, Tony had admitted to him last night that he was the one who made the Spider-man suit and lent Peter all the tech and gadgets but that was professional. It wasn’t out of character, in fact, it screamed Tony Stark, the man all but eager to have others use his tech. A day that went by where Tony didn’t create something for the Avengers, Stark Industries, or anyone else was a day they needed to worry about.
His car, though? Steve was taken aback. The man had a hundred cars, easily. Lending one out wasn’t an inconvenience of any sorts. Yet to lend a new one, an expensive prototype to a kid for his driving class — Steve had seen the Youtube videos, Spider-man didn’t drive well. At all.

Steve liked to think he got to know Tony well over the past handful of years, well enough to know he didn’t trust easily.

He had to have put a lot of trust in the boy for that.

Watching Peter swallow down mouthfuls of eggs, somehow looking even younger than last night, he subconsciously wondered what it was he had done to deserve so much trust. And just maybe, if Tony could manage it — maybe he needed to give it a shot as well.

“You might want to make sure you come up for air, son,” Steve mentioned, watching him shove the fork into his mouth.

“Sorry. Sorry…” Peter garbled between spoonfuls. “I didn’t realize how hungry I was.”

He slowed his pace, though not by much. Wanda had already gotten him a second helping, her behavior gaining a few stares that she avoided by returning to the lounge area with Vision. Peter didn’t seem to mind, eagerly digging into the food. He felt that he could eat six to seven plates and still not be full. It had been like ever since the spider-bite.

Steve raised an eyebrow. “You could give me a run for my money with that kind of appetite.”

Peter sheepishly smiled.

“You always say to eat a full meal,” he briefly paused, his smile falling flat. “Well…you in the videos, anyway.”

Natasha frowned and cocked her head to the side. “I’m…sorry, could you repeat that, Peter?”

Peter looked up from his plate, slowly examining the confused but very interested faces staring him down. Clint already had a wide smile on his face, his white teeth showing clearly.

“The…PSA’s…” he squeaked, “…from school.”

“The PSA’s?” Rhodey repeated.

It was a moment too late that Peter noticed Steve shaking his head, almost mouthing ‘please don’t’ in his direction. All eyes were on him, reminding him distinctly of last night. Peter bit the inside of his check; he really, really needed to learn to keep his mouth shut.

Deciding he was already one foot into the mess, he continued.

“Yeah. You know…the stay-in-school type, eat a hot lunch, don’t use fireworks…” Peter began to mumble, lowering his chin to his chest. “…tooth decay…”

Sam howled in laughter and slapped his knees. Rhodey stood up from his stool, the leg braces whirring when he turned to look at Steve.

“ Tooth decay?” he repeated.

Steve bowed his head. “They were…they said it was…for a good cause.”

Rhodey turned away from Steve and in Peter’s direction, finger pointing towards him. “Pete, I’m
going to need access to these videos. ASAP.”

Sam’s laughter had quickly become hysterical, his fist pummeling the counter, his chest heaving for breath.

“It was after New York, they said it would inspire — it was…for the children…” Steve tried to defend, his cheeks turning a slight shade of pink that Natasha couldn’t help but notice and chuckle at.

Peter winced and shrugged, giving the Captain an apologetic look as he returned to his food.

“I need to know so much more.” Sam took a deep inhale. “So much more. Oh god, Steve, did you do D.A.R.E? Tell me he did D.A.R.E.”

Steve frowned. “I don’t understand that reference.”

Sam had swiveled around to Peter, awaiting the response that came in a sharp nod.

“Yeah, kind of,” Peter admitted. “I always thought that one was a little hypocritical. I mean ‘don’t do drugs’ coming from the man who did like, the biggest drug of them of? Why-”

“Zip it, Spiderling.”

Everyone’s attention fell to the entrance of the kitchen. Even Wanda and Vision paused their private conversation when Tony strolled in.

His finger pointed sharply at Peter on his way to the kitchen island. “The last thing I need to deal with today is the sentinel of liberty turning you red, white and blue.”

Tony had already made his way past the others and behind the bar counter, pouring himself a hot cup of coffee. Rhodey watched him, his arms crossed and face stern, his demeanor changing instantly. The others sat quietly, even Peter, unsure of what to say.

Tony placed the coffee pot back on the burner and raised the mug to his lips. “But you know, the kid does have a point. Shouldn’t be giving advice you can’t follow.”

Steve furrowed his brows. “I’d watch yourself. It’s not like you’re the best role model right now.”

“Alright!” he loudly announced, setting his mug down with an audible clank! “We’re going to nip this in the bud.”

He clapped his hands together and cracked his knuckles before setting both palms on the counter, leaning over it heavily. The darkening bags under his eyes were obvious with the overhead sunlight brightening the room, and his white button down was heavily wrinkled, his tiring work from last night evident in his appearance.

“A very… prominent, important lady figure in my life has highly recommended I offer an apology of sorts to reconcile things.”

Tony watched while Wanda and Vision approached the group, Clint and Natasha leaned back in their seats with interest, and Rhodey continued to stare him down. A beat went by; he frowned and shrugged.

“What? That wasn’t good enough for you?”

Steve glared. “Stark—”
“I’m joking. Christ.” He took a sip of coffee. “Still haven’t removed the icicle from your ass, I see.”

Tony’s snark didn’t receive a response, though Steve’s dirty look did intensify, blue eyes shooting daggers in his direction. He sighed and shook his head, too exhausted to put up a fight.

“Parker…wasn’t suppose to be kept from the team, okay? It wasn’t that he was confidential, he just wasn’t…disclosed.”

Rhodey cocked his head to the side. “How is that not confidential, Tones?”

“It’s not confidential because I say it’s not confidential,” Tony snapped.

“Great reasoning,” Sam mumbled.

“Listen,” Tony harshly spoke, “it was the kids request that he be kept under the radar. He finds this secret identity thing to be a cutey little act. I even offered him a spot on the team, shiny new suit and all-”

Finally finding his voice, Peter slowly raised his hand in the air.

“I—I never permanently turned that down, Mr. Stark. I just—”

Tony pressed his finger to his lips. “Hush. The adults are talking.”

Peter’s hand fell to the table and he bowed his head, poking at his leftover scraps. “Just…friendly neighborhood Spider-man…on the ground…” he muttered under his breath.

Steve stood from his stool. “You offered him a position before we even knew about him?”

Both men stared at each other, the stress between them flooding the room like a broken damn.

“I did,” he answered.

“Bold move, Tony,” Rhodey stated.

“Yeah, well, that’s not new,” Natasha drawled a bit incontestably.

“I was ready to accept the consequences then, and I am now,” Tony proudly stated, keeping his stance firm.

Steve approached him from behind the counter of the bar. “The last time you dove head first into something that you didn’t fully comprehend, we almost lost the team.”

“We lost the team, Rogers,” Tony bit back, his words cold, harboring a pain that hadn’t been healed yet. “And I’m trying my damndest to bring it back together.”

“Keeping secrets isn’t the way to do that,” Steve rebuked.

“You’re right,” Tony agreed. “You’re absolutely right.”

For a moment, Steve appeared confused, unsure of where the conservation was going. His eyes tired, his posture admitting resignation, Tony looked directly at him and earnestly said,

“I’m sorry.”
The room became so quiet Peter was sure he could hear a pin fall to the floor. He looked towards the others for signs of how to react, never having encountered a discussion between the two men that didn’t involve physical fighting — being that Germany was his only encounter with the two men, of course. From what he could gather, the apology was not expected.

Clint frowned, looking at Natasha in shock. “Are my hearing aids acting up, or did he just —”

Tony turned towards them, his hand gestured out. “I’m sorry, to all of you.”

Sam frantically dug into his pant pockets. “Hold on, can you say that again, I need to record that —”

“Keep being a smart ass and I’ll take it back,” Tony scolded.

It was enough to seize the room, the group realizing how serious was. Sam slowly settled back to his seat, his arms crossed, showing signs that he wasn't ready to forgive and forget just yet.

Tony sighed, rubbing the nape of his neck. “My intent was never malicious with Peter. He’s just a boy trying to keep his family and friends safe and honestly, can you be angry with that? None of you can look me in the eye and say you wouldn’t want the same thing. Hell, Barton, your entire family is a secret from the world.”

Clint shrugged, not making an attempt to dispute the fact.

Tony continued, “I respected his request and followed through with it. So if you have anyone to be mad at, it’s me — but it’d be pretty damn stupid to stay mad over something like this. We have bigger fish to fry.”

Rhodey looked between him and Peter, raising an eyebrow with curiosity. “You trust him then?” he asked.

It was easy for Rhodey to tell when Tony was bullshitting. They had been friends for a long time, way before Iron Man, long before Afghanistan — there was a foundation between them that couldn’t be rattled. His entire life changed along with Tony’s, somehow joining him in the crazy ride of War Machine, Iron Patriot and the Avengers.

So when Tony nodded, he wholeheartedly believed him.

“I do,” Tony said. “He’s good. He’s better than good, he’s great.”

Nobody missed how Peter looked up at hearing those words, his eyes sparkling with a sense of pride that made him grin ear to ear. For a moment, Tony reflected in that. A shadow of a grin washed across his own face, something that not one person in the room didn’t notice. The exchange was unique, and it softened Steve to witness it, almost viewing Tony in a different light from the humility that bounced off him.

It was gone within the second, the moment Tony realized things had gotten too sappy for his own liking. “Stop it kid, you’re giving me reflux.”

“Maybe we should be the judge of that,” Sam advised. “Go down to the gym and have a couple go’s with him.”


She winked in his direction, but it wasn’t the type of look that left butterflies in Peter’s stomach.
His eyes went wide and he could have sworn his heart stopped for a moment, leaving him flustered and panicked.

“No, Tony’s right,” Steve thankfully interrupted. “We have more pressing issues at hand.”

He relaxed, his posture no longer tense and ready to fight, rather somewhat casual and calm as he leaned against the kitchen bar.

“Did you find anything?” Steve asked.

Tony shook his head.

“Nope. Zip, nada, zilch.” He dug into his pants pocket, pulling out a small object and tossing it across the counter to where Peter sat. “But security did come across this.”

Peter caught the object with surprising agility. Clint and Natasha were both impressed that his hand shot up in the air despite his head staying down low, his eyes not even focused on what came flying in his direction. Once in his grip, he looked up and frowned.


“I was able to retract the data from the Spider-tracer. Whoever it was, they came straight from Queens to here, no pit stops,” Tony explained. “Then just…nothing.”

Rhodey had walked towards him and, without asking, put his palm out for the drone. Peter handed it off and he examined it curiously.

“This is the only thing he left behind?” Rhodey asked.

Tony sipped at his coffee and nodded.

“You think he found it — took it off when he knew he was being followed?” Sam asked.

“Or it fell off,” Peter spoke up.

Tony clucked his tongue, setting his mug in the kitchen sink.

“Those things don’t just fall off, kid. I designed them not too,” he explained.

“But what if…theoretically…” Peter slowly started to say, “it didn’t have anything to attach to anymore?”

Approaching the kitchen table, Vision and Wanda looked at him with great interest.

“Would that not be falling off?” she asked, confused.

Peter looked towards her. “It’s just really weird that he was there, and then he wasn’t. The same thing happened in Times Square. He was there, I had him, and then…”

“Poof,” Clint supplied.

Peter pointed towards him, excitedly nodding. “Poof!”

“Are you talking about the possibility of teleportation?” Vision calmly asked.

The room fell silent, all eyes on him. Peter glanced around and weakly shrugged his shoulders.
“Yeah, I mean…maybe.”

It wasn’t until he said it out loud that Peter realized how silly it seemed. The others took a moment to ponder the thought, obviously having dealt with their own share of strange encounters over the past handful of years. But no one seemed entertained the idea as seriously as him. He couldn’t blame them; none of them had seen what he saw. One moment he saw Mysterio and then suddenly he was fighting Cap? It was too weird for his liking.

Rhodey turned to Tony. “This facility has military grade CCTV security cameras, wouldn’t they pick up something as abnormal as a disappearing thief?”

“We don’t even have footage, Rhodey.” Tony’s voice was defeated, dejectedly explaining the fact.

Clint dropped his fork and shot up from his chair, seemingly agitated. “What do you mean we don’t have footage?”

“Everything within a mile radius of the south-east workshop shut down. The alarms worked solely off generators from the basement, otherwise we wouldn’t have even been clued in. Whoever it was, they left us in the dark ages,” Tony said.

’Just like the other night.’ Peter recalled the hundreds of electronic billboard screens that fizzled out into nothing, cell phones that shut off and police radios that refused to communicate.

“A technological blackout.” Natasha looked towards Peter, almost as if she plucked the thought straight out of his head. “That’s what you said last night. The fog he emits creates a technological blackout, like how he shut down all of Times Square.”

He could only nod, unsure of what else to say.

Steve, arms crossed and leaning against the counter, looked up at Tony. “And the only thing stolen was The Chameleon helmet?”

“Compound has been swept ten times over. It was all they wanted,” Tony answered.

Rhodey rubbed at his forehead. “Forensic find anything — fingerprints, DNA…?”

Tony shook his head. Rhodey cursed under his breath.

Vision hummed with interest. “Who else could have known about the device to commit thievery over it?”

It was something they hadn’t yet considered. After all, it had only been a couple days ago that Tony presented them the shiny helmet, giddy like a schoolboy over his newest invention.

The billionaire looked towards Peter, his eyebrow quirked up.

Once realizing what was implied, Peter’s eyes shot open wide as saucers and he viciously shook his head.

“I—I didn’t tell anyone about it, Mr. Stark — I swear!”

Tony immediately turned to Sam, his eyes narrowing.

“Oh come on,” Sam exasperatingly huffed. “Rhodey and I had our fun with it, that’s it.”

“He’s right, Tones,” Rhodey defended. “I put it back in the workshop that night, locked up and
secured.”

Steve approached Tony, standing at his side as he asked, “You think we have a breach?”

Tony rubbed his neck and sighed. “I don’t know.”

Rhodey was right, they had built the facility to be top of the line, highly secured, to protect the team and the millions of dollars worth of tech they dealt with. Since the Accords had dissolved, SHIELD was a constant presence in the building that had all but become their next headquarters. The chances of someone breaking in from the outside were slim to none. Yet the very concept of having someone on the inside that could betray them made him feel sick.

He shook off the thought.

“Either way, we need to find it and fast. In the wrong hands…”

No one needed him to finish; they all knew the damage that could be done with something as powerful as the appearance changing helmet. They had already suffered the consequences brought on by Ultron. There was no telling what would come out of this mess.

“Can you disable it from here?” Vision asked. “Like your Iron Man suits, can you remotely disable it from our current location?”

Tony half shrugged. “Well, you would think I could, yes.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “What does that mean?”

“It means I never fully finished it,” he bit back. “I hadn’t installed the remote connectivity feature yet, whoever has it…it’s a one way on-button.”

A blanket of stress fell over the room, a collective ‘uh-oh’ echoing their thoughts, Peter’s included. The fun they had with the device the other night suddenly seemed less innocent, weight barring down on the fact that looming trouble was over their horizon.

Vision, who normally seemed to have an answer to any equation provided, frowned with confusion.

“How do you find someone who can take on the appearance of anyone?”

No one had an answer. Breakfast suddenly seemed trivial, food having gone cold and plates going untouched.

Rhodey stared Tony down from across the room, his look speaking more words than his vocal cords actually could.

‘Crap.’ Tony cursed internally, his memory jogging the conservation with Bruce. ‘Nothing is what it seems.’

He hadn’t found the time to discuss the message with the team; not yet, anyway. Banner hadn’t even made his presence known since his arrival yesterday, sulking on the other side of the facility, insisting he was ‘readjusting to Earth’ or some nonsense.

Double crap. Tony rubbed at his forehead, sighing. It was all too coincidental for his liking, feeling like this was all part of a bigger picture, pieces of a puzzle that could fit together perfectly. If there was one thing Tony came to realize lately it was that there weren’t such things as coincidences
when it came to the life of Iron Man.

He opened his mouth to speak. “I may have an idea of —”

The alarm that blared throughout the ceiling speakers caught them all off guard. Tony’s words fell flat, panic rising in his gut. He stepped forward into the room with purpose.

“FRIDAY?”

“**There is an attack currently taking place near the Collar City Bridge. One hostile party that has been declared an enhanced volatile being. SHIELD has requested your urgent attention in this matter.**”

Tony turned around and faced Steve, who broke his attention from the ceiling where the AI’s voice had come from.

“Rogers?” It was the voice of permission, an unspoken ‘you’re still the leader in this so-called-mess’. It may have even been a sign of respect, the subtle knowledge of knowing where Tony stood between them all.

Steve gave a curt nod, an unspoken ‘thank you’ in his actions. He then stepped forward and pointed to the doorway.

“Suit up, team. We leave in five,” he declared.

Clint rolled his eyes, pushing back his chair with a groan. “I gotta stop having breakfast with you guys.”

Natasha smiled, standing up from her seat at the table. “You know you love the action.”

“Love is a strong word. Tolerate, maybe.” Clint wagged a finger at her. "Maybe.”

Peter watched in awe while they all shuffled out. The occurrence was surreal, sitting silently as he witnessed the same heroes who saved New York City whisked away to do it all over again.

Steve stopped in his tracks, Tony right behind him. Peter barely noticed.

“Are you coming, son?” Steve asked.

His head shot up so fast it gave Tony whiplash. His eyes were wide, and his mouth sputtered like a fish out of water. He did a double take, and then another after that to ensure he was the only person left in the room that Steve could be speaking to. Even then he pointed a finger at his chest, silently asking ‘huh? Me?’

Tony could have laughed. His back faced Steve and he gave Peter a shrug, as if to say ‘hell, if he wants you there, kid…’

“Uh…yeah.” Peter jumped up from his seat, the chair falling down behind him. He scrambled to pick it upright, tripping over his feet as he ran towards the exit to follow the two men. “Yeah, I’m coming!”

Tony slapped him on his back as they quickly made their way down the hallway and to the jet hangar.

It was official.
This was the best day of Peter's life. He’d worry about peaking too soon at a later time, right now he was going to fight side by side with the Avengers. There was no way this could get any better.

Chapter End Notes

My my, where’s the angst? Where’s the drama? Where’s the whump? I’m pretty sure that’s what I set out to do, but there’s so much fluff, it’s like cotton candy up in here.

I kid. The storm is approaching. Clouds are getting dark. Stay tuned.
So I’ve been reading rumors that Mysterio will be in the Spider-man: Homecoming sequel. If you’re reading this in 2019 and that’s actually happened - YAY! It’s about damn time the fish-bowl freak got the spotlight! But obviously my character development on Mysterio is much different than how they’ve proceeded, both in the comics and what I’m sure the MCU will be doing. See the author notes from the next chapter for more information.

I’m painfully accurate with my locations in the story, and to be honest, I don’t know why I torture myself like that. I like to believe it keeps me grounded, but at the end of the day I have to be honest and say I’m just a bit of a perfectionist. Albany New York is upstate and roughly two hours from Queens, which I feel is a proper distance from Peter - meanwhile, the Collar City Bridge, Adams Island and Stomy Island are all real locations, about 8 miles from Albany. Not that it’s important. Not that it matters. But if you were interested in seeing what I see when I write this, check it out.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Collar_City_Bridge

Fun nerd fact!:

The reference to Sam/Falcon using bird calls is a throw back to the original Sam Wilson, who in the comics could telepathically communicate with any birds.

Awesome Android is an interesting character; not really villain, not really good guy. Stick around for the next chapter to hear about his creation in this story. Let’s just say that a certain research corporation is to blame - wink wink.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Awesome_Android

Six months ago, Peter rode in a private plane for the first time in his young life.

Standing on-board the Quinjet, he realized that was child's play compared to this.

“They say accidents always happen closest to home!” Clint hollered from the pilot’s cockpit with a cheeky grin.

Steve walked past them, pulling down the edges of his dark blue Captain America helmet. “Something tells me this was no accident, Barton.”

The jet hovered above the Collar City Bridge, a whopping six-minute flight — at most — from the compound. The speed they flew at amazed Peter, the jet soaring in the sky like a darting rocket until they reached their destination. He once watched it from the windows of the facility, never dreaming he’d be inside, decked out in his Spider-man costume, anticipating his first battle with the Avengers.
His first battle with the Avengers. Peter knew he shouldn't be smiling but he couldn't help it. This was awesome.

Peering out the windows of the jet, they all witnessed the creature at the bottom of the bank, a giant, stone-like monster wreaking havoc on the small island in the middle of the river.

“We need to contain him before he reaches the bridge. With strength like that, he could kill a lot of people,” Steve stated.

“No dip shit, Rogers,” Tony bit back.

Peter looked over from the window and at the two men, only hearing their conservation from the earpiece he had been provided with upon entering the jet. It was like being in a helicopter, at least he assumed, having never been on that type of ride either. He was riding in the Quinjet before ever riding in a helicopter — it was insane to think this is what his life had become.

“He appears to be a similar size to Mr. Bruce Banners Hulk,” Vision determined, arms crossed as he eyed out the windows.

Though from far above the creature seemed like a speck on the ground, Vision’s judgment appeared to be correct. The rock-monster easily towered over the trees that it tore from the field, tossing them around like they weighed nothing.

Natasha clucked her tongue and shook her head. “Where’s the big guy when you need him…”

She gripped the wall of the jet, studying the chaos below them with a sense of dejection. Tony looked over his shoulder and towards her, the statement not going unheard. As if something clicked in his head, he spun around and walked past Cap, into the cockpit and ignoring Clint’s pestering when he did.

“So…what do we do?” Peter finally asked, nervously looking at the team.

The entire scene was well beyond anything he had ever experienced before, the Vulture being the highlight of his bad-guy fights. And of course, that was a fight he did solo. Surrounded by various Avenger members, he quietly wondered how he would fit in, if he would fit in at all.

Distantly, Peter imagined that this was what it would be like on the first day of a new job. Not that he ever held a job before. In a very brief amount of time, he came to realize that there was a whole lot he hadn’t yet experienced — helicopter rides, a job — it left him jittery and anxious, unsure of what to do. As excited as he was, the pancakes and bacon from earlier started to make him feel queasy.

Steve threw open the back door of the jet. The howling from the rock monster pierced through the roaring engines and gustful of wind that hit them at full force.

With his Spider-man mask clutched in his hands, Peter was immediately greeted with the smell of saltwater from the Hudson River, the sharp aroma of pine and dirt clouding the fresh air.

Decked out in his uniform, Captain America turned and faced the others.

“Alright, here’s the plan. Clint and Natasha, we need you to stay here and control the Quinjet. Use the rocket launchers if necessary, but stay high and stay away, and wait for my command.”

Natasha nodded, quick to join Clint in the cockpit where he sat in the pilot’s chair, controlling the aircraft. He gave a salute to Steve without ever turning around.
Steve continued, “We’re going to need e-vac on the bridge. Rhodey and Peter —”

At hearing his name, Peter’s head shot up, and he nodded before even knowing what his assignment was. He was ready, no matter what the task.

“Get down on the bridge and detour the oncoming traffic. We don’t know how bad this is going to get, and we can’t risk any casualties,” Steve instructed.

Tony re-approached the group, the face plate to his Iron Man mask in his hands.

“Yeah, especially with SHIELD up our asses these days,” he muttered.

Rhodey rolled his eyes. “Great, that’s what I’ve always set out to achieve. Worlds most powerful traffic flagger.”

Tony turned to look at him, his face falling flat, almost sorrowful. “Rhodey, this isn’t about—”

“No, I get it, really.” Rhodey huffed. “Let’s not cripple the cripple any further, right?”

Natasha looked over her shoulder with stern eyes. “Guys. Not now.”

Her warning was followed by a howl from below, the creature ripping trees from the ground, one after another.

Peter’s eyes floated between Tony, Rhodey, and Steve, the latter finally stepping between them, one hand on the jet’s wall and the other in the air to separate them.

“Focus on the task at hand. Sam, Tony, Vision, Wanda — you’re with me,” he instructed them.

“Don’t attack until we know what we’re dealing with.”

Tony brought the Iron Man faceplate eye level and its metal click echoed in the jet.

“Aww, where’s the fun in that, Cap?” he mocked, his voice echoing through the helmet, the eyes of his mask glowing white. He jumped out of the jet before anyone had a chance to respond, his repulsor beams breaking through the air and falling in line with the engines roars.

Sam followed him next, his Falcon wings shooting open the moment he cleared path of the aircraft. Vision gripped Wanda’s waist tightly and flew her down, leaving only Steve standing.

He turned to look at Peter, who had just put on his Spider-man mask. Next to the boy was Rhodey, decked out in his War Machine armor. With one wink and a smile, Steve fell backward and into the sky, pulling his parachute open with ease.

Peter leaped forward and watched with a sense of wonderment, the blue figure dropping down to the ground with the others, his landing so smooth it was like spreading butter.

‘So cool!’

“You guys need a ride down?” Clint asked from the front of the jet.

Rhodey shook his head, his helmet overtaking his face. “Meet you there, Spider-boy.”

He took off as quickly as he spoke, flying out of the plane in similar fashion as Tony. Peter chuckled, peering out the door with amazement. Down at the river bank, the five Avengers surrounded the large rock-monster, each testing its patience to see what would happen. Rhodey had already landed on the bridge, setting up detour sparks on the concrete with ease.
“Peter?”

Looking to his left, he saw Natasha standing next to where Clint sat. Her head was cocked with a glimmer of concern in her expression.

He didn’t even realize Black Widow could be concerned. Peter suddenly furrowed his brows; should he be worried that she was concerned? This was all too new to him. Why hadn’t someone written a how-to guide on this? It would make sense that after a decade Mr. Stark would at least consider the idea.

He settled on giving her a thumbs up, immediately regretting the lame move and wiping his hand on his thigh.

“I got this!” Peter excitedly chirped.

Natasha raised an eyebrow, doubting him. “Be careful.”

He looked out the door and below them, the wind hitting his mask at full force. He tried to convince himself that it wasn’t that far up and that he had jumped from much higher before. Which he had. He had this, easily, cat in a bag. A deep breath in, a shake of his hands to calm his nerves — he had this.

“Careful is my middle name,” Peter quipped. He braced his knees before he jumped out of the jet, latching a spider-web onto the side and free-falling down.

Natasha and Clint looked out the pilot’s window, watching as he let go of one web and latched onto another, this one connecting to the top of the bridge. He would let go of that one and connect one more, this time swinging over the bridge in a full loop before landing next to War Machine on the road.

“My knees hurt just watching that,” Clint muttered.

Down below where the others fought, the once plentiful trees that the island held laid scattered in the water, the creature ripping them out of the ground in an angry fit of rage.

“Gosh, no consideration for mother nature,” Tony remarked. He floated in the air on the creature's right side, Sam hovering on his left.

“I don’t think this guy is concerned about global warming, Stark,” Sam drily said.

Steve stood on the ground below them with Wanda, and Vision stayed high in the air above them all.

“Well, let’s see what he is concerned about then.” Tony flew up to his face, or more specifically his head, the creature having no eyes or nose to look at. “Hey, rocks-for-brains, you think you can find another place to dig up your garden salad?”

“Stark, I said don’t engage!” Steve yelled into the comms.

“I’m not engaging!” Tony retorted, “I’m asking him a simple, honest question that —”

The creature threw his hand out and swatted Iron Man away like a bug, sending him twirling in the air until his blasters could balance himself out.

On the ground, Steve gave a hint of a smirk. “That’s why I said not to engage.”
“That’s why I said not to engage.” Tony mimicked childishly.

On the bridge, Rhody redirected traffic at one far end, Peter on the other. They had the area cleared within minutes, all the cars stopped and backed up in a line that stretched on for miles. Even with the flares littering the road though, it didn’t stop inpatient people from hurrying across.

Rhodey quickly sidestepped as a bright colored sports car sped past him.

“Jesus!” he muttered, pointing his finger towards Spider-man on the far end of the bridge. “Don’t drive like these assholes when you get your license.”

“Wasn’t planning to…” Peter replied through the comm, also hurrying to sidestep the speeding car. “Hey, do they not see the giant dangerous monster in the water?”

“They do,” Rhodey answered. “They’re New Yorkers. They’re used to it by now.”

A roar from across the river bank broke through the air, and they looked over to find Falcon soaring around the rock creature while Steve and Wanda stayed on the ground.

“Eh, they might just be like that regardless.” Peter grinned beneath the mask. “You said it yourself. They’re New Yorkers.”

Rhodey found himself chuckling at the comment. As if on cue, another car broke through the barricade and sped across the overpass.

“C’mon!” Rhodey shouted.

“Okay, Wanda?” Steve looked over at the crimson-dressed woman. “What can you do to hold this guy back?”

She stepped forward and cracked her knuckles.

“I think I have idea.”

With a deep breath, she closed her eyes and concentrated with intense effort, her fingers pouring out a glowing red that increased by the second. When she felt the power at full strength, she threw her arms out in front of her and with the action came an enormous force of her energy. It wrapped around the creature like a blanket, tight and coiling.

They didn’t have long to celebrate. As soon as it hit the rock-monster, it seemed to absorb into him and bounce right back to them. A force shot forward that knocked Steve and Wanda onto their backside, and Sam and Tony tumbling in the air.

“Whoa!” Sam shook his head, clearing away his dizziness. “What the hell was that?”

“It did not work,” Wanda dejectedly stated, taking Steve’s hand to help her off the dirt ground.

“Yeah, we caught onto that,” Tony snapped.

Vision, who floated above them all, began to propel forward.

“I may be able to disorient him. Once I do, it could create the opportunity to detain him and question his motives.” He flew down from the sky, his fist clenched tight, a yellow glow wrapping around his arm before it collided heavily with the creature’s head.

A punch that would typically break the entire sound barrier was barely enough to make the
creature stumble. His feet stumbled slightly on the ground before he brought his arm up and slammed it into Vision. The same yellow aurora reflected back and nearly blinded the team, causing them to shield their eyes.

Vision was smacked so far back that he flew past the Quinjet high in the air. Natasha and Clint watched in shock as a red and blue blur passed by them.

“Uh, guys?” Clint asked into the comm.

“We lost our android,” Sam griped.

Natasha looked out the jet’s window, watching the flying blur soar further and further away.

“Yeah, we can see,” she casually mentioned. “You need backup?”

“Negative. Stay at your post,” Steve answered.

Tony, still in the air, circled Sam with a pondering ‘hmm’. “Though I hate to admit it, I think this guy has more than rocks for brains.”

Sam looked over at him, eyes narrowed. “He’s literally made of rocks. You telling me those pet rocks we had as kids are coming alive?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying, Wilson.” Tony’s voice dripped in sarcasm. “Only not.”

Down below at the bridge, Peter was meticulously setting down more flares across the road when he stood up with piqued interest. “Are you saying he’s sentient!?”

“He’s not showing any characteristics of humanity, barely any intelligence,” Tony spoke through the comms, flying around the creature in an attempt to get his attention. The rock-like monster barely looked around him as he did.

“He’s an android?” Peter seemed thrilled. “That’s awesome!”

Flying underneath the rock-monster’s arm, Iron Man seemed to hit a soft spot. The repulsor beams made contact with the granite-like skin and agitated the monster further, knocking Tony far into the air.

He spun backward a handful of times before finding his balance, grimacing beneath his Iron Man helmet.

“Watch it, kid,” Tony muttered.

Peter watched the scene from afar, wincing as Iron Man tumbled into the sky, the rockets from his hands and feet sputtering until they became a consistent blast. “I mean, uh — not awesome. Not awesome at all. Totally not-awesome-android.”

“What do you suggest, Tony?” Steve asked.

Tony returned to the island while staying his distance, eyeing the creature with curiosity. Sam flew on the opposite side, following his lead in steering clear of the path of the monster. He ripped trees from the ground and tossed them into the river with angry roars but otherwise didn’t seem to notice the Avenger’s presence.

Approaching from high in the sky, Vision flew down and rejoined the team, floating near Iron Man and Falcon.
“That was...unexpected.”

Tony spared a glance his way. “Yeah, I’d say so. You good, buddy?”

“My functions remain undamaged,” Vision said. “However, I would advise not aggravating the creature again. Such a blow could prove to be fatal had it not happened to me.”


Tony rolled his eyes. “You’ve been doing great with that, Rogers. Maybe come up here and lend a hand?”

“He’s responding to our attacks,” Steve patiently stated. “We can’t risk agitating him and getting someone hurt.”

Wanda looked towards Steve. “If we do not stop him now, he will destroy all of Adams Island.”

“We can always take him over to Stomy Island if he decides to continue his temper tantrum,” Sam advised, pointing to the much smaller, tree-covered island across from them.

“No, you can’t,” Clint said. “Negative,” Natasha spoke at the same time over the comms.

The five heroes looked up into the sky where the Quinjet hovered.

“You’re a stone’s throw away from housing development and a school,” Natasha informed them. “Whatever you do, contain it where you are.”

Flying down to the ground, Tony landed on the dirt with ease, the boosters from his repulsor beams giving out and leaving him to stand tall.

“You heard ‘em, Cap.” He crossed his arms. “What’s the plan?”

If there was one thing louder than the rock creature’s angry roars, it was the honking traffic from the Collar City Bridge. War Machine and Spider-man were barely containing the angry drivers from going on the overpass.

“Whatever you guys decide, I suggest doing it soon.” Rhodey spoke into the comms, “I really don’t want to be on the six o’clock news for holding up rush hour traffic.”

Steve took a moment to examine the situation, absentmindedly rubbing the bottom of his chin as he let tactical scenarios cross into his mind.

“Wanda, Vision — do you think combining your abilities would be enough to hold him down? If we can find a way to contain him without angering him, it’ll be easier to restrain him.”

Wanda looked towards Vision, who came floating down from the air. After a brief exchange, they nodded their heads together.

“I believe using the power of the gem should increase the strength of Wanda’s force field,” Vision stated.

Wanda took a deep breath in. “It is worth a try.”

She concentrated again, this time taking longer, the glow around her hands bright and vivid. Her eyebrows furrowed and her forehead creased, the energy flowing from her body sharp and intense. Finally, she threw her arms out with a loud and shrill yell.
Immediately, Vision followed suit, the stone embedded in his forehead shooting out a yellow beam of light that followed the path of her glow. They connected and spread out like a large sheet, entangling the rock monster with ease, turning his gray granite skin a pinkish tone.

Sam looked down at the ground where the others stood.

“Did it work?”

There was a pause. The shouts and howls from the creature died down.

“I think so.” Tony’s repulsor beams lit up. “I’m going —”

With the loud roar and same force used on him, the creature discharged the energy that held him down. The power from both Wanda and Vision’s abilities sent the entire team in the air and flying backward. They barely had time to react, all four soaring back in the sky and towards the river.

Tony was the first to regain his balance, immediately turning on his belly and flying into action towards Steve, the Captain heading straight towards the water. He barely got to him in time, Steve’s legs skimming the river when he grabbed his waist and whisked him back into the air.

Vision had grabbed hold of Wanda, rescuing her from sinking into the river’s water as well. They stayed further back upon collecting themselves, stunned at what had happened. She was frazzled, her long hair blown into her face and tangled with knots.

“What do you guys copy?” Clint asked, his tone laced with subtle concern.

Tony’s feet landed on the dirt ground, setting Steve down with him.

“Yeah, we’re here,” he answered, his repulsor beams shutting off.

Steve looked towards him, giving a curt nod of his head. “Thank you.”

Tony patted him on the back. “Can’t have you crapping out on us yet, Cap.”

“Uh, guys?” Peter’s voice broke through the comms, their attention directed to the long bridge in front of them where they knew he had been stationed.

“I know you want me dealing with the traffic, but uh — well…okay, quick question — do you think this guy is acting like a sponge?”

Steve frowned. “Come again, son?”

On the bridge, Peter walked closer to the edge of the overpass, examining the scene from afar.

“Each time Vision and Wanda use their powers, it’s almost like the awesome android just absorbs them and uses them back on you,” Peter held his hand in the air. “I mean — he’s not awesome, not while he’s attacking us. You. Attacking you. Not awesome android attacking you.”

On the island, Tony’s faceplate shot open. He looked over at Steve, who paused for a moment as he considered the possibility. A beat passed by before he looked over at Tony, a mixture of realization and recognition written across his features.

“Son of a gun,” Steve muttered. “I think he’s right.”

“Wanda, Vision, you’re dismissed,” Tony ordered. “Retreat to the Quinjet and stay there. We can’t add any more fuel to this fire.”
The two didn’t need any further instructions. Vision flew Wanda and himself up into the sky, the back door of the jet already open with Natasha awaiting them. Hovering out the door, she looked at the scene below.

“Need backup now?” she asked, stepping aside as the two entered the aircraft.

“Yes.” Tony tilted his head to the side. “Parker — get over here.”

“Peter, up here first,” Natasha’s voice butted in.

Steve grabbed Tony's arm. “What are you—”

“Who knows what this atrocity can reflect back at us,” Tony interrupted him. “Do we really want a fifteen-foot tall walking rock wall with Captain America’s strength?”

Steve shook his head. “I’ve seen that kid lift twenty-five tons. If his strength isn’t equal to mine, it’s better. You’re just giving this creature the advantage by bringing him into the fight.”

“Not with the idea I have in mind.”

Steve didn’t have a chance to argue. Peter had already shot two webs onto the quinjet and pulled himself into the air, landing inside and next to Natasha with a visible thud.

They watched on the ground as the two exchanged a brief conversation. Her fingers pointed at Steve and Tony and while he shrugged with a sincerity that could be seen down far away. He ultimately dove out of the jet, a web sticking to the side as he lowered himself down to the island.

He landed gracefully in a squatting position, his left palm balancing himself on the ground.

Tony furrowed his brows and pointed up to the jet.

“What was that about?”

“She, uhm, she…” Peter stood up, shrugging innocently. “She wanted to make sure I was okay coming over here.”

Tony’s face fell flat. His dumbfounded expression was all too visible with his Iron Man mask open. His eyes darted back and forth as he took in what he was told, his scowl growing more intense.

“Romanoff, do not baby my kid!”

His stern warning was immediately cut short, cringing as he realized what he had said.

“I mean — you know what I — damn it!”

There was silence over the comms. Only the honking traffic, roaring monster, and engines from the aircraft filled the space between. Even Sam didn’t dare to joke. Peter stood awkwardly in front of the two, his large mechanical eyes blinking.

Steve cocked an eyebrow, and the corners of his lips twitched.

“You do what you want, Stark.” Natasha’s voice came through. “We’ll be patrolling the skies.”

If it were possible, Tony’s cheeks began to reflect his red Iron Man armor, his gloved hands rubbing at his forehead despite the pressure the metal put on his bones. It was only when a loud roar and gust of wind hit them — knocking Tony and Steve back and Peter forward — that he
refocused his attention.

“Tony.” Steve stumbled to his feet. “You have a plan?”

It was a tone of impatience, one that Tony was familiar with. He sneered, letting his faceplate click back to his helmet and the rockets in his hands light up with full force, lifting him into the sky.

“Yeah, stay back.”

He was at the rock creatures head within seconds, circling around him with Sam at his side.

“You going to include me in this plan of yours?” Sam asked, irritated.

“As a matter of fact, I am,” Tony said, “We need to hit him where it hurts. His arms seem to be the most sensitive, specifically his underarms. I’m going to get under there and launch a few rockets. That should do the trick.”

“And me?”

Tony flew up to where the Falcon hovered in the air, palms outstretched and facing downwards to keep him afloat.

“You still good with those bird calls of yours?”

Sam pursed his lips. “Are you fuc—”

“I’m joking,” Tony eased. “Flap those wings of yours to keep him standing. He goes down and so does everything else within a mile radius.”

Down below on the ground, Peter raised his hand in the air.

“Uh, Mr. Stark?” he forced out. “What about —”

“Haven’t forgotten about you, Underoo’s.” Tony swooped to the ground, hovering feet about where Spider-man stood. “When I hit him, you gotta wrap him up tight like a Christmas present. You think you can handle that?”

“Whoa whoa whoa!” Sam yelled into the comms. “If Vis, Wanda, and Cap need to stay clear because of their abilities, why does creepy critter web-head get to stay in the fight?”

Tony flew away from Spider-man and back into the sky, floating across from Falcon. “You know he’s not actually a spider, right?”

“You know I’m not stupid, right?” Sam snapped. “If this guy takes his ability to shoot those nasty-ass spider webs, we’re—”


Sam scoffed. “You’re telling me.”

“No, that’s super gross.” Peter shivered and grimaced, disgusted. “Did you think the webs came out of me or something? Ohhh, that’s gross, man.”

Tony’s faceplate shot open. His eyebrow cocked in the air, his expression the so smug it made Sam hot with anger.
“Want to retract that statement regarding your intelligence?”

He looked between Tony and the ground where Spider-man stood, the boy waving at him while simultaneously pointing at his mechanical web shooters. He squinted his eyes at Iron Man.

“Bite me, Stark.”

Tony's faceplate shut tight and he flew away.

“Business first, Wilson!”

He was back to the creature within seconds, the rock monster too occupied tearing down trees and throwing them in the river to notice his surrounding enemies. Timing it right, Iron Man shot his repulsor beam the moment he ripped another tree from the ground.

The beam hit hard, but his cry was even harder. Before he could stumble back, Falcon was moving his wings as fast as the quinjet’s engines, the gust of wind that followed keeping the creature standing.

Peter latched a web onto the android and pulled himself in the air, the velocity of his jump allowing him to spin with momentum, wrapping the webs around the creature’s waist and legs with ease.

He briefly had déjà vu, the memory of Germany and a sixty-five-foot tall Ant-man resurfacing in his mind. With the creature being significantly smaller, he spun around him faster and many, many more times. If he watched from an outside perspective, it had to look like a red bug swarming around, blurring into a mush of colors.

“Ohhhh, bad roller coaster ride — really bad roller coaster ride!” he shrieked, the spin becoming faster and faster. His web tied around the rock creature’s legs until his cartridges ran dry and he flung free.

Peter tumbled backward and onto the ground, landing with force on his back, then his hip, then his back again — he tumbled and rolled with no control. Finally he dug his fingers into the dirt ground and skidded to a stop, hitting the edge of the island as the bottom of his feet just barely touched the tip of the river’s water.

He looked up with anticipation. “Did we do it?”

At the far end of the island, the creature stayed immobilized, wrapped tightly from the arms down in spider-webbing.

“I think we pulled it off,” Tony announced. “Not bad, kid —”

A roar pierced through the air.

It didn't come from the rock android, the creature seemingly still after being tied together.

Peter’s head shot over to the bridge, slowly standing from the ground as he took the time to replace his web cartridges.

“Guys!” Rhodey’s panicked voice cut through the comms. “We have a major problem.”

The roar came again, a deep angry yell that cut across the bridge.

The team didn’t need Rhodey to explain. They watched in horror as two cars were tossed aside
from the Hulk’s path, flying towards the river as he let out a loud, angry cry.

“Oh, no!” Peter was in action before he could finish speaking, two webs shot on the bridge’s structure, allowing him to yank himself into the air like a catapult.

Iron Man was right behind him, the heat from his engines blasting on the souls of his feet.

He pressed his two fingers down firmly on the centers of his palm, sending out web grenade after web grenade, his fingers not moving fast enough. They created two nets of sorts on each side of the bridge where the cars were tossed off, like white sticky hammocks. Both cars landed on each web blanket with a slight bounce, giving Tony enough time to throw the doors open and evacuate the citizens inside.

Sam took precedence over the other car, helping a family of four out and to a place where they could be safe.

The incident didn’t stop Hulk. He beat his chest and slammed his hands down on the bridge’s tarmac, leaving the structure to crack and break under his strength. Before Rhodey could even process what had happened, he jumped from the bridge all the way to Adam’s Island, his landing so powerful it made Steve stumble back.

“Am I the only one seeing this?” Clint asked from the quinjet.

“Negative,” Steve breathed out in shock, dirt emerging into the air like clouds of dust. “Hulk is definitely here.”

Natasha ran to look out the jet’s windows in a mixture of shock and terror, and Clint did a few double takes to ensure she was okay. Her face had significantly paled, and her mouth was slightly ajar, but she remained otherwise silent.

“Oh, I guess I’ll be the one to ask,” Sam spoke up. “How?”

Iron Man took off from the bridge and back to the island, jets blazing.

“That was me,” he said. “Sorry. My bad.”

It was a couple of seconds before he landed on the ground next to Steve, the Captain having stepped back and far away from where the rock monster and Hulk interacted. Hulk was immediately enraged, tossing him onto the ground, attacking the rock android with all his might.

Steve looked puzzled. “Your bad? Tony what —”

“How did you —”

“When did —”

“How the hell —”

Their voices overlapped each other on the comms, creating a distortion of an audible mess that couldn’t be untangled. As Peter came swinging back to the island, landing on the ground in a crouching position, Tony held his hand high in the air to quiet the multitude of questions.

“One at a time! Christ.” He shook his head. “Banner returned the other day. It’s a great story, really, but now’s not the time to hash it out.”

“How did he know we were here then, Tony?” Steve asked.
Tony clucked his tongue. “He may have been my Plan B.”

Steve looked at him with a hot, fiery rage so intense, Pete thought eagles were going to drop from the sky and cry at his feet. While Tony didn’t get overwhelmed easily, the distraction from his team and now pressing issue of Hulk and rock-android fighting each other boiled a frustration within him.

He rolled his eyes behind the mask. “What!? Romanoff mentioned him. I thought it was a good idea so I sent out a signal for his help.”

It clearly wasn’t good enough of an answer. Steve only looked angrier.

Tony lifted a finger. “In my defense, I told him to wait.”

“Stark, he —!”

A combination of both roars overtook their conversation. They looked up to see that Hulk was pummeling the rock monster with angry punches, clearing him of the spider webs that he had been tied down with. It didn’t take long for him to break free completely, throwing punches right back to Hulk.

“Uh, guys?” Peter squeaked out, pointing towards the two battling creatures.

Their punches hit at full force, each one sending out shock waves, Hulk’s anger only further agitating the rock creature. The dirt on the ground clouded their vision and tickled in their throats, the violence between the two getting worse.

“Mr. Banner’s Hulk appears to have given the rock android similar strength, sir,” Vision spoke through the comms.

Steve pursed his lips and crossed his arms, staring down Tony with daggers.

“Oh knock it off, Rogers I didn’t —”

“This wouldn’t have happened had you not brought him into a fight we already had handled —” Steve argued.

“I didn’t bring him in. I politely ask he be on standby while we —”

Two furious howls assaulted them, combined with a shock wave from their colliding punches. The noise was so sharp that Peter covered his ears over his mask, wincing at the piercing sound that was doubled with his enhanced senses.

“You guys have to get Hulk out of there,” Clint hollered.

“He’s right,” Steve agreed. “We’ve just doubled our opponents now that the android has his strength.”

“Which, by the way, I did not know he could do when I called Banner in,” Tony defended, now yelling over the fighting from both creatures.

Before Steve could respond, the quinjet’s engines roared above them. The wind blew his hair back and sent dirt flying into the river, and the back door opened the moment the aircraft got low enough.

Natasha jumped out with purpose.
“I’ll handle this,” she firmly stated, her tone laced with anger, quickly walking past her teammates.

“Whoa, whoa!” Steve shot an arm out, blocking her path. “Nat…I said stick to your post. We don’t need you getting hurt.”

She spun around to face him. “More people will get hurt if they continue to fight. I’m going to get him to go down the Hudson River, out of the way so you can contain the android again.”

Steve held his arm in place, his eyes locked with hers. None of them could deny her statement, surely a reason why Clint allowed her out of the jet in the first place. They knew she was the only one who could calm the Hulk. While Steve didn’t seem too convinced, he ultimately dropped his arm, his face softening with concern. She gave a short, curt nod of her head, an unspoken statement of trust between the two that told him she’d be careful.

Bitterly, Natasha looked at Tony. “Any more secrets you want to tell us about today, Stark?”

Tony rolled his eyes. “The password to my email is *password* with a one at the end.”

His wisecracking went without laughs. She resentfully shook her head, and Tony knew between the glares from Steve and her cold shoulder attitude that this was going to bite him in the ass.

He’d deal with it later. For now, he was thankful for her presence, though he kept it unspoken.

She cautiously approached the two fighting creatures, her steps slow and gentle on the ground, her boots barely making a sound.

“Hey, big guy…long time, no see.”

Hulk’s head turned to look at her with neck-breaking speed, and his nostril's opened wide with anger, letting out a burst of steam. The rush of fear that shot up from her gut was enough to make her nauseous. Briefly, she wondered if he would even remember her, or if this tactic would still work.

It had been so long. She could very well be committing suicide by trying this.

Natasha paused, allowing him to take in the sight, giving him time to remember - remember *her*, remember Bruce Banner’s life. Though her arm shook, her adrenaline running high, she outstretched it to him, her entire hand the size of one of his fingers.

And it wasn’t long before he softened, letting out a loud grunt of confusion.

“What’s it been? A year?” She took another step forward. “Year and a half?”

She ignored the bickering over the comms, Steve lecturing Tony about secrets and Tony defending himself in imbecilic ways. It wasn’t her concern right now; she didn’t have time to bother with their immature behavior.

Her focus was solely on the green eyes that stared back at her, the once angry features falling flat.

“We have a lot of catching up to do.” Her hand got closer to him. “You think…you can come with me?”

The comms went quiet, the team inevitably overhearing her calm determination, the heavy breathing from the Hulk replacing their voices. His large brows furrowed, and he shook his head viciously, turning back to the rock-like creature with persistence.
“It’s handled. It’s not your problem,” she told him.

He grunted and whined, almost upset like a child being told ‘no’. Throwing his arm back, Hulk went to give another punch, only to stop mid-throw, huffing out a breath of frustration with it. He seemed confused, overwhelmed.

Natasha knew how he functioned. Fighting was all he did, it was the only purpose he had. Taking him away from a fight was taking away his only instinct. And with the Hulk, that was a dangerous risk.

His arm fell down, just low enough for her to grab hold of his finger with her entire grip.

“Sun’s getting real low, you know.”

The bright, vivid green eyes flickered brown, followed by a cry of anguish. It was exactly what she had been expecting.

“Clint, now,” Natasha demanded, rolling onto the ground and tumbling aside as Hulk pushed past her. He stormed away from the android, the team, and everything else to run into the Hudson River’s waters.

The Quinjet flew down low, backdoor still opened for Natasha to jump into. She clung onto the side of the aircraft as it immediately soared into the sky. Unfortunately, the rock android had also risen from the ground and swatted at the jet, barely missing it by a few inches.

He went to do it again, Clint already tilting to the side to avoid his attacks.

“Shit — Barton, get the jet far away from here!” Tony shouted. “We can’t risk this rock head —”

“Awesome Android,” Peter corrected, finger in the air.

Tony pretended not to hear him. “We can’t risk him taking you guys out.”

“Already on it.” Clint had the jet in the sky and taking off for the Hulk, the green monster running down the river with howls of anguish.

With the aircraft away from the rock android, he seemed to calm down having nothing in his direct line of attention. Like all scenarios that involved Hulk and Natasha, the team could only hold hope that they caught him before things got too rough.

It may have been over a year, but the connection still seemed to be there. They at least had that on their side.

Peter stepped forward between Tony and Steve. “So what now?”

“We do it again.” Steve looked away from the sky. “You restrained him before, we try it again.”

Tony lit his blasters and soared into the air. “Alright gentlemen, take two!”

Sam flew over and positioned himself at the creature’s backside. It caused enough annoyance for him to notice their presence, and enough time for Tony to aim for his armpit again, the rockets heading straight for his granite skin.

Only this time, he stepped aside and swatted Falcon away, lifting his other hand to let both rockets collide with his palm.
Tony narrowly dodged the sparks and flames that came shooting back at him.

“What the hell!?” he yelled.

Sam seemed equally confused, his wings coming to a halt.

“Why are not able to catch him by surprise this time?”

On the ground, Peter began to jump with enthusiasm, tapping Steve on the arm repeatedly.

“He’s remembering!” Peter explained. “He’s storing away our moves so he can predict what we do next.”

Steve cocked an eyebrow, mildly amused by the kid's excitement. It was like he had Tony Stark’s brain in a child’s body, which having learned of Peter’s age, seemed to be spot on.

“Mr. Stark, after we defeat it, can we keep it?”

Steve barked a laugh and turned away, hiding his smile. The amount of innocence and joy, while completely foreign to the team, was a refreshing quality that certainly created a new spark of life.

“Keep it?” Tony repeated, baffled. “Kid, first we have to kick its ass, which seems to be a problem right now. Then it’s being shipped off to SHIELD where it can’t give me any more headaches.”

“Yeah, and I think SHIELD’s going to have a lot of fun with this one,” Steve said.

“Well, I’m not having any fun with him, and I’m tired of these surprises.” Tony flew down the ground and joined the two while Sam stayed positioned in the air.

Steve crossed his arms. “What’s your plan?”

“That was my plan. Any brilliant ideas in that noggin of yours?”

“I have an idea,” Peter shyly spoke up.

Tony and Steve looked at each other first, the two leaders mentally questioning if it was worth the risk. Tony was the first to give in, shrugging as if to say “what else have we to lose?”

Steve didn’t like taking risks without having a solid foundation to stand on. Looking over at Peter, clad in his Spider-man costume, he had to remind himself that while his first fight with the team, he had already provided significant help. He had to tell himself there was a reason Stark recruited him. Of course, that meant trusting Tony more than the kid.

They had a lot of trouble with that lately. But they had promised to work on it, and that meant putting his fear of trust aside for a better cause.

He sighed and shrugged, turning towards Peter. “Go ahead, son, what’s your plan?”

Peter was quick to respond.

“Okay, so, it seems the awesome android — totally awesome, not even going to deny it anymore — it’s like he’s dependent on his programming. He replicates abilities and stores away our strategies so he can fight back. Otherwise, he’s just…a shell. Mr. Stark said it himself, he doesn’t show much intelligence. We don’t bother him, he doesn’t bother us.”

“You suggesting we leave him alone?” Sam asked through the comms.
Steve shook his head. “We can’t do that. He may not be directly attacking us, but he is destroying what’s in his path.”

“No, not leave him alone,” Peter explained. “Distract him again, this time good. But it’s going to take everyone’s help.”

The Quinjet had long since departed, and Rhodey worked solo on keeping traffic at bay over at the bridge. It left the four of them to finish the fight, enhanced humans or not.

Steve knew two heads were better than one, and four bodies were better than nothing.

Tony nodded his head and crossed his arms. “We’re listening.”

The island had become barren, and Awesome Android had run out of trees to dig up, relying on pulling at dirt from the ground to entertain himself. Peter spared a glance before looking back at the team.

“Have you ever seen that really old movie *Jaws*?”

There was a beat of silence, followed by Sam muttering “...oh my god.”

Tony cringed and rolled his eyes. “Get to the point, kid.”

“So you know how the guy put the scuba tank in the shark and then shot him, and then he exploded — the shark, that is, not the guy.”

Tony almost had the urge to let him know clarification wasn’t needed, but something clicked in his head. He waged a finger in Peter's direction. “I think I see where you’re going with this.”

Steve knitted his brows, confused. “But we’ve already tried to distract him once. He knows we’re aware of his weak spots.”

“So we don’t use his weak spots,” Peter insinuated, looking behind him at the towering creature, the dirt clouding the air like smoke.

They didn’t have any more time to kill. The island was nothing but a wasteland and he’d be heading across to the next one any second now. They couldn’t risk him getting close to the residential housing developments.

With a deep breath, Peter turned back to the team.

“I’m going to need a lift.”

Within minutes he had explained his plan to the team and before he knew it, metallic hands were hooked underneath his arms and lifted him into the air, the cold from the suit counteracted by the heat of the repulsor beams.

Both Iron Man and Spider-man approached the height of Awesome Android, keeping their distance as Falcon soared in circles around his featureless head. The creature swatted at him with confusion.

“Fly like a fly, *Falcon*. When did I start taking orders from *Dora*?” Sam muttered, switching to circle the opposite direction. “And why do I gotta be the bug — your entire name is based off a damn bug!”

Peter landed on Sam’s back with a *thud*, his sticky fingertips clinging to his wings and keeping him grounded. Iron Man flew away but stayed in the air near them.
As they circled Awesome Android, Peter shot web grenade after web grenade, the tacky fluid covering the front and back of his head. He let out a muffled cry, pulling the web away from his mouth with frustration.

“Ready, Captain?” Peter hollered down below.

Steve braced himself, knees bent and ready for action. Sam came to a stop and Peter slung out a spider-web, the fluid attaching to the Captain’s back. Once it did, they flew high together, lifting him off the ground and into the air.

The Falcon flew above Awesome Android, at least double the height with Captain America tagging along. Once they had gained enough air, Peter detached the spider-web from his wrist and Steve dropped with incredible speed, falling down below like a missile.

And then a resonating *SLAM* was heard, his shield hitting the top of Android’s head, the creature screeching in response.

Tony immediately flew over and shot rocket after rocket into his open and exposed mouth, the blasts bursting into flames within his cavity.

The next events occurred synchronously.

Awesome Android stumbled back and threw his arms out in defense, knocking Peter straight off Sam’s wings and to the river’s waters.

Steve tumbled down from the sky and onto the ground, rolling until he came to a hard stop.

Peter shot web after web, the strands flinging into the air with nothing to land on. The Awesome Android had begun shrinking in proportion as he fell backward. By the time it was over, he was a relativity normal size, easily comparable to an average human.

Both Iron Man and Falcon flew down from the skies and hit the ground together, approaching the much smaller Android with interest. He laid on his back, unmoving, his much smaller mouth in a frown.

It was then Tony noticed that Peter wasn’t with Sam.

“Where did he —” he turned around, searching frantically, noticing that Sam seemed as clueless as he did.

“He was right with me. I don’t know —”

“Shit!” Tony flew off before Sam could finish his sentence, repulsor beams lifting him high and away from the island.

And then he dove deep into the water.

When Peter had been knocked off Falcon’s wings, his first instinct was to swing — attach his web to anything, anyone, to get him grounded. Both arms stretched outward, and he hit the center of his palms with force but nothing stuck. He flew back with such force that the wind felt like it could rip his mask off.

He barely noticed that the once fifteen-foot tall android was now shrinking like a deflated balloon. He thought, for just one moment, that *awesome android* really lived up to his name. And then he hit the water.
Peter had fallen into rivers at dangerous heights before. That didn’t mean he was prepared for the sting that came with it. It was like knives digging into every pore of his skin, the cold shocking him to his core, a brief yelp echoing from his mouth.

The thing with falling from the sky meant that he couldn’t fight the strength of the water that pushed him deeper and deeper into the river. It was like being sucked into a black hole, his arms swimming him up but the drop from above taking control.

Though his eyes remained open, his vision got darker the further down he went, the sun from the mid-morning skies disappearing. As water sunk through his mask and into his nose, and as he thought of how screwed he truly was, two beams of white light broke through the darkness and floated near him.

Tony grabbed him and flew up, breaking the water’s surface with incredible speed.

He gasped loud and hard when they met fresh air, gathering murky river water from his mask as he coughed and sputtered. His lungs were barely clear by the time they landed back on the island, his sopping wet feet turning the dirt into mud.

But that didn’t hinder his excitement.

Peter threw both his arms up in victory.

“Whoo-hoo!” he yelled. “Yeah!”

His cries of triumph were cut short by wet coughs, and he bent over with each that came his way. Tony immediately went for his mask, lifting it just high enough to expose his mouth, the metal around his fingers glistening with the river water that came spewing out.

Steve let out of the breath he hadn’t realized he had been holding, relief flooding his veins at the sight of Tony flying back to the island. He let his shoulders drop to rid the tension that had built, walking away to help Sam contain the creature laying on the ground before things got too heated again. Still, from the corner of his eye he kept a close eye on Peter, watching with intent interest.

There were a lot of words Steve could use to describe Tony Stark. Stubborn, egotistical, selfish, independent, snobby— watching him hover over Peter, he realized with shocking insight that the aura flooding between them was a concern, almost a paternal protection.

Tony pounded on the kid’s back as he coughed dirty river water onto the ground with each action, his inhales wet and rickety.

“Breathe, kid, breathe…” he calmly instructed him, obviously not wavered by the thumbs up that Peter insisted on giving, not until his coughs dissipate and his breaths were less shaky.

Steve let out an audible hum. This wasn’t the same man he fought in Berlin six months ago. He didn’t know what to do with that, and so he turned away and focused on the task at hand.

Peter took a deep inhale, this time clean and dry. He watched in front of him as Sam contained the much smaller rock creature, and he laughed with amazement.

“Holy crap, he’s so small now! That’s just…” Peter grinned ear to ear. “That was so awesome! Way more awesome than the Android, which is still so awesome. Holy crap, that was —”

Peter stopped mid-sentence as Tony removed his Iron Man mask, exposing much less happy features than what he was experiencing. He was in trouble — he had to be in trouble - he must have
screwed up and now they were angry with him. His heart plummeted in his stomach, and he gulped
heavily.

“Mr. Stark, I —” his apology was cut short when Tony laid a hand on his shoulder, sighing with
relief.

“You did good, kid,” he said. “You scared the devil out of me, but you did real good.”

Peter grinned, possibly wider than before. Tony wasn’t angry — no, he seemed almost…proud.
And though it wasn’t much, barely a twitch of his lips, he could tell Tony was smiling himself.

He did good.

Peter nodded in thanks, wiping away the dirty water from his mouth. He did good. Those few
words were the best he had heard in a long time, feeling a sense of pride in himself that he hadn’t
felt in months. Suddenly all the overlapping failures washed away and didn't mean squat to him
anymore, not with approval he had just received.

Tony must have noticed his happiness, because he went from having his hand on him to wrapping
his entire arm around his shoulder with a tight squeeze. Peter relished in it.

Over by the rock android, Steve stood across from Sam, ensuring the creature wouldn’t cause any
more problems. Slowly and gently, he pulled at the webbing on his back, the fluid sticking
between his fingers the more he yanked off.

Sam looked up and grimaced. “Gross.”

The white helmet landed on the table with a *clang* and *clatter*.

“Your badge worked like a charm.”

Dmitri barely spared a glance at the device, watching as Francis removed his plexiglas helmet and
sat it down next to it. He turned away from the television monitor and leaned back in his chair.

“No my badge, Klum. You can thank Walter Cortez from IT department of Stark Industries.”

Francis Klum rolled his eyes and crossed his arms. “If I recall correctly, Walter Cortez was
dumped in a bath full of acid five months ago, and *you* assumed his identity.”

“Technicality’s,” the man's thick Russian accent caused the words to roll off his tongue. “They had
me check security footage of last night. Your gas worked like charm, just as I planned it to.”

Francis scowled, pulling up a seat across from Dmitri.

“Yeah, you can thank *Oscorp* for that atrocity.” His words were bitter, an angry hurt from his past
that still clouded the air.

Dmitri grabbed the white helmet away from him, his eyes narrowed. “What did I say when I found
you?”

Francis paused, looking at the ground. He knew the answer, but that didn’t mean he wanted to
speak it. Speaking it reminded him it was real, and that it happened. And inhumane experimentation on an innocent man who just sought help for a traumatic past wasn’t something that should have ever happened.

Some days he blamed his brother for what he had become. He didn’t deserve what was done to him, he said no, he didn’t want to be touched — but at the end of the day, he knew what monster made him who he was.

“It doesn’t make it any better.”

Dmitri rolled his chair closer to him, helmet between his knees.

“It does. We will use what they did, what they have blessed you with, to our advantage. We will succeed with upper hand, Klum.”

Francis looked up from the floor, the glasses that the Russian man wore almost reflecting his face back to him. He wearily nodded his head. Dmitri stood from his chair, taking the helmet with him across the room.

Still, while he was right, many questions were left lingering in his mind. Francis turned his chair to face Dmitri’s direction. “You know, for someone with all these impersonation skills, you’re wasting a lot of time on Tony Stark.”

Dmitri barely turned his head. “And for someone with ability to teleport, you waste time searching for fame.”

Francis rolled his eyes. They had this argument time after time, ever since they met five months ago. There was no need to defend himself yet again. Dmitri had his goals, and he had his own. They just didn’t see eye to eye on them.

“I’m just saying…why do you need it?” he asked, pointing to the helmet. “You can clearly do without it.”

“Masks are masks,” Dmitri calmly explained. “They are nothing compared to real deal. Infiltrating Stark Industries gave me opportunity to monitor Stark’s inventions. Low and behold, he files away record of creating nanite holographic technology that replicate appearances. It’d be foolish not to take advantage of such a glorious thing.”

Francis furrowed his eyebrows, confused.

“Okay, so now…you can not wear a wig every time you go in there and pretend to be their IT employee? I don’t understand.” He scooted his chair closer. “You told me this was going to get you Stark’s money, and you’d give me a share of that money. I don’t see how this fits together.”

“First, you’ll get your money. You can use it on whatever you damn want, you wannabe Houdini.”

“Hey, I —”

“I told you when we started this.” Dmitri turned around. “Be patient.”

It wasn’t good enough. He had been patient, for almost half a year. After five long months, he was finally sent to do something — test his nanite gas, ensure that the fog would truly create a technological blackout that would allow them to steal Stark’s invention. With all of Times Square in pitch darkness, Dmitri finally sent him away to do something useful.
But here they were, sitting with the helmet they stole, and no intents to leap into action.

“Why? You have the helmet now, kill Stark and take over his life,” Francis plainly stated.

He shook his head. “We can’t jump gun like that, Klum. There’s too much I don’t know about him, how he works. How the business runs, how his money flows in — I take over now, and everything could be pulled out from under us. Under me. We wait.”

Dmitri set the helmet down next to him, spinning it so the open eye slits were looking straight at him. And then he walked away.

“As much as it pains me to say, his intelligence in keeping everything running — cash flow included — is too vital to lose.”

The guy was a thinker. Francis had figured that out months ago. It’s another way they butt heads. He liked to act first, think later. In a way, Dmitri was an overachiever, ensuring everything he did would be perfect.

While slow, painfully slow, they’re plan was coming together without a hitch. Francis couldn’t deny that.

“So what now?”

Dmitri smiled. “We break him. Take something from him that kills him, from inside.”

He turned the television monitor in his direction, the screen displaying live footage from upstate New York. Francis pulled his chair closer to watch.

“-it really is a sight, isn’t it Kelly? We’re live here from Collar City Bridge, showing you first footage of the Avengers and what could possibly be a new Avenger with them? I have to say Kelly, Tony Stark’s Iron Man seems very pleased with the work done here today.”

“Oh yes Mark, that’s Queen’s local Spider-man, for those who don’t know. He’s been doing fantastic work locally in our neighborhood and looks like he’s gotten on the good side of the Avengers as well!”

“I mean, just look at that hug, Kelly. That’s teamwork right there.”

Eyeing the screen, Francis watched as the news helicopter from above caught Iron Man and Spider-man in a firm, friendly hug. Tony Stark walked Spider-man away, discussing something that seemed promising, his hand in the air to emphasize what he was saying.

Francis looked to Dmitri. “How?”

Dmitri laid his hand on the clean, white helmet.

“We set up greatest illusion known to mankind.”

“The creature has been taken away and the bridge has been re-opened and cleared. And I have to say, Mark, I haven’t seen the Avengers look this content in a long time.”

“Queen’s Spider-man seems to be welcomed in, that’s for sure. And if I may say, Kelly, I think he’s welcomed in our hearts as well.”

The television continued to play in the background, Francis’s grin enlarging with every word the newscasters spoke.
“Now you’re talking my language.”

Chapter End Notes

Credit where credit is due -- I was partially inspired by this comic cover.

Stay tuned, and again, you guys are awesome!
Every. Single. One. Of. You - You are amazing. You are fantastic. Thank you SO Much for your incredible, awesome feedback!! I mean it, this story is yours. Every update is yours. I write for you, because knowing you’re interested - that’s the purpose of each update. Thank you thank you thank you :) 

*digs hand into bag of cotton candy*

Man, this fluff is good.

*takes another bite*

Really good fluff.

Fun Nerd Facts!:

Carlie Cooper is one of Peter Parker’s girlfriend following the Brand New Day storyline. A fun little throw away line for ya.

The web fluid ingredients are accurate to cannon.  
http://i.imgur.com/Sq3xmDG.jpg

However, as someone who works in the lab (granted, with blood, but still) this combination is just a bunch of fancy elements thrown together to sound smart. Don’t try it at home, kids.

SHIELD’s code number for Awesome Android is actually in reference to Andy’s debut issue, Fantastic Four #15, 1963 and The Avengers issue #286 in 1988.

I feel like I’ve turned Clint into the awesome ‘cool’ uncle who wants his nephew to have fun. Not sure how that happened, but I’m rolling with it. I also mentioned in the last chapter that I would be bumping up Wanda’s age - technically, her age isn’t declared anywhere in the MCU, but I’ve noticed a lot of fans pin her anywhere from 15 to 20. I personally feel she’s a lot older, even older than the 22 I age her to, but I decided this was a good balance between the two assumptions.

smucitūrā is suppose to mean "Jerk" in English. The translation can be poor though, due to "jerk" actually meaning things like pull or tug. I don't claim to speak or know the language, so I apologize on that behalf.

Lastly, I couldn’t resist adding the ballet scene. It’s totally unnecessary, and I’ll admit that, but I wanted to write something involving dancing, despite how impossible it is to convey dancing in fiction. Tom Holland is such an amazing dancer that I couldn’t pass up the opportunity. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zpfzgfee-74

That, and with the amount of darkness I’m about to drop on you all, I had to add a little more sweetness in the mix to make up for it.
He had peaked too soon.

Surrounded by the Avengers, drinking and eating in celebration of their latest win, Peter knew he had peaked too soon. And he decided that he was one hundred and ninety-six percent okay with that.

“As Thor would say —” Clint held his beer high in the air. “A most wondrous victory hast fallen upon us comrades! Alloweth us rejoiceth and feast until thou sun sets and theth dayth rethstart!”

Natasha widened her eyes. “Okay...that got to be ridiculous. And you know he’s Asgardian, not Shakespearean, right?”

Tony walked away from the group and to the bar in the kitchen.

“He might as well be.” Pouring a drink into his mountain glass, he pointed a finger behind him at Steve. “And I still say the elevator goes up.”

Steve chuckled and shook his head. “It’s not worthy!”

The air between them was light, much lighter than their morning together and an incredible difference from last night. Even Tony and Steve shared a laugh together. It was hard to say what had done the trick; maybe they needed a good fight to release their tension, or perhaps now that they had the time to reflect, their problems seemed to be on a smaller scale. Either way, Peter wasn’t opposed to the change.

Sitting in the lounge area, the other team members relaxing around him, he felt like a giddy child meeting his idols. Only it was better than that — he had met his idols and was now essentially partying with them. It was like a dream come true.

“How is Thor doing, Bruce?” Steve casually asked.

Bruce, sitting across from the others, nervously fiddled with his cup and plate of food. He looked up at the sound of his name, giving a slight, awkward shrug. “Uh, you know…family issues.”

“Space...that’s...” Natasha locked eyes with him, her face softening with a faint, warm smile. “That’s a hell of a place to be for a year.”

Bruce nodded. “Yeah, it uh...it was.”

“You’ll have to tell me about it.” Natasha stood from her seat, her hand gently running across his shoulder as she departed for the bar.

Her behavior didn’t go unnoticed, especially after the battle on the bridge. While at first hot with rage, they had returned to the compound and she had significantly calmed down, so much so that she even gave Bruce a full tour of the facility, all the way down to the laboratories.

They let bygones be bygones on this one, all seemingly in agreeance that returning from outer space justified a day or two alone to readjust.

Tony, however, decided from this point forward he was done keeping anyone’s secrets.
“Take it to the chapel,” he told them, “I don’t want to hear it.”

“Hey, guys!” Rhodey hollered from behind them. “Check this out. Bug eyes made the news!”

Tony and Natasha emerged from the bar whereas Peter flopped around on the couch, his knees pressing firmly against the back and his hands gripping the headrest. The others turned their heads to better see TV that hung on the wall.

“Would you look at that.” Clint grinned, leaning over to bump his fist into Peter’s shoulder. “New York is all over you now.”

“I think it’s safe to say, Mark, while we’ll be awaiting a press release from Tony Stark, it seems like the Avengers have added an additional member onto their team.”

“Our Twitter feed is blowing up, Kelly. Some people are worried that Queens will be left without their friendly neighborhood protector. Carlie Cooper tweeted out: I hope this doesn’t mean we’ll be losing sight of Spider-man. He’s a sweet gentleman who saved me from a mugging not too long ago. Either way, great job today Spidey.”

“Awww.” Natasha walked by and ruffled Peter’s hair. “Great job, Spidey.”

He bowed his head and waved her hand away, hiding his blushed cheeks and smile in the couch cushions.

Tony shrugged. “Well, kid, they’ve practically already announced it — looks like you’re in.”

Peter’s head shot up, eyes wide. “Wha—what? No, I can’t — I—”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself, Pete,” Clint said. “You kicked ass out there today.”

“I know, it’s—it’s not that—I just…”

Peter clammed up, the words falling flat on his tongue, dissipating with his exhale of breath. It seemed silly to say out loud, and surrounded by the team; older, more experienced adults who were well above his skill level, he didn’t know how to say exactly what was on his mind.

The truth was, digging his fingers into the fabric of the sofa, Peter couldn’t shake how rough of a night homecoming was. Top three of the worst he had experienced in his life. Sitting on his bathroom floor, May’s towels bunched against his chest to slow the bleeding — he was too young to consider the possibility of dying. He loved being Spider-man, more than anything in the world. He’d never give that up.

But he loved being alive too. And he wanted to experience life while he was.

Sam crossed his arms. “If he joins, I refuse to schedule Capri Sun breaks for him. He doesn’t get special treatment because he’s a young brat.”

“Hush, you smucitură!” Wanda snapped.

Sam pointed his finger at her. “How am I suppose to know if that was a bad word?”

“Calculations of many possible scenarios tell me that Mr. Parker would make a great asset in our fights,” Vision calmly stated.

Tony had locked eyes on him, his orange-tinted sunglasses containing FRIDAY slipping down his nose. The kid struggled to speak a sentence despite the encouragement the others wanted to
provide, and Tony knew better than to push it. He may have recruited Peter, but he wouldn’t be the one to force him into the gig.

He was a kid. Superhero moonlighting or not, he had the right to want to be a kid.

“I’d rather just stay on the ground…for a little while.”

Tony cleared his throat. “I think we can arrange a PRN agreement. Called in when necessary or needed. Sound good?”

Peter looked over in his direction, a sense of relief ridding him of the tension that tightened his muscles.

“Yeah. I like the sound of that. Just…” He smiled, nodding. "...just when needed.”

Peter was happy that he didn’t need to explain it, and happier that Mr. Stark understood where he was coming from. Plus, this way he still had the chance to fight side-by-side with the Avengers again. This morning’s battle was easily the biggest and best highlight of his life so far, and it left him feeling butterflies in his stomach at the very idea of being called in again.

It was a unique feeling. He loved Aunt May and he loved his home, his friends, and Queens was where he was born and raised. But sitting with these people — his people, his kind, he felt the most at ease he had ever felt before. Like he belonged.

Tony sat on the sofa and crossed his legs. “I keep the new suit until you're full time though.”

Peter rolled his eyes. “You can keep it if it still has the Baby Monitor Protocol.”

“Kid, when I’m dead and in my grave you’ll still have that protocol.”

Peter threw his head back onto the sofa’s headrest. “That’s not fair!”

“Wha—what’s that?” Bruce asked, his confusion evident.

“Baby monitor?” Clint kicked his feet up on the coffee table. “Tell me that’s quirky name and not what I think it is.”

“A program designed as a safety, security feature that’s embedded in his suit, recording everything he does, monitors his vitals, reports any abnormalities, and god forbid he screws the pooch, gets in touch directly with moi?” Tony paused for dramatic effect. “Yeah, no, that’s exactly what it is.”

“Unnecessary is what it is,” Peter mumbled under his breath.

Tony’s whipped his head towards him. “Want to say that again?”

A beat of silence passed.

Peter shook his head with a smirk. “No.”

Tony let out a mix of a huff and chuckle, picking up a toothpick covered with cheese squares and tossing it his way. “You’re such a little shit.”

Peter didn’t have to look up to catch the finger food — his hand raised with quick and accurate speed. Once in his palms, he took a bite and smiled.

“So Tony is watching your every move…” Bruce looked at the others. “Should-shouldn’t one of us
be calling CPS?”

“Ha-ha, Bruce made a funny!” Tony sneered. “Seriously, you guys thought I would send out a
minor with a multi-million dollar suit and call it a day? You think so little of me.”

“No, I believe we think the right amount of you.” Clint's hands leveled out in the air like a scale.
“It’s an exhausting task, balancing out your ego, with your other ego….and your stubbornness…we
should all really get a raise.”

“Wait.” Rhodey approached him, palm outstretched. “You’re getting paid?”

The others joked and laughed, throwing out sarcastic remarks one after the other. Steve silently
observed them. He hummed in realization — Tony was watching the kid. Surely not twenty-four
seven, and knowing the man, his tech and artificial intelligence’s would warn him of anything long
before he personally noticed, but still. He was making efforts to protect him.

The more Steve discovered about this situation, the more his opinion from last night began to
change.

“You’ve put a lot into this, Tony,” he finally spoke up. “I’ll admit, I wasn’t expecting that.”

“What can I say, I like to keep people on their toes.” Tony watched as the alcohol swished around
in his glass. “And speaking of which, get your damn feet off my coffee table, Barton. I’m not
running a bed and breakfast for a biker gang.”

“I live on a farm,” Clint defended, lowering his legs.

Bruce straightened his posture and turned towards him. “How is the family, Clint?”

“Good, thanks. Cooper just started high-school. I’m trying to stay semi-retired, for them, but…” he
shrugged, a sad smile emerging on his face. “You know how it goes.”

“Ugh, all this talk about young ones…you guys got me going down memory lane.” Sam grimaced.
“I hate memory lane.”

“What, high school wasn’t the glory days for you, Wilson?” Tony joked.

“I had an afro…when afro’s weren’t cool anymore.” Sam took a hard bite of a cracker. “Besides,
we all didn’t have piles of money to get us into nice, comfy private schools like you.”

Steve shook his head, raising his glass to his lips. “I don’t like remembering those days either.
Things definitely looked up after high school.”

Bruce chuckled. “Super-serums tend to do that.”

Steve innocently shrugged.

“How about you, Peter?” Natasha suddenly asked. “How are things going at school?”

Peter gulped heavily, suddenly very aware that Black Widow had asked him about his school life.
He wasn’t sure if that made him feel totally awesome or incredibly childish.

“Uhm, well…” he trailed off, licking his lips nervously. “Last semester I fought the dad of the girl
I had a crush on after he stole Mr. Stark’s plane with all your stuff on it. He went to jail, and she
moved away. So…there’s that.”
Natasha frowned, and her eyebrow shot up. The others went quiet. Peter immediately realized that wasn’t the type of answer she was expecting — something more along the lines of “yeah, AP Bio is a bitch.” would have done the trick.

“Ahh, your typical, normal, standard girl trouble,” Clint joked, taking a swig of his beer.

Bruce furrowed his brows. “You find time to focus on your studies between all this?”

“Yeah, I mean — it’s not hard.” Peter shrugged. "School, that is. I have a midterm final next week but I’m sure I’ll pass. Honestly, it’s just not that…challenging right now.”

Bruce rubbed the bottom of his chin. “Where do you go?”

“Midtown School of Science and Technology.”

His eyes widened in surprise.

“Wow. That’s….that’s a prestigious school, Peter,” Bruce said, gesturing his hand out in the air. “I’ve—I’ve helped fund a lot of their physics programs. You should be proud that you’re going there.”

Before Peter could open his mouth to respond, Tony butted in. “He’s better than it. I keep trying to get the kid into MIT — that webbing he has? Created it himself. He’s smart, he’s better than that school.”

Tony bragged about Peter as if he were his own, and like the other times in the day, it caught Steve’s attention. He watched intently as Tony rambled on about the kid’s intelligence, wits, and unfortunate stubbornness, giving off the impression of a bond he didn’t realize existed.

They knew Tony had recruited Peter back during the Accords debate, but other than what the news said about Spider-man, they weren’t clued into what connection the local hero had with Stark. He had to be honest with himself, he would have never pinned the two to form what appeared to be such a close bond over that period of time. He wasn’t surprised that Tony hadn’t told him about it — they weren’t there yet.

Too much damage to repair.

Still, it seemed foreign. The pride, the need to protect, the parental fondness in his words. The only other time he’d seen Tony talk with such affection was when he spoke about himself. And that said a lot, considering the man was engaged.

They all knew they’d be entering a lot of change coming out of the Accords, but Steve wasn’t expecting this kind of change. It was nice, he decided, feeling a smile tug at his lips. It was nice.

Bruce leaned in, fascinated. “Your uh, your webbing — what’s it made of?”

Peter looked up, surprised. It took a moment to find his voice, the shock of Doctor Bruce Banner sitting across from him and asking him direct questions enough to knock the air from his lungs.

“To be honest, it’s a — it’s a combination of things, Doctor Banner,” he said. “A lot of solvents, and, uh -”

He held up his hand. “Call me Bruce.”

Peter nodded, though a little shakily. He counted on his fingers, “Uhm, it—it has salicylic acid,
toluene, methanol, L-Heptane, carbon tetrachloride, potassium carbonate, ethyl acetate —”

“And I need more alcohol.” Natasha got from her seat.

“Right behind you on that one.” Clint followed her out.

Bruce chuckled, elbows on his knees as he leaned in with interest. “That’s genius, Pete. I’d love to take a look at it some time.”

“Ye—yeah! Of course, that’d be cool.” Peter rubbed the palm of his hand against his pants, reaching out for a handshake. “It’s—it’s an honor to meet you, by the way, Doctor Ban—Bruce.”

Bruce smiled, taking his awkward handshake. “Pleasure to meet you, Peter.”

“Easy, Brucey,” Tony warned. “He might actually wet himself if he gets any more excited.”

Peter dropped Bruce’s hand and looked over at Tony, disgusted, his face scrunched up in a cringe. Tony winked one eye and leaned back into the sofa, his smug confidence overtaking the room.

*That* was the Tony Stark Steve was familiar with, and he shook his head with a sigh, getting up to retrieve another drink.

The evening went by so smoothly that their problems were forgotten. The team welcomed Peter in as if he had been there all along, and for the most part, his age had become an irrelevant issue. His maturity and intelligence easily made up for his lack of experience in life.

That was, until, Natasha noticed Clint hand off a egg-shaped drinking glass to Peter. She leaned over slightly, taking a whiff of the liquid as the others continued with their conversation.

Bruce held his hands in the air. “I’m just hypothesizing —”

“And I’m just saying — black widows are deadly spiders. Deadly. You can’t change that,” Rhodey argued. “Deadly means dead.”

“I understand that. But from my experience with radioactive material, we’ve witnessed what gamma radiation can do to a human being — me, in this case. And now we’ve seen what a spider injected with radioactive serum can do — Peter, obviously, inherited the abilities of the spider-like…I believe if that spider were still alive, it would be more dangerous than —”

“Clint!” Natasha ripped the drink out of Peter’s hand. “He’s fifteen!”

Already across the room at the pool table, Clint shrugged.

“Exactly. Let the kid live a little.” His cue stick hit the billiard balls with a *clank*. “He’s with adults, he’ll be fine.”

Peter seemed at a loss, his hand still shaped as if he were holding the glass.

Tony stood up abruptly. “You causing trouble, Barton?”

Clint rolled his eyes and set the pool cue down. “It’s a little bit of rum a lot of soda. Don’t act like you weren’t drinking at his age.”

Sam gaped, standing on the other side of the pool table with his own cue stick. “You have a son, man.”
“Exactly! And I’d happily let him drink if there were adults present.” Clint waved his cue stick at Sam. "Statistically, teenagers are less likely to get wasted if —”

“No.” Tony stormed forward, finger waging in the air. “Statistics be damned, I have to answer to this kids aunt, and hell hath no fury like a woman whose nephew is returned to her drunk.”

Peter frowned, looking at Natasha and Bruce with confusion. “Am I in trouble?”

Bruce chuckled, and Natasha shook her head.

“No,” she said. “But don’t accept anything Clint gives you tonight.”

From across the lounge, Clint hollered, ‘Party poopers!’

It wouldn’t be the first time he tried to pass off an alcoholic drink to Peter. It got to the point where Steve and Natasha stood close by, each taking guard for the next time Clint would either set down a cup close to him or put it directly in his hands. They’d simply take it from Peter’s grasp before he could even speak, either drinking it themselves or pouring it down the drain of the kitchen sink.

It was only when Tony threatened to cut him off from accessing the bar that he finally stopped.

“Tony,” Clint argued, “the kid fought a fifteen-foot rock monster today. I think he can handle a little bit of liquor.”

Tony narrowed his eyes. “Try it one more time and FRIDAY won’t let you three feet near the bar.”

“You know it makes this game ten times more fun, though.”

Sam rolled his eyes. “Alright, enough bickering. Who’s next?”

“Okay, uhm…” Bruce clucked his tongue, thinking. “Never have I ever…walked in on someone using the bathroom.”

The entire room took a swig of their drinks, Peter’s glass absent of any alcohol despite how hard Clint tried. Sitting on Bruce’s left, the group turned to look at him, awaiting his turn.

“Never have I ever…” Peter hummed in thought, “sent a text to the wrong person.”

Steve was the only person not to drink his beer. Sam and Rhodey both looked at him incredulously.

“What? I don’t really use my phone.” Steve lowered his head in shame. “I don’t…really know how to.”

“That, I believe,” Tony muttered. “Never have I ever…broken a piece of furniture by sitting on it.”

“That’s not fair,” Bruce hesitated on drinking from his cup. “Hulk shouldn’t count in this game. I’m not drinking on that one.”

“Tisk tisk, you’re only lying to yourself, Bruce.” Natasha winked at him.

Clint grinned. “Never have I ever, broken the ‘5-second rule’,”

Both Steve and Peter sipped their drinks.

Natasha cringed. “Gross.”
“What?” Peter defended. “I haven’t gotten sick in like, over a year. I can handle the germs.”

Natasha laughed. “Still gross, baby spider.”

Sam looked over at Steve. “He’s a teenager — what’s your excuse?”

Steve shrugged. “Super-serum metabolism. I was raised in the 1930’s. You don’t let food go to waste just because it touched the floor. Like the kid said, when you can handle the germs…”

“You damn enhanced,” Rhodey mumbled.

“Careful there, Rogers,” Tony warned. “Helen could only do so much with your reinforced analgesic. Get too sick, and you’ll be one cranky Cap.”

Peter seemed both confused and interested. “What’s—what’s that? Reinforced…”

Bruce set his drink down and looked at Tony. “Actually, that’s something we should probably get started for Peter. I assume his metabolism is similar to Steve’s? If he’s going to be out in the field, we should make sure he has medicine that his body can properly metabolize.”

“You hear that?” Tony smirked at Peter. “Bruce wants you for a day so he can poke and prod you.”

Peter nervously gulped. “Oh. Fun.”

“It’s not bad. They only want to make sure they can treat you if they need to,” Clint reassured him. “Advil probably doesn’t do the trick anymore, does it?”

Peter shuddered — there were the homecoming memories again, rushing through his mind before he could block them off. He tried hid his pained expression behind his cup, taking a long drink of his soda while nodding his head.

“We’ll get it figured out,” Tony brushed him off. “Romanoff, your turn. And keep it PG-13.”

Natasha squinted her eyes his way. “I’m not the one who went straight to *never have I ever had a bedroom injury*, Stark.”

“That could go either way. It’s not my fault you have a dirty mind.”

Somewhere down the road, once the evening came and the moonlight began to shine through the skylight, someone had thrown out *never have I ever played truth or dare*, which of course, quickly transitioned into the game before any injections could be made.

Rhodey rolled his eyes, “When did we turn into a bunch of high-schoolers?”

“I blame the actual high-schooler,” Sam immediately responded.

Peter’s eyes went wide, and he shook his head in defensive.

“What? I haven’t even suggested these games!” he turned to Rhodey. “Mr. Rhodes, you’re the one who —”

Clint interrupted Peter, eager to start. “Truth or dare, Natasha.”

She smirked. “Why do I have a feeling you’re going to love this game.”

“Because I am," he quickly answered. "Now, truth or dare?”
“Dare.”

He paused, lips pursed in deep thought. “I dare you…to show us that ballerina side you hide away so well.”

Bruce sputtered on his drink, half expecting Natasha to pull her gun and shoot everyone dead to rid herself of any witnesses. Sam was already helping Clint move the coffee table out of the way, and Tony mumbled about breaking boundaries and ending up in coffins.

Natasha merely leaned back on the couch and shook her head. “That’s not something I need to do.”

Clint shrugged. “No, but you did pick dare…”

He gestured to the now open space. She didn’t budge. Bruce looked anxious, glancing between her and Clint as if awaiting one of them to start a fist fight.

She finally broke. “Okay. But only if someone joins me.”

“Who the fu—hell,” Sam corrected his language, “knows ballet well enough to do that?”

“I never said they have to know ballet. I just said they have to join me,” Natasha corrected him, her eyebrow confidentially quirked up.

The room was dead silent for a moment, eyes either locked on the floor or looking to the others waiting for someone to step forward.

“Alright,” Peter set his drink down. “I’m in.”

Half the room hollered in cheers, the other half laughed hysterically.

“Okay, who gave him liquid courage?” Rhodey joked.

“I’ve been trying!” Clint shouted over the laughter.

Tony stood back, doing his best to swallow his smile. “Kid, this is embarrassment you can avoid. I’d stand down if I were you.”

Peter shook his arms and jumped in the air to shake off his nerves. “Eh, twenty years from now I can say I danced with the Black Widow. Who am I to give up that?”

The moment Natasha joined him in the now empty space surrounded by couches, Peter immediately regretted his decision, feeling his heart drop down to his toes.

He didn’t even dance at homecoming. He danced alone, in his room, sometimes goofing off with Ned — holy crap, what was he doing? Sweat started to seep into his pores, and he miserably began to think of Aunt May throwing deodorant at him, her way of letting him know he stunk. Great, did he stink now?

Oh god, this was a bad idea.

“Music?” he squeaked with panic, looking to Natasha. “Can I put on some music?”

He was reaching for his phone before she had even agreed, nodding her head as she removed her high-heels. Unfortunately for him, Tony was one step ahead.

“FRIDAY,” he spoke to the ceiling, “play whatever latest pop crap is in right now.”
“Okay, uhm, actually — can I back out?” Peter turned to look at Clint. "Is it too late to back out?"

The music was already playing. Natasha laid a hand on his shoulder, smiling warmly.

“It’s easy. I’m only going to do a foutte spin. One foot spins, one kicks. Real easy. You seem agile, you’ll do fine.”

Peter nodded. “Okay…spin. I can do that. I spin — all the time. Just spin. Okay, I got this…”

His feet already barefoot, he cracked his neck and shook one more time, desperately trying to rid his nerves. They stood side by side with room for clearance, and he watched her intently to follow her moves. She lifted one foot up, went on her toes,

And then they spun.

And spun. And spun. And spun.

Peter hadn’t even realized Natasha had stopped until he was at least fifteen spins in, when his foot finally caught on the glossed, marble floor and he lost his balance, quickly falling into a side flip to regain his balance.

A small, hesitant round of applause greeted him. He gave a half-cocked smile, looking to his right at Natasha, who stood with her hands on her hips.

“Did I do it?”

She nodded, impressed. Peter grinned, so wide his white teeth began to sparkle.

Sam jumped from the couch and set his beer off to the side. “Alright, if Spider-boy can manage, it can’t be that hard.”

“He cracked his knuckles, shooing both Natasha and Peter out of the way. He was less graceful as he stood on the tips of his toes, unable to find balance before even spinning. It wasn't long before he stumbled to the side and completely collapsed onto the ground, his bottom hitting the floor with a loud thud.

Sam grunted as he sat on his knees, ignoring the laughs and mock applause from the others.

"Bravo!" Rhodey shouted.

"Magnifico!" Clint slow-capped.

Tony pointed in his direction. “Take this in, Parker. It won’t be all the time that the adult embarrasses themselves.”

“Shut up, Stark.” He pointed at both Peter and Natasha. “I don’t like spiders.”

Peter barked a laugh and shrugged innocently.

Natasha smirked. “One more, for good measure?”

Peter gestured to the open space. “After you.”

They managed to impress everyone with a few more spins, Peter’s awkward but awe-
inspiring agility stealing the room. With the lively music playing overhead, Natasha took the opportunity to teach Peter some dance moves, which Sam quickly butted in on, demanding he be able to show his own.

“Oh no, if we’re doing this, we’re doing it the right way,” he insisted. “Teach the kid real moves. Something that’ll get him all the ladies.”

Somewhere down the road, he found himself following dance steps from both Natasha, Sam, even Clint joining in briefly, while Steve insisted his dance moves were eighty-years out of date. It was probably the most fun and entertainment that the group had in a long time, especially since everything that had occurred with Ultron and the Accords.

Tony sat back and watched with amusement, occasionally snapping a photo and sending it Pepper’s way.

Eventually, the group dispersed. Rhodey had decided a while ago that he was going to dig deep into his government clearance for the Captain America public service announcements that were discussed earlier in the morning, leaving him busy on his laptop. Natasha and Bruce found a quiet corner talk in, and the others were scattered about relishing in their own discussions.

This left Peter alone on the sofa, where he scrolled mindlessly through his cell phone, occasionally texting Ned about how ‘friggin amazingly awesome’ his life had become. He was slightly surprised to feel the couch cushion sink in, and even more surprised to look up and see the young, red-haired woman sitting next to him.

Wanda smiled. “Hello.”

Peter laid the phone down in his lap, smiling in return. “Hey.”

Ever since the early morning, Peter had noticed she tended to gravitate heavily towards Vision, the red and blue android clearly providing a sense of comfort for her. Most of the evening they spent their time away from the others, discussing things privately on the far end of the room. Which was fine for Peter, but to see her suddenly so close to him, and without Vision nearby, left him feeling nervous.

“You did good job today,” Wanda told him.

He wasn’t sure what he was expecting her to say, but he dropped his shoulders in relief when he heard her speak. He figured this was an easy conversation to have.

“Yes, uh — thanks. Thanks,” Peter nervously pointed towards her. “You did good too. I mean, what you could. With…you know. But your powers are cool! They…seem like they could do a lot? I mean, they can. Do a lot. It’s just that — ugh.”

Scratch that. Not easy at all. Apparently, he was just awful at talking to any girl.

She smiled, the same smile he noticed early in the morning and late last night. The smile that said ‘I know something’ but wouldn’t go any further. The smile that, quite frankly, was beginning to creep him out.

Before he could reach for his phone as a distraction, she spoke up.

“I must be honest with you.”

He looked up, confused.
She readjusted herself on the couch. “Last night, I look in your head.”

Peter’s mouth opened and closed like a fish out of water, unsure of what to say.

“I…yeah,” he drawled out. “I caught onto that.”

Wanda frowned. “I did not mean any harm. I only desire to protect my family.”

Peter nodded. “Totally understand. It’s cool.”

His acceptance didn’t seem to make her feel better, in fact, she looked even more weighed down. Burdened, almost. “I need you to know, what I saw…it haunted me, all night,” Wanda’s face softened. “I am sorry for the pain in your life. I, too have suffered loss.”

Oh.

‘Ohhhh.’ Peter thought, everything clicking into place, the puzzle suddenly fitting together.

He had no idea what to say.

“Thanks?”

He winced internally, beating himself up for squeaking such a pathetic response.

Wanda didn’t seem to care. “I know you cannot bring them back. Every day I long for my brother, Pietro, though I know he is gone. And it hurts.”

Peter suddenly felt hot, his skin flushed and a little bit sweaty. He could only nod, unable to trust himself with a proper response. How do you even discuss something like this? He didn’t exactly have experience with super-powered Sokovians, let alone someone reading into his mind. The pain he hid away there — well, he hid it for a reason. His parents, Uncle Ben, the people he had failed…the days he failed himself.

They were raw emotions, tucked deep away where they couldn’t bother anyone else.

And she had seen it.

He suddenly felt extremely exposed, and incredibly nervous.

And yet she seemed at ease. “But you have strength that I do not,” Wanda went on to say. “You use your hurt to better others. You are brave, brave boy.”

He looked at her, the sincere smile growing on her face bringing one to his own. He nodded as an unspoken ‘thank you’, the lump in his throat too swollen to let him speak.

And then she stood up. “And you are growing — I get you food.”

She had walked away before Peter could protest, entering the kitchen where a smorgasbord of food was set out, grabbing a plate and piling it on.

Steve watched closely as Peter and Wanda spoke. His arms were crossed over his chest, leaning against the wall on the opposite side of the room. Though the faint sounds of music and other conversation kept him from hearing what they were discussing, he studied them conservatively and with a sense of interest.

It wasn’t long until Tony approached him, taking a stance next to him against the wall, his hands
deep in his pockets.

Steve ultimately broke his stare, head briefly falling to the floor. “He seems to be a hit.”

Tony clucked his tongue. “What can I say — I know how to pick ‘em.”

Steve had no place in arguing or denying the fact. He merely nodded, eyes lifting up to watch the boy across the room.

It was almost strange seeing him the way he was now, occupying himself with his phone, sitting awkwardly on the sofa. The prior evening was rough on them, the shock of a fresh-faced kid being recruited into their world of super-heroes, but since then it seemed he had easily chummed up with everyone on the team. Even Natasha, who Steve knew to be cold-hearted and detached, had quickly found a soft spot for him.

There was just no denying how easily he fit in. It was like he had always belonged with them.

“He did well out there today.” It was stating the obvious, and Steve knew that, but he wasn’t sure how else to say ‘sorry for getting passionate about things last night’.

“Yeah,” Tony agreed. “He really did.”

Sitting on the couch, scrolling through his phone, he seemed so young.

He was so young.

And yet his strength, eagerness, and bravery had shinned so brightly. Peter had proved himself more than once to the team, his enthusiasm easily making up for his bumbling flaws.

Steve uncrossed his arms. “You understand why I’m reluctant though, right?”

Tony nodded. “I do.”

There was a pause before Tony looked over at him. “Because I feel the same way.”

Twenty-four hours ago they were at each other’s throats, fighting over having recruited a child into their war. And for the most part, Steve stood by it - he was too young, he had too much of his life ahead of him and it wasn’t fair to him. Looking over at Tony, he realized that though they had been in a disagreement, their point of views were actually very similar.

It was always like that with Tony. On the same page, just a few paragraphs down.

“He’s going to do it either way though, Rogers,” Tony said. “Might as well equip him to do it right.”

And equipped he was. Steve watched first hand as the kid swung around today, over the bridge, onto the Quinjet, around the android — he was skilled, spider-bite or not. It wasn’t much different than the shield he carried on his back, a tool to aid him in his efforts.

“Kid’s got heart,” he said.

“Brains, too.” Tony chuckled. “Saved our asses back there on that bridge.”

Steve nodded, another fact he couldn’t deny. How many plans had they gone through before Peter’s finally worked? He thought it would be best that the kid stay on the bridge, start small — do an easy task like detour traffic. But low and behold, they needed him in the field all along. And
he handled the pressure like a champ.

Peter must have noticed them staring in his direction because he looked up, giving an awkward wave.

Steve saluted him back, all while telling Tony, “Keep him safe.”

Before Tony could respond, the vibration and noise from his cell phone cut through.

He dug out the device from his pants pockets to retrieve it and shrugged. “Big dogs. Gotta take it.”

Back in the kitchen, Sam leaned against the counter with a beer in his hand, watching as Wanda practically emptied their supply of food onto one single plate.

“You trying to be his big sister now or something?”

Her stare was red-hot and fierce, and he could have sworn he heard a growl from her as well.

He put up two open palms. “Whoa, chill there witch, I was joking.”

Wanda returned to the sofa with Peter, laying down the plate of a comically large mixture of food. Of the entire pile, she took one chip, nibbling on it softly.

“Do not let them bother you. They teased me when I joined as well,” she stated. “They do not take younger members too seriously.”

Peter perked up. “Oh yeah - what’s uh, how old are you?”

“I am twenty-two.”

“Oh.”

God, he really was the baby in this group. He took a handle of chips and shoved them in his mouth, hoping the food would make his awkwardness go away. For each bite he took, he scrolled through the touchscreen of his phone.

Wanda noticed and leaned over curiously. “What is that?”

Peter looked up. “This? Uhm, it’s a playlist of songs. My friend MJ synced up our music library. I’m looking to see what she added this weekend.”

She stared at his phone with interest, reading each song title as they passed by on the screen. It seemed like it would never end, the pages going on and on despite how fast he scrolled through. He had to have double the amount of music she had ever listened to in her entire life, all on one device.

“May I?”

Peter looked at her, noticing how she delicately pointed to the phone.

“Yeah, here.” He sat up slightly from the sofa, pulling out his tangled ear-buds from his back pocket, struggling briefly to pull them apart so Wanda could take one end while he used the other. His thumb scrolled through his phone until he landed on the song he wanted, tapping the screen and hitting play.
Wanda adjusted the earbud, holding it in place as if to better hear the music. It wasn’t even thirty seconds in until she grinned, her white teeth showing beneath her lips.

“I like this.” She nodded her head along to the beat. “I like this a lot.”

Peter smiled back. “Yeah? I’ll send you the playlist. It’s uh, it’s got a lot of good songs in it.”

Tony’s voice cut through their conversations, catching everyone’s attention as he re-entered the room.

“Just got a phone call from the lovely folks down at SHIELD.”

Rhodey looked up. “Something tells me they weren’t just checking in.”

“If only.” Tony sighed. “Reports came back on the Awesome Android.”

“Hey!” Peter grinned. “You used his name.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “Creature 151963-2861988.27 was a bit of a mouthful.”

“What’d they have to say?” Clint hit his cue stick on the pool table, knocking the balls around on the table.

Tony crossed his arms over his chest. “Property of OsCorp.”

The room fell silent, the shattering of billiard balls banging against each other echoing in the air. Those who had gone further away from the group immediately rejoined, some even putting their drinks down in serious-mindedness.

“OsCorp?” Rhodey repeated, looking up from his laptop.

“They’re claiming it was an experiment of theirs gone haywire. They accepted responsibility, promise to pay the fines — the whole nine yards,” Tony explained.

Bruce frowned. “You buy that? That — that it was an experiment gone haywire?”

“With OsCorp?” Tony scoffed. “Hell no. I wouldn’t buy their shit even if it was manure.”

“It’s interesting,” Vision spoke up, his calm demeanor breaking through. The group turned to look at him. “A creature who has the ability to absorb superhuman powers appears not long after your new device, The Chameleon helmet, has gone missing. Presumably at the hands of a man who could, possibly, teleport.”

Steve let out a low whistle. “That’s a lot of coincidences to string together.”

“You think OsCorp is at fault for stealing the helmet, Vis?” Natasha asked.

He shook his head. “I do not think so. I simply think it is odd. It does not…sit right with me.”

“Well, join the club there, buddy.” Tony let out a grunt as he sat down on the couch. “Nothing OsCorp does sits right with me.”

The group was so preoccupied with their conservation that no one noticed Peter sitting alone, staring at the back of his hand as if something would materialize. It was barely a year ago that his class took a field trip to OsCorp, and running his fingers along his skin, he could almost still feel the bump from the spider bite beneath his knuckles.
Just as he was about to speak up, his phone rang. May’s photo lit the screen, and he hastily retreated to a quiet area before answering the call.

“We still have to figure out where that helmet went,” Steve chimed in.

“And who this Mysterio creature is,” Sam shook his head, scoffing. “Everyone has to have a gimmick these days.”

“Hey, you think if we just smack him across his fish-bowl head,” Clint swung his cue stick in demonstration, “he’ll suffocate or some nonsense, like a fish out of water?”

Natasha furrowed her brows. “That’s implying he’s a fish.”

“He could be.” Clint shrugged. “I mean, we just fought a giant rock android. Who’s to say —”

Rhodey jumped up so quickly his leg braces knocked down the chair behind him.

“Found it!”

“Oh hell yes!” Sam jumped over the back of the couch and all but ran to where Rhodey was.

Natasha chuckled. “You guys are awful.”

Steve looked around, confused. “What’s going on?”

“You might want to call it a night,” she carefully warned him, standing from her own seat and casually making her way to the group that formed around Rhodey.

Approaching the others, cell phone in his hand, Peter awkwardly waved to get Tony’s attention.

“Actually, uhm, I uh — I need to call it a night myself, Mr. Stark. That was May…she wants me home.”

“Awww,” Clint whined, setting his beer on the table. “Well, if the kid is leaving, the party might as well be over with.”

Bruce made his way over. “This seems to be their grand finale here, Pete. Sure you don’t want to stay a little bit longer?”

Peter shook his head. “I’m good, really. I’m…sure I’ll be watching them again sometime this week.”

Steve’s face fell flat.


Peter sucked in his lips nervously. It wasn’t hard to remember that he swung all the way over here to begin with, crossing through the path of the Hudson River the best he could. He pointed to the doorway with his thumbs.

“You think Happy would be willing to drive me home?” he asked.

Tony waved a hand in the air, rising from the couch. “He’s been with Pepper all day dealing with this bridge incident. Despite what he thinks, I’m not the cruelest boss in the world.”

He was halfway out the door when Peter realized what was being implied. Unfortunately, it didn’t
register fast enough, and Tony turned around with a sense of impatience.

“I’m not giving you all night to say your goodbyes — come on, chop chop.” He clapped his hands together, urging him on.

Peter’s eyes went wide, and he scrambled on his feet. “Right, y-yeah, of course. Uhm, I gotta get my suit —”

Tony nodded his head down the hall. “Quarters are on the way to the garage. Let’s go.”

As Peter quickly addressed his goodbye, Tony pondered silently to himself. He couldn’t help but take in the oversized AC/DC shirt Peter still wore — his shirt, of course, the smell of palladium permanently embedded in the cotton material. His fingers tapped subconsciously on his chest, the habit from his arc reactor days never fading away.

He looked to the ceiling. “FRIDAY, while I’m thinking about it, put in an order for wardrobe attire. Mr. Parker’s size, casual and business, please. Have housekeeping stock his closet when it arrives.”

“Will do, boss.”

Peter had turned to leave when skinny arms wrapped around him tightly, his eyes going wide at the sudden hug from Wanda. Before he could even consider lifting his arms, she pulled away as quickly as she came.

“It was nice meeting you, Peter.” She squeezed his arm. “This is your home now too. Please, come visit again.”

Peter nodded. “Yeah, of course. And I’ll—I’ll send you that playlist.”

A roar of laughter filled the room, catching their attention. Off to the side, Sam was wheezing so hard he could barely breathe, while Steve was hiding in a corner with his face in his hands.

“Hi, I’m Captain America. And I’m here to talk to you about one of the most important weapon in any soldiers arsenal. Math.”

“Math!” Sam shouted, slapping his knee. “Stop right there, Ultron! Tell me what two plus two equals. Can’t? Ha! That’s because I have the power of — OW!”

Steve may or may not have stepped on Sam’s foot as he left the lounge area.

Tony wasn’t a chauffeur. Hell, half his life he had barely drove himself around. That’s where his money came into play. It was just the lifestyle he lived, and why he hired people like Happy Hogan. Still, he didn’t own handfuls of luxury cars for no reason. Sometimes a nice, quiet drive was a good way for him to wind down and think.

He relaxed behind the wheel of his Audi, keeping his speed reasonably between the highway limit and what could get him pulled over. After all, he assumed that’s what you did when you had kids in the car.
For the first thirty minutes, he was sure Peter hadn’t taken a breath in between words. He let the kid ramble on, excitedly discussing the day’s events as if he hadn’t been there himself.

“And then he was so small, Mr. Stark! How do you go from super big to super small? Well, not super small. He was average small. Kind of like Ant-Man. Hey, whatever happened to that guy?”

It wasn’t too long into their trip to Queen’s though that he fell quiet, and Tony briefly considered turning on music to fill the silence. Sparing a glance to the passenger’s seat where Peter sat, he ultimately decided against it.

“Damn, kid,” Tony muttered. “Talked yourself right to sleep.”

While he would have liked to believe as much, Tony knew better than that. He could see the day was wearing thin on Peter by the time the sun had set, the bags under his eyes growing darker with each hour. He had to wonder if the kid had even slept last night. Still, he kept up the facade well, eagerly talking to everyone like the energizer bunny he was. That was the thing with Peter — always moving, always bouncing and jittery.

Tony could only imagine how much adrenaline had pumped through the kid’s veins, between last nights adventure and then his geeky-self getting overwhelmed hanging out with the team. It had to be enough energy to fuel a third world country, and the crash was probably just as bad.

He looked back to the road, a soft sigh escaping his lips. He wasn’t sure how or when he got into this situation, but deep down inside, he knew it didn’t bother him. The fact it didn’t bother him probably bothered him, but he’d deal with that another time.

The kid did good today. He did better than good, he did great — fantastic, amazing even, this little amazing Spider-man saving the day like a pro. It was like a sense of pride that bubbled within him over the fact, happy to see him excel so wonderfully at the crazy job he was thrown into.

He knew Peter had it within him, to be the hero, to be better than he was. He just needed the guidance. It was something Howard Stark failed to provide him. His father gave him all the money in the world but he never had the guidance he needed. It took Afghanistan for Tony to realize he needed to be his own light in the darkness.

Looking over at Peter again, Tony softened. He didn’t know what it was about the teenager that drew him in like a magnet. All he needed was an extra hand in Berlin, something to convince Rogers that he was off his rocker and needed to come to his senses. They should have parted ways after that, there was no reason for him to become so connected. And yet half his year was spent focused on the Spider-kid —

No.

Peter.

He was focused on Peter.

It was almost as if they were one in the same. Two damaged souls just trying to make the world a better place, so their pain wouldn’t be experienced by anyone else. He shouldn’t be getting so close. People close to him got hurt — he hurt those close to him. It was instinct by this point, the toxic, inevitable nature within him that he couldn’t shake. And now Peter was close — he was close to the team, his life, his world — it was asking for trouble.

Somehow, along the journey he had taken as Iron Man, this fifteen-year-old kid looked up to him. He was a role model now, and he didn’t understand what to do with that. There wasn’t anything
good to look up to, if anything, he was the example of what not to do. But he did, Peter admired him and it kind of made Tony sick to his stomach, for more reasons than just the sappiness behind it.

Being Iron Man, flying in the skies, saving the world, that seemed like a piece of cake compared to this. There wasn’t a playbook on how to mentor a teenager — scratch that, a teenage superhero. The most he could do was try. It led him to all sorts of headaches, frustration, and stress but he owed it to the kid to at least try.

He owed it to himself.

“Is it worth it, Tony?” Steve asked. “Is he worth it?”

The procession of streetlights and passing cars illuminated his face, shinning inside just long enough for Tony to see Peter curled up in the leather seat, head lolled to the side as his arms clutched the bag that contained his spider-suit. His mouth was slightly ajar, light snores sneaking out with each breath he took.

Yeah, Tony decided. He’s worth it.

Chapter End Notes

*goes for bag of cotton candy*

Oh no.

*shakes empty bag*

Oh no, guys.

I’m all out of fluff.

(◉‿◉)
Shout out to AtiliaDawnBlack for the Natasha “shank in his sleep” threat.

An FYI - If you think I’m being a cop out with Nanites, you are 100% correct. They have become my go to for “there’s no way science can properly explain this, so I’m falling back on this as my excuse for everything.” Sort of like vibranium, it just *exists* as what it is, and we don’t question it too much. I’ll more than likely throw in some science mumbo jumbo lingo to make everything seem plausible, but I’m fully aware that it’s just not. Which is why I love fiction and comic books so much - a whole new world for you to explore with little limitations!

Remember back in chapter 7 I had mentioned I’m way too accurate with real world locations? Still a habit I have yet to break. Only difference here is St. Anne’s is a brick concert venue as opposed to the beaten up abandoned warehouse I made it out to be. Main Street Park is a gorgeous place to visit if you’re ever in that area, by the way!

Fun Nerdy Facts!:

Mark 37 is, in fact, the Bleeding Edge armor, aka the nanotech armor Tony uses in Infinity Wars. Yes, it will come into play in this story, down the road. I will be honest now, the IronSpider suit more than likely won’t make an appearance, though I have planned a reference at the ending. But we’re not even through segment 2 yet - sit back, kick up your feet, relax! We have plenty of time to go until the end.

And just remember…

This is what you came here for.

(and if you’re nervous, re-read the tags)

Tony knew he was ignoring the problem. He also knew that by ignoring the problem it wouldn’t make it go away, contrary to how hard he tried. There was something incredibly blissful about sticking his head in the sand though, especially after having what he could easily call a good time with the team.

They hadn’t laughed that much in months. It was like a renewed sense of energy that sparked between them all, and he wouldn’t deny he was prolonging the inevitable by keeping his mouth shut.

Unfortunately for him, the issue wasn’t exactly one hundred percent secret. As hard as he tried, it was eventually brought to his attention again.

Rhodey slowly sat down on the red leather couch, his leg braces whirring at the movement. “Maybe we’re over-thinking it. Who’s to say it’s really that important?”
Himself and Bruce were sitting in the lounge area of the Avenger’s facility, Tony across from them leaning against the metal railing that led to the floor below. He seemed less than interested in the conservation, all but vocalizing his extreme annoyance at being pulled away from his other duties.

Bruce frowned. “He brought me back from outer space so I could tell Tony. I…think it’s pretty significant.”

Tony casually waved a dismissive hand. “If it were that significant, he would have taken the time to explain the damn cryptic message.”

While neither men could argue with the fact, it didn’t take away from the severity of the situation. At least not for them. Tony insisted all was okay until, well, it wasn’t. Rhodey wasn’t thrilled with that mantra.

Bruce looked over his shoulder and towards the stairway banister. “What about the chameleon helmet? The one you said was stolen.”

“Yeah, I’ve got my guys on it,” Tony answered, "but they still haven’t latched onto a lead.”

“No, not that.” Bruce turned further around on the sofa to face him. “The helmet has replication ability, right? What if that’s what he meant by ‘nothing is what it seems.’ Someone having that type technology, there’s no way to tell who they really are, right?”

By now, that same thought had already crossed his mind a few times. It just wasn't one he lingered on. Tony crossed his arms over his chest, humming in consideration.

“I don’t like it,” Rhode adamantly insisted. “I think you need to get the others involved in this.”

He looked Tony’s way, a typical Rhodes ‘this is serious, and you need to take it seriously’ expression heating up the room. As usual, Tony disagreed, shaking his head and unfolding his arms, all while making his way to the couches.

“Not yet,” he argued, sitting down on one of the sofa’s. “Give it time, I just dropped a bombshell on everyone with Parker.”

“That was last weekend, Tones,” Rhodey argued.

Tony narrowed his eyes. “And the Accords was months ago, but you don’t see shining rainbows around here yet, do you?”

A flash of contorted, heavy pain spread across Tony’s features and left almost as quickly as it arrived. Bruce looked back and forth between both men, understandably clueless for the animosity that burned between them.

“I — I don’t know what went on while I was…gone,” he stammered, still unsure of how to describe his year-long adventure in space. “But everyone seems to be fine with Peter around. I don’t think that’s a problem anymore, certainly not right now.”

Tony let loose a scoff from deep in his chest. “I’m sleeping with one eye open in case Romanoff shanks me in my sleep for recruiting, in her terms, a child soldier.”

“You’re overreacting,” Rhodey said. “The kid’s been here practically every day this week chumming it up with everyone. Even Natasha has a soft spot for him.”

Bruce nodded in agreeance. “He’s nice. Sweet boy, very talkative, very —”
“Nerdy?” Tony finished.

“Eager.” Bruce went on to say. “Steve and Natasha have had him all week for training, but once I get a chance I’d like to get him into the laboratories, run some test —”

“Poke and prod, got it.” Tony knew exactly what Bruce was going to say. Instead of engaging, he leaned back into the couch with ease, pointing to the scrap piece of paper on the frosted glass coffee table in front of them. “Let’s poke and prod this first though, shall we?”

He had written it a thousand times now, the paper trashed no sooner than it took him to jolt it down. Sometimes he even found himself scribbling it on a dry erase board before immediately smearing it away with his bare fingers. He was a visual person, someone who needed to see something to understand it. Despite how deeply it was stuck in his mind, he continued to write it down, re-reading the message as if it would make things clearer.

It didn’t.

The words had begun to lose their meaning and morph into a sentence of nonsense. He was starting to feel like he was wasting his time and energy on the matter, and if it weren’t for Rhodey and Bruce —especially the latter, he wouldn’t be giving it a second thought. But they insisted he focused on it. While Rhodey was curious, Bruce was more unnerved than either of them, deeply disturbed over the incident.

Rhodey spoke up, “Don’t forget about the OsCorp tech that’s been on the loose.”

“Awesome Android?” Bruce furrowed his brows with confusion. “That was one creature. Unless — unless there’s been more I don’t know about.”

Tony shook his head. "Nope, just the rock head. Though over the weekend I did have FRIDAY do some digging on them."

He reached in his front blazer pocket for his cell phone and swiped the touchscreen with his finger. With a hard shake towards the empty space between the couches, a large, holographic image spread out in front of them.

“They’ve been working on technological dampeners for the past three years.”

It was pages among pages of detailed project data, so much that Tony couldn’t keep up with what he scrolled through.

Bruce leaned forward, elbows on his knees with a sense of fascination. While he worked mainly with biochemistry experiments, and Stark Industries focused on mechanical technology, OsCorp Industries was a research corporation. And a sketchy one at that. They weren’t surprised to see an array of under-the-table experimentation programs funded by then, a handful already shut down by higher government officials.

Tony said it before and wouldn’t hesitate to say it again — he wouldn’t trust OsCorp if his life depended on it.

Rhodey hummed out loud. “The security feed shut off of the night the chameleon helmet was stolen.”

“And Times Square went dark the night before,” Tony added.

Bruce creased his forehead with confusion. “My-mysterio? You think it’s the crazy magician?”
Rhodey wouldn’t say for sure, not without valid proof. He was like that, he needed something damning to solidify his opinion. Tony, on the other hand, had enough evidence in his hands to make the fish-bowl criminal one problematic target.

“He lets out this smoke. A fog,” Tony explained. “Once he does, everything that has a chip, battery or LED screen attached to it shuts down like a new play on Broadway.”

Bruce shook his head, “That — that doesn’t make any sense, Tony. Fog is vapor water. Tiny liquid droplets suspended in the air, there’s no way it could interfere with technology like that.”

Scientifically speaking, Bruce was right. Tony tapped on his chest, empty of an arc reactor, and clucked his tongue in thought. A beat of silence passed before he straightened his posture on the sofa and snatched the scrap piece of paper from the table.

“I’ve been working a lot with nanotechnology lately,” Tony started. “The helmet - that’s nanorobots working on a molecular surface-bound level. I even have a new suit in the works. Mark 37, pure nanites, head to toe. My goal is to have the nano-machines create a second layer of artificial muscle over my body, which the Iron Man armor and additional structures can be assembled to.”

Rhodey seemed at a loss. “What’s your point, Tony?”

“If there’s any trace element of nanites in that fog he releases, and if those nanites contain technological dampeners —”

Tony was interrupted by a shrill alarm that blared through the compound, the ceiling fixtures blinking red and white like a strobe light, the sound so piercing he briefly had to cover his ears.

“Deactivate alarm, code 19633,” he instructed to FRIDAY.

Rhodey looked to his left where Bruce sat, immediately jumping from his spot on the couch as quickly as he leg braces would allow him. His actions were so swift, it was almost as if Bruce had caught fire.

He might as well have been. Tony looked over, catching sight of a green tinge spreading across the scientist’s neck.

“Whoa…” Rhodey stepped back, one leg at a time.

Tony looked over at the two, quick to notice the change of color in Bruce’s skin. His face fell faster than a corpse in cement boots.

“Easy, Bruce. Easy.” He slowly and carefully walked towards the couch, two hands up in the air with caution.

With the alarms shut off and the lights back to normal, Bruce was able to take a deep and calming breath, though his expression remained hardened and writhed. It took a few seconds, but the green that spread across his neck began to disappear below his button-down shirt.

“I’m good. I’m fine,” Bruce insisted, his words harsh and mumbled. “What’s going on?”

It was a good question. Tony exchanged a brief glance with Rhodey before he looked to the ceiling for answers.

“FRI?”
“There is an attack currently taking place in Brooklyn on Main Street Park. State officials have already shut down traffic on both the Manhattan and Brooklyn Bridge due to an influx of sentient species.”

His eyes rolled so hard he could have sworn they almost popped out from their sockets. Tony rubbed his temples with frustration. “Christ, we were better off staying in the city.”

“Species? As in plural?” Rhodey asked, looking up to the ceiling.

“That is correct. SHIELD has been alerted and is requiring your immediate attention in this matter.”

“Bring up visual,” Tony demanded, arms crossed over his chest.

The screen appeared before them within milliseconds, a holographic image displaying what the local news captured via helicopter in the sky above. As the AI had stated, both bridges were shut down, an array of traffic blocked for miles past the highway.

If they didn’t look close enough, they could have easily assumed there was an infestation of flying bugs surrounding the outer skirts of Brooklyn. It was like watching some twisted infestation movie, swarms of flying creatures surrounding the entire area, more than he could keep track of.

But they only needed one close up to realize what the real problem was.

“That’s…” Bruce gaped, rising from the sofa.

The breath knocked straight out of Tony's lungs. He nodded sharply, his eyes wide in horror.

“Chitauri.”

The word was bitter on his tongue, his heart skipping a beat hearing it exit his throat.

Watching the display, they could see the area was already in a panic, civilians running indoors to protect themselves from the winged creatures. They weren’t the same as six years ago — no, this was different, someone had done something to them.

Someone had tampered with them.

The very idea made Tony sick to his stomach. He was already halfway down the stairs when he spoke again. “FRIDAY, send out an urgent message to all team members. We need all hands on deck.”

“Yes, boss.”

He made a beeline for the hangar, his feet not taking him to the Quinjet fast enough.

“...so the killing of the Czar could have some elements of payback or punishment for his responsibility for the death or banishment of thousands, but the real motivation to kill not only Nicholas Romanov but his whole family is likely found in the desire to secure the revolution —”
Peter’s head shot up from his desk before anything had happened, the hair on his arms going stick-straight at the oncoming sense of trouble. Not a second later did a piercing beep sound from his cell phone.

Ms. Warren turned from the chalkboard, seemingly annoyed. “Cell phones off during finals. I won’t tell you again.”

Peter hastily nodded, all while attempting to turn off the alarm that blared from his phone.

The problem was — he didn’t know what the alarm was for. Or how it got on his phone. Or how to turn it off. It was loud, annoying, screeching and he never remembered programming it.

Ned looked his way, both worried and confused, mouthing ‘dude…you cool?’

Peter shrugged, completely baffled. It took trial and effort to turn off the sound, hitting everything on and around the cell phone to get it to quiet. He was all but ready to turn the damn thing off when a message scrolled across his screen.

“This is urgent, Underoo’s. Brooklyn, Main Street Park.”

Holy crap.

Peter gawked at the phone like it was a foreign object, all common sense and normal brain function exiting his body, an overload of sheer excitement replacing his train of thought. He was being summoned for another mission. A mission he was called to. By the Avengers. To fight with the Avengers.

Holy crap.

He grabbed his backpack and books, rushing out the door before he could say a word.

Unfortunately, Ms. Warren was quick to stop him.

“Excuse me, Mr. Parker.” Her tone was harsh and cold. “And where are you going? This midterm counts for half of your semester’s grade.”

Peter stopped in his tracks, one foot out the door and the other stretched out mid-run. His mouth opened and closed, his thumb pointing out into the hallway.

“I, uhm…I…”

Ned shot up from his desk. “Peter has diarrhea!”

Flash burst into laughter, a few students around him quick to do the same.

Peter looked at Ned with a glare that could kill. “Dude…” he hissed.

“Oh my god, that’s priceless!” Flash cackled hysterically. “Parker has the poops! Oh no, better go get those squirts out, poopy Parker!”

Peter was positive his face had turned the same shade as his Spider-man costume. Ned slowly sat back down in his chair, offering an apologetic shrug of sorts while Flash continued to howl with laughter.

Ms. Warren tossed a hall-pass his way.

“Please return it, Peter,” she mumbled, turning back to the chalkboard without saying another
Peter rolled his eyes and shook his head, trying to ignore the classroom’s ridicule as he jogged out into the hallway.

“Poopy Parker! Poopy Parker!” Flash chanted between laughs.

Across the classroom and in the very back, MJ furrowed her brows, her chin leaning into the palm of her hand.

“Jesus, Flash,” she said. “Are you six? My nephew behaves better than you and he's a toddler.”

Okay, that’s enough, class! Focus.” Ms. Warren turned around to face them. “As I was saying, the revolutionaries, if they wanted their way, had to remove the Romanov lineage. Tsar Nicholas was considered an incompetent ruler, but history will teach us that Olga, Tatiana, Maria, Anastasia and Alexei, even his wife Alexandra did not deserve to be killed. They were innocent, caught in the midst of trouble only because of Tsar's namesake…”

Peter’s dirty Nikes came screeching to a halt in the hallway of the school, where he lifted an entire row of lockers with his one hand. In one swift movement, he ripped his backup out from underneath and let the lockers drop back down the floor. His feet stumbled out the two double doors to the school, tripping momentarily before he jogged down each step with rapid speed.

The Quinjet arrived in Brooklyn in record time. The hardest part was landing the aircraft somewhere that non-flying team members could escape from. The entire area was swarmed with mass-produced alien tech, creating a jungle-like atmosphere in the city.

Natasha, Clint, and Wanda were already rolling out in the reinforced jeep, the tires screeching through the park and onto cement ground where they pulled up near the Brooklyn Bridge promenade. The game-plan was discussed briefly and quickly on the ride over. They established that they needed to prevent any deformed Chitarui from entering the city, and in no time Wanda had already set up a force field.

Steve revved the engine to his motorcycle, the rumble of the straight pipes to the bike underwhelming in comparison to Hulk’s roar. Above both of them, Iron Man, War Machine, Falcon, and Vision took off in the skies.

The Chitarui heads were quick to attack.

“Anyone else having deja vu?” Tony shot his repulsor beam at the flying creature that came at him, and then two more on his left side.

“You remember the attack on New York as well as Natasha remembers Budapest.” Clint pulled back on an arrow and shot it at the offending creatures.

Rhodey fired his repulsor beams, one after another. “What info have we gotten?”

“Not much.” Natasha spun to the side as she shot her Glock. “Chitarui, if you hadn’t caught on yet.”
“These aren’t Chitarui,” Steve quickly bit back. "Not in the sense of what we fought six years ago.”

In the skies above, Vision flew in a straight line. The stone embedded in his head let out a single stream of energy, splitting the creatures in half. They dropped to the ground with no resistance, sparks of electricity burning the grass below.

Sam soared around him, a gun held tightly in each hand, shooting as they came into his path. “Whatever they are, they’re creeping me out,” he muttered, stopping only to reload his guns.

Vision swooped around both Tony and Rhodey, the beam of light surrounding them.

“Mr. Rogers appears to be correct. These Chitarui are not acting on their own accord. Monitoring their behavior, they seem to be following a programmed protocol.”

Iron Man shot down below, his repulsor beams sputtering as he came to a stop and skidded on the ground. Panicked civilians still ran in the park, struggling to find shelter while above him the Manhattan Bridge was evoked with honking horns.

He picked up a discarded Chitarui head, still somewhat intact after having taken a bullet from Falcon. He turned it over and grimaced. It was almost identical to the monsters that haunted his dreams, the gray plating of their skin and golden helmet locked on their head still as vivid as ever.

The only difference was the mechanical wings attached to both sides, reminding him distinctly of Roman empire gear. Or Thor. What he wouldn’t give to have the God of thunder around right now.

“They’re modified,” Tony stated.

Across the way near the Manhattan Bridge, Clint scoffed, pulling an arrow from his back. “What gives that away?”

Tony tossed the disfigured head and lit his engines to fly back into the skies. “Well, for one, the lack of a body is a dead ringer.”

Sam swirled in the air, on his back momentarily while he shot four rounds of ammo at each target. “The whole flying head thing? It’s seriously creeping me out.”

Steve ripped his shield from the front of his motorcycle. The bike soared down the park with his arm extended out and the shield knocked down a row of the Chitarui heads that fluttered in the air.

“I don’t understand — Stark, you had your own personal clean-up crews rid the entire city of anything that was left behind.” Steve jumped off his bike and swung his shield out in front of him, a sound similar to bowling pins being knocked down ringing in his ears.

Tony blasted away an oncoming swarm. “This wouldn’t be the first time someone got their dirty hands on alien tech.”

His shield came back into his grip like a boomerang, and Steve paused for a moment with a deep, frustrated sigh. “More secrets?”

Tony flew above and past him in the sky. “Not a secret. A situation that was taken care of, by Spider-kid no less. Someone smuggled alien tech before. I wouldn’t be too surprised if they did it again.”

Distracted by the crowd of oncoming Chitarui heads that were approaching his way, Tony blasted
one repulsor after the other, each hand working overtime in an attempt to clear his path. He hadn’t even noticed the horde that was coming from behind him.

That was, until, a distinct *THWIP* vibrated in his eardrum.

Iron Man spun around. His repulsor beams lifted him in the air as he watched a Chitarui head whirl in the sky, attached to a spider-web that ultimately hurled it onto the ground like a celebratory football.

Spider-man landed on the nearest light post, punching another Chitarui that attacked his right side.

“Whoa, this is trippy, Mr. Stark!” Peter hollered, his free hand throwing a web grenade at a crowd that came directly at Tony. The sticky substance balled them together.

“Speak of the devil.” Tony hovered over to him. “Thanks for showing up, kid.”

“Yeah, no problem!” Peter grinned beneath the mask. “Hey, what’s with these guys? It’s a little early for Halloween tricks, don’t you think?”

“They’re reassembled Chitarui parts,” Tony explained. “Smash ‘em and trash ‘em, got it?”

Peter shot a strand of webbing to the nearest and highest object he could, leaping off the lamp post and into the air with ease.

“Easy enough!” He latched onto another head, once again swinging it around in the air before letting it go. “Mr. Rhodes, batter up!”

Above him in the sky, War Machine turned around to see an incoming projectile heading his way. His repulsor beam easily blasted the alien tech into pieces.

While the offending creatures were contained from going any further into the city — Wanda doing the best she could to surround the basic perimeter in her force field — it didn’t stop the conflict from turning into chaos. The once bright green grass was littered with metal pieces, piling up the more they destroyed. The once beautiful park was quickly starting to take on the appearance of a dirty landfill.

Natasha and Clint stayed stationed in the jeep, only moving it when necessary — like when Natasha put the gears in reverse and crunched over a handful of nasty flying heads. Wanda focused on keeping the force field up, only to be distracted when swarms of creatures attacked her, causing her to send out energy in an effort of protecting herself.

Captain America’s shield roamed the park like a boomerang, and above him, Sam and Vision worked to get the creatures out of the sky. Rhodey and Tony were back to back, repulsor beams shooting out faster than they could think.

And Peter was essentially playing baseball with Hulk.

“Whoo-hoo!” he shouted, swinging another head in the air. “Fly ball!”

Hulk let out an angry roar, catching the Chitarui head with ease and squeezing it within his giant, green hands to feel it crunch into pieces. For each that was sent his way, he looked at Spider-man with anticipation of another. Peter was almost positive Hulk was enjoying this.

Steve zipped past them both on his bike before skidding to a halt. His shield came back to him just as quickly and he latched it onto the front of the Harley. From over the Manhattan Bridge and to
the Brooklyn Bridge, he could see Wanda struggling to keep her force field up, the glowing red flickering before dimming out. The three were being ambushed, a need to fend off the creatures now their priority.

“We need to keep these things from entering the city,” Steve urged, revving up his motorcycle again.

“Hulk is doing a pretty good job at that!” Peter shouted, swinging multiple Chitarui heads to Hulk, where he tossed each onto the ground. He beat his chest with a roar afterward, a somewhat sadistic grin on his face.

Natasha grunted over the comms. “They haven’t passed Anchorage Plaza yet, Clint and I will block their path there.” Gunshots rang out from her Glock before the engine of the jeep roared to life.

In the skies, the four flying Avengers were surrounded, each Chitarui head they took down being replaced by two more. Tony and Rhodey could barely move, each still back to back in an effort to fend off the flying creatures. Vision soared past them all but even he couldn’t seem to contain the madness.

“These things just don’t stop coming.” Sam was pulled down to the ground, a horde attaching to his left wing and he landed with a thud, shooting at the heads with asperity.

“I’m going to scan the skies to try and find a point of origin,” Tony said. “FRIDAY, give me a boost.”

His engines lit and lifted him high into the air, faster than Rhodey could react. He was far above the team and Chitarui within seconds, towering over both bridges and then some.

Seeing it from high above left a troubling feeling to settle in his gut. His scanners lit online and began to roam across the entire area but from his visual standpoint, there was no telling where the reassembled alien tech was coming from. All he knew was that they had easily doubled in size since the team had arrived.

Multiple Chitarui heads latched onto both the front and back wheels of Steve’s motorcycle and he came to a crashing stop, stumbling off the bike and rolling onto the ground.

“Stark, we can’t keep holding them off, we need that location!” he hollered, rising from the ground and grabbing his shield.

In the air, Tony shook his head, his eyes reviewing his HUD screen with frightful confusion. “It doesn’t make any sense. I’m not picking anything up.”

Clint dived into the back of the jeep to re-stock his arrows, narrowly missing a gunshot that whizzed past his ear when Natasha shot an attack heading his way.

“Well, it’s not like they’re just falling from the sky.” Clint shoved the arrows into the quiver on his back. “Not this time.”

Peter web-slung a batch of Chitarui heads into the sky. Hulk leapt to the side to catch each one that came his way, clapping them between his hands as if they were bugs. Which, in their current state, Peter noted they highly reassembled. He was about to shoot another spider-web out when his muscles tightened in anticipation, the back of his neck buzzing like crazy.

His body instinctively turned to his right, his eyes latching onto a warehouse down the road not
even a quarter of a mile away. It sat close to the underneath of the Brooklyn Bridge and despite the
destruction that surrounded him, he focused on it with shining clarity. He had been Spider-man
long enough to know when to listen to his spider-sense.

Peter turned back to Hulk. “Gotta do a hit and run, big guy. You’re doing great, keep smashin’!”

Hulk roared in response, attacking the Chitarui that came his way. Meanwhile Peter latched two
spider webs onto the bridge and hauled himself into the air, swinging past the team, the park, and
the horde of creatures that flew around them.

In the skies, while his HUD still scanned for any source that could provide them help, Tony
watched as Spider-man swung away from the others.

“Parker, you’re going too far out from the perimeter,” he warned.

“I know.” Peter winced his choice of words, quick to finish speaking before Tony could throw a
sarcastic retort his way. “I need to check this out, something’s wrong!”

Steve slammed his shield against the attacking swarm. “Soldier, stand down. We need you in the
field!”

“Check what out?” Tony swooped down from the skies, intending to hover his way to Peter if it
weren’t for the ambush of Chitarui that blocked his path. “I’m not picking up anything on the
scans.”

Peter was already long gone, having made his way past down the street until he landed with a
thud on the rooftop of the old, beaten down building.

“Uh, St. Anne’s, I think?” he quickly climbed down the building, his finger pads sticking to the
crumbling wood like glue. He wasn’t even on the ground yet when he heard the crying from
inside, his ears perking up to the sound like a dog. “There’s someone in trouble. I’ve gotta help
them!”

Tony went to bite back with an argument but he was smacked in the temple by a clutter of Chitarui
heads. He shot out a repulsor beam, sending them away.

Across the way on the Brooklyn Bridge, now closest to where Peter was, Natasha pressed her
comm heavily into her ear. “Tony, that warehouse is abandoned property. He —”

Her voice cut out, gunshots ringing in its place.

Tony’s own repulsor blasts filed his ears. “Let him go, he might be onto something! We need a
refuge area and if people are retreating there, he can start up a command center. Kid’s perfect with
looking out for the little guy.”

Sam’s falcon wings roared to life and he shot to the sky with a handful of creatures clinging to his
legs.

“Yeah? Well, what about the not-so-little guy? ‘Cause I could use a hand over here!”

Within seconds an arrow latched onto his wings, a concussive blast sending the swarm of flying
heads off his body. Startled, Sam looked up and across the way at the Brooklyn Bridge. The HUD
in his red goggles zoomed in to the bridge where Clint waved in his direction, smug smile and all.

“Not what I meant,” he grumbled, flying away. “But it works.”
The warehouse was so old and beaten up that Peter had to crawl through a second story window to get through. Breaking away the wooden panels that blocked his path, he was shocked the city hadn’t demolished the building yet, its structure barely standing as it was.

“Hello!?” he hollered, hands cupped around his mouth. “Is anyone in here!? Do you need help!?” Peter’s shouts were only matched with an echo of his voice. He scratched his head, realistically only scratching the top of his Spider-man mask, and turned around with confusion.

“Karen?” he asked his AI. “You can scan things too, right? Can you scan the building?”

“Absolutely, Peter,” she responded, buzzing to life a scanning feature from his suit.

Peter continued to explore the vastly large warehouse, from the ceilings down to the bottom floor. The middle ground was so unstable with falling floorboards that he relied heavily on his sticky fingers and feet to guide him between. While Karen scanned for any signs of life, he pondered on with confusion. His spider-sense had definitely led him here. And unless he needed to get his hearing checked — which he was confident he didn’t — he heard someone crying inside.

“There is an apparent temperature difference on the far right corner of this building, Peter. I have mapped it out on your HUD screen.”

Peter dropped from his spider-web and landed on the ground, immediately walking towards the other side of the warehouse.

“But no people?” He spun around as he walked, double checking his surroundings. “I could have sworn I —”

Before he could say another word and before Karen could answer him, he came face to face with the ‘apparent temperature difference’ that his AI spoke of. And boy was it a sight.

“Whoa…”

In front of him, filling the corner of the warehouse from bottom to almost the top, was a pile of Chitarui heads, all unmoving and seemingly disabled. They were blocked off by numerous pillars of wood, and Peter wondered if he’d have even noticed had it not been for Karen pointing it out.

Peter pressed a finger to his ear. “Uh, guys — I mean, Avengers — team?”

Steve spoke through the comms, “Spit it out, son.”

“I think I just found where they’re coming from.” He walked a little closer to the pile, examining it with a curious fascination.

Gunshots, repulsor beams, and roaring engines filled his ears, the fight on the other side seemingly getting worse.


“Yeah…” Peter drawled out. “A whole crapload of them.”

“Not possible,” Natasha shouted over the blaze of weapons. “We’re on the bridge a few feet away from that building. There are no signs of Chitarui exiting from there.”

“I don’t know how they’re getting out, but they’re definitely here.” Peter loaded his web-shooters
up with fresh cartridges. “I’m going to contain them.”

Tony fought off the swarm surrounding him. “Hold up, kid, you need backup.”

“I got this, Mr. Stark!”

“Doesn’t matter. I’m heading your — shit!”

As if the chaos wasn’t enough, the moment Peter shot his webbing onto the enormous pile of reassembled Chitarui heads, loud explosions crackled through his comm and screams from outside overwhelmed his senses.

“Shit!” Clint cursed.

“When the hell did they start exploding!?” Sam shouted.

Steve rolled onto the ground, covering himself with his shield. “Wanda, do not let that force field down!”

“I am trying!” she yelled back.

Rhodey soared through the air. “Tony, it’s like fourth of July down there —”

“I see that!” Tony grunted, dodging explosions in the sky. “Vision, get everyone on the Brooklyn Bridge back to the jet!”

In the skies, Rhodey was already letting out a stream of foam to contain the fire, the white chemicals dousing the ground like a blanket of snow. The mass amount of alien parts that surrounded them made it nearly impossible to control the damage though, and his suit only held so much extinguisher as it was.

Tony followed his lead, the repulsor beams that once shot blasts of ammo now raining down fire extinguisher to keep the flames from getting any worse. Unfortunately, it wasn’t long until either of them ran out of their supply, and the explosions continued.

Hulk stood over Captain America, roaring with each explosion that hit his back, protecting the smaller man with his massive body.

“Boss, scanners have acquired new findings.”

Tony couldn’t have been more annoyed. “I swear to god, FRIDAY, if you tell me what I already know —”

“There is an increasing heat signature of alarming concern originating from .06 miles away, east of the Manhattan Bridge and your current location.”

“Yeah?” Tony scoffed. “And there’s a lot of concerning heat signatures around me right now, so —”

“Boss, the heat signature is reaching dangerous atmospheric pressure. Thermal scanners are picking up signs of pure fusion weaponry detonated to explode if temperatures exceed safe levels.”

Tony froze. The engines from his feet became the only thing keeping him stable in the air. “Point six miles…bring it up on the HUD.”
Within a millisecond the screen inside his helmet lit to life, a map guiding his eyes in the direction of —

Alarms went off, obnoxious red blinking in his vision, his HUD becoming a light show of warning signals. Visuals showed a blueprint outline of the Spider-man suit, and his eyes flickered over the distress signal with overwhelming panic.


He had already taken off from the others. “Pete, you gotta retreat.”

“What!? But I’ve almost —”

“That’s an order, kid. Get out!”

Tony didn’t need his AI to connect the dots for him. Peter was in the location of the impending explosion. If he had to take a guess, the ‘crapload’ of Chitarui he had come across was ready to detonate like the ones surrounding them. And even if he still had fire extinguisher left in his suit, it wouldn’t be enough to tame that kind of explosion.

He was halfway out of the park when a dozen disgusting flying Chituari heads floated in his path, all detonating at the same time. He was thrown back from the impact.

“Heat signature reaching critical levels. Explosion imminent.”

“Shit — someone needs to get to St. Ann's, now!” Tony fought to clear his path, his own suit blistering hot from the flames.

“We’re surrounded up here, Tones!” Rhodey shouted back, both him and Sam struggling to stay afloat in the air while steering clear of the explosions.

Hulk roared in response.

Steve grimaced at the sound that blasted into his ears. “I’m grounded, Stark — I won’t make it!”

“Goddammit it!” Tony fought to find a path, each turn he took dazzling in flames. Even when he flew straight through it, the explosions somehow found a way to toss him ten feet back. It was like flying through a wind storm. He had no control.

“Parker, that building is a ticking time bomb — get out!”

There was no response.

“Clint, get that damn jet down here —”

“I can’t, Tony!” Clint hollered back. “Wanda’s force field is the only thing keeping these fuckers from sending the city up in flames.”

Tony growled in frustration. “Kid, get out of there, now!”

FRIDAY counted down the impending explosion.

He didn’t receive any response from Peter. The panic in his gut tripled, his chest tightening with fear.
“Peter, NOW!”

“I can’t — I can’t!” The cries broke through the comms, full of crackling static and panic. “I’m stuck, I-you gotta help me, Tony, I’m stuck!”

The determination flooded through him like a broken damn, and he flew through the exploding Chitarui faster than the Quinjet could have taken off. His body handled the twists and turns with accuracy, using the force of the explosions to his advantage.

“FRIDAY, boosters — now!”

The engines underneath his feet lit up.

“Maximoff, when I give you the go, you drop that field and get me through to the other side.”

High above in the Quinjet, standing on the open backdoor with her hands weaving bright, red energy, Wanda nodded. “Acknowledged.”

“Three…two…” He took another hit on his side, spinning in the air before lighting his repulsor beams and regaining control. He was almost there. A few more inches and he’d be by the other bridge.

“Now!”

The field dropped, the shimmering red disappearing within seconds.

Iron Man shot through like a flying rocket.

The warehouse exploded.

He was sent tumbling in the air, his back hitting the force field with a sickening thud, the windows of surrounding buildings shattering into broken glass. The impact was so hard his vision went dark and he dropped down to the ground with no control over the suit, a rag doll that tumbled on the grass.

The sound was so loud his ears temporarily went deaf, the only hearing to return a shrill ring. Everything went blurry. For a moment he thought it was his vision that couldn’t focus, watching as his HUD flickered in and out of life. It wasn’t. His suit struggled to recover, internally repairing the electrical damage done.

Tony blearily looked up from the ground, his palms pressed heavily on the grass as he fought to sit on his knees.

He wasn’t sure how long it took him to process the sight. The shock was heavy, disbelief sinking deep into his bones. Car alarms wailed chaotically, thousands of pieces of glass and steel fell down from the sky in a deadly rainfall, and smoke and fire rushed out of the old building.

The building where Peter was.
“Status,” Tony croaked. “Status, FRIDAY.”

“You have sustained —”

“Not me, damn it!” he yelled, struggling to get off the ground, “Spider-suit. Status on the Spider-suit.”

It was the longest three seconds of his life. His mind had gone blank and his eyes were painfully wide, liquid pouring within from a lack of blinking.

“I’m…sorry, boss,” the AI said rather sympathetically. “The Spider-man suit has gone offline.”

No.

He shot up from his knees, boosters flickering in and out of life before they remained on.

No.

He flew straight towards the burning building, ignoring the shouts from his comms, ignoring the warnings from his AI, ignoring the blistering heat that broke through the alloy metal of his suit.

Tony could feel his heart pounding in his chest, pulsating so hard it radiated in his skull. He didn’t stop. He couldn’t stop.

The building hadn’t collapsed yet, but when he entered, he knew it wouldn’t be long until it did. The structure crumbled around him, pillars of old, rotten wood falling to the floor.

“Peter!?”

His screams were barely heard above the blazing flames, and he had to duck to avoid part of the ceiling that came crashing down.

“Kid — Parker — answer me, damn it!”

“Warning: Suit reaching critical heat levels.”

Tony flew through the flames, the suit trapping the heat of the fire, blistering his body. “PETER!”
“Warning: Suit reaching critical heat levels. Emergency evacuation will take effect.”

Tony’s cries were desperate, and he was panicked — he knew it, he could feel it. He could also feel the fire heating up his suit, the metal suddenly too hot against his skin, stinging like a burn that would only get worse. The smoke and ashes began to enter his lungs and he coughed heavily against it, subconsciously knowing the suit was failing if he couldn’t retain fresh oxygen.

He didn’t care.

“PETER!”

“Warning: Suit has reached critical heat levels. Emergency evacuation in effect.”

“Goddamn—it, no! No, override! Override for fuck’s sake!” He continued to search the warehouse, ignoring the heat that made him sweat buckets. “Override code 1529—”

“I’m sorry, boss.”

Tony never had a chance to respond, to think or to make another move. He lost control of the suit — it was a protocol he designed. The AI took over and flew him out of the warehouse, the heat so damaging to its construction that the HUD fought to remain online. His engines sputtered in and out before giving away completely. The suit opened and spit him out, harshly tossing him to the ground where he rolled to a stop.

Behind him in the park, the Chitarui heads all dropped at once, shattering on the ground. Rhodey and Sam stayed high in the air, watching silently as it happened. Hulk continued to shadow over Steve, the offending alien tech hitting his back with force.

Tony never noticed.

He didn’t move. He didn’t blink, he wasn’t even sure if he was breathing. All he could do was stare ahead, the blazing flames dancing in the wind, sending embers to fly in the air and trickle down below him on the ground.

The warehouse was consumed in flames, the air around him darkening with smoke. The blood rushed to his ears and though everyone shouted over the comms, he couldn’t register a single thing. His hearing was muffled, even the sirens in the distance a faint buzz to him.

Tony knelled on the ground in shock, the world around him fading away, his only focus the blazing inferno in front of him. Despite the sirens in the background, and despite the shouts over the comms, he couldn’t hear anything. Every sound was a faint, muffled hum.

He sat in shock.

“Tony…”

He barely felt the hand that laid gently on his shoulder, bare of the Iron Man armor. He didn’t look even if he could. He knew it was Steve, standing behind him solemnly.

They didn’t speak. There was nothing to say.

Despite the crackling fire, screaming sirens, despite all the noise around them, it had become horribly quiet.
Identity Theft
And Washed the Spider Out

Chapter Notes


Put down the damn pitchforks, review the tags if you’re nervous - and thank you SO much for your feedback. God, you ALL are so friggin amazing.

No nerd facts for you this chapter, but I will substitute it with a fun tidbit about the author! I tend to see things on a daily basis that don’t phase me - at all. It’s why I got into the medical field, I have morbid curiosity and fascination with that stuff. But I’m reminded by others that what I find to be very tame, is not at all tame to them.

So going forward, I’ll be posting warnings for chapters that contain descriptive writing of bodily injury/functions/ect (which will probably be like, all of Phase 3). I’m sure a handful of you will finish the chapter and think “Huh? That was nothing.” but I really want to be on the safe side with this - I’m being very honest here, I’ve looked straight at a degloved hand and barely blinked (do not google that if you have a weak stomach)

Trigger warning for panic/anxiety attacks. Mild descriptive writing of bodily injury.

They didn’t talk.

The basics were exchanged, but nothing else needed to be said.

So nothing was.

The compound hadn’t been this quiet since he returned from Siberia.

Tony sat hunched over on the couch, his chin resting in the palms of his hands, the tips of his index fingers pressing heavily against his nose. His eyes were wide, heavy and fearful, but he didn’t blink.

He couldn’t. If he did, he’d see…

He hadn’t moved from the spot in hours, not since Pepper took over the situation. His useless, scrambled attempts at controlling the damage did more harm than good. It was nothing like him to behave in the way that he had, screaming and shouting at everyone who crossed his path until his throat went hoarse and his voice fractured by strain. He had become an absolute, complete wreck, breaking apart at the seams with each minute that painstakingly came to pass.

It wasn’t like him, not at all. Tony Stark was confident, cocksure, owning a room the moment his expensive Louis Vuitton dress shoes stepped foot inside. He was smooth talking, witty and snappy, and when he spoke people listened to him and no one else.
That Tony Stark didn’t return from Brooklyn.

Instead, he entered the compound a blubbery mess, his anxiety off the charts, his impatience and panic directed at every poor soul that walked near him. Sitting alone in the common area of the facility, Tony knew being ushered away from his staff was more for them than him.

He didn’t care.

He was paralyzed with thick, heavy denial. He wouldn’t admit what he knew to be true until it was proved to him. SHIELD was immediately brought in to recover the reassembled alien tech and his own team swept through the ashes of the burned down warehouse with a fine tooth combed. He awaited their results.

Utterly nauseous, his stomach twisting in knots, Tony fought for each breath that filled his lungs. He had vacated everything within him shortly after returning from Brooklyn. Even if he hovered over the toilet now, nothing would come up.

The shock hadn’t gone away. If anything, it settled deeper into his core, rattling him with a cold, disgusting repulsion. The team split up almost instantly — Tony didn’t know where they were at, possibly in the facility but he had no way to be sure. He just didn’t care. He still couldn’t get Wanda’s cry of sorrow out of his head, a howl that could have broken the sound barrier. She hadn’t made such a horrifying sound since her brother had died.

He couldn’t let himself feel that yet. Not while there was the smallest possibility of…

Of anything.

He closed his eyes and let out a rattling sigh, the air shaking in his chest.

Fuck.

This was bad.

This was real, real bad.

So wrapped up in his own thoughts and chaotic unnerve, he hadn’t even noticed when Rhodey entered the room, standing idly at the door frame.

“Tones?”

Tony shot up from the couch with lightning speed and looked towards his friend with large, hopeful, desperate eyes. They shined bright with tears that had yet to fall, the crows-feet around them standing out more vividly than ever.

He hadn’t even bothered to hide the raw emotion behind a flashy pair of sunglasses That told Rhodey just how bad this really was.

“Anything?” Tony's voice cracked underneath the stress. “Tell me they found…”
“I’m sorry, Tony,” Rhodey softly said. “They’ve swept the site five times now. There’s nothing.”

Rhodey didn’t move, not bothering to enter the room. He knew that he’d only be asked to check again, sweep again, leave again. The sun had set long ago and their teams worked unrelentingly through the dark night to investigate what was now called ground zero. He watched Tony with a pained expression, unsure if he had ever seen the man so unraveled before.

He hadn’t. Rhodey wasn’t ready to acknowledge that.

Tony viciously shook his head. “Bullshit.”

Rhodey sighed. “Tony, the explosion —”

“No,” he insisted. “There has to be something — you can’t tell me they didn’t find a single goddamn thing —”

“The explosion was borderline nuclear. Everything was...the heat was too much.”

There was the nausea again, creeping up from his gut and swimming in his throat. Tony couldn’t stand anymore, his already weak knees giving out beneath him and he sat back down on the couch. Breathing suddenly hurt too much, his lungs constricted, and wheezing, and reminding him that he was breathing and Peter wasn’t, he was alive and a fifteen-year-old teenager suddenly wasn’t.

This was a nightmare.

He scrubbed his hands over his face, rubbing his skin so harshly that it hurt, wishing the pain would wake him up and take him back to when this hadn’t happened. Take him back to a time where he never involved Peter in a world that would get him killed.

The attack on New York was a nightmare.

Taking his last breath in space, that was a nightmare.

This was hell.

“Fuck,” he spoke in an exhale, the word shaking on each syllable. “I don’t…”

He didn’t know what to do. This was never supposed to happen. He wasn’t prepared for this. Tony Stark, always ready with a game-plan, always packing a plan B, C, and D in his pocket, was clueless on how to proceed.

“Where is everyone?” Tony settled on asking, desperate to distract himself from the sickening reality that threatened to eat him alive.

Rhodey leaned against the door frame. “Around.”

Tony looked up and towards him, his expression speaking louder than his words. Tell me something, Rhodey, it begged. Keep me grounded. Please.

Rhodey frowned and dropped his shoulders, finally deciding to take a few steps into the eerily quiet common area. “Natasha and Clint are handling things with SHIELD. Vision’s been with Wanda, Bruce and Sam went their own ways. I don’t know about Rogers, he’s—”

“Right here.”

Rhodey briefly turned his head, though Tony’s remained locked on the slick, marble floors. Steve
entered the room with his hands in his pockets, posture slump for someone who was usually so pristine. He wore a t-shirt soaked with sweat, telling them both that he had been taking out his anger on the gym’s innocent punching bags.

Better them than him, Tony decided.

Steve furrowed his brows. “Anything, Rhodey?”

He wasn’t as hopeful as Tony had been, primarily because he hadn’t fallen into such an extreme denial. He knew, watching the building explode, what the outcome was. Still, they lived in a world full of aliens and enhanced individuals, so nothing was off the table.

“No.” Rhodey shook his head. “The search and rescue parties went over the site five times. They’re sweeping up the debris now, but forensics say they may find teeth later on —”

Tony’s stomach rolled.

“I can’t fucking do this.” He wearily stood from the couch, gripping the armrest when he nearly stumbled on his feet.

Rhodey noticed his buckling knees and offered him a hand but it was rejected as soon he extended it out. Tony’s chest visibly heaved as he took a deep breath in and he made his way to the kitchen, leaning over the sink with shaking arms.

His shoulders were tight and tense and he fought off the pain that each damn breath brought him, because he was breathing and Peter wasn’t, his lungs were crisp and clean and Peter’s burned black, charred and decaying into ash and —

“How are things going with SHIELD?” Rhodey asked.

They continued their conservation behind him, quiet and hushed as if him hearing them would stir a reaction. Their tones were serious and solemn and Tony focused in on it, willing himself to stay present and not trapped in his head.

He knew that if he went under now, he wouldn't resurface.

“Not good,” Steve admitted. “They’re, uh…less than pleased.”

“Yeah. I imagine,” Rhodey muttered. “What's next then?”

It wasn’t often that the two looked to each other for advice, typically on different pages when it came to leading the team. They had a tendency to occupy the same space with very different energies, two men from two different times of life that had very unique ways of going about things. Rhodey would always respect Steve as the leader of the team, but rarely did he ever participate in the decisions the man would make.

Knowing they had resorted to this — resorted to coming together in a time of crisis — it somehow made the whole ordeal more grave.

Still, they never got a chance to lean on each other. Pepper’s sudden presence in the room broke through their underlying tension, walking slowly from the hallway with uncertainty if she should even approach the moment.

She looked at Rhodey first before her eyes silently drifted to Tony, his back facing them, hunched over the kitchen sink. Rhodey didn’t say anything, his face did enough of the talking for him —
sadness echoed in his eyes and a frown laid on his face, saturated with somberness.

Pepper’s heels clicked softly and slowly as she came closer to the group.

“Tony?”

Though he still didn’t turn around, his head did lift up, acknowledging her presence. She’d take it. She’d take anything she could get from him at this point. Pepper had been with Tony long enough to know the ropes on how to deal with his stress, agitation, and even hysteria, but the truth was, nothing had broken him like this before.

Not Afghanistan, not even the aftermath of New York.

Pepper wasn’t sure if there was any coming back from this one.

She swallowed heavily. “I’ve done everything I can to keep this away from the press, but…”

Steve nodded. “They’re vultures.”

Pepper silently agreed.

Tony’s back shook with a scoff. He did his best to straighten his posture, turning on the faucet with trembling hands.

“Let them say what they want,” he mumbled, splashing a handful of cold water on his face.

For a split moment, it felt good, too good. The cooling relief that hit his skin and nerves reminded him of fire, flames, smoke, and ashes that he could still taste on his tongue.

Pepper furrowed her brows, shaking her head. “Tony…”

Her mouth moved to speak, the words falling flat on her lips like they wouldn’t escape from within her. She had been dealing with the aftermath all day into the evening, but she was able to stay cold about it, treat it like business because dealing with Stark Industries and the Avengers was business.

This was family.

“You need to get to May Parker before she finds out from the news.”

Oh.

‘Oh shit.’ Tony closed his eyes. His breath caught still in his lungs, a burning fire forming in his chest that he relished in because if Peter couldn’t breathe, why should he? And if Peter felt hot, red fire smoldering in his chest until the bones of his rib-cage melted into nothing, why shouldn’t he?

May.

Oh god, he didn’t sign up for this. He couldn’t look that woman in the eye and tell her he took her child away, buried him in an early grave, killed him because he was unable to protect him as he had promised.

He promised her this wouldn’t happen.

Why the hell did he make that promise?

Tony barely heard Rhodey excuse himself, saying something about helping Natasha and Clint at
SHIELD and more crap he didn’t care about because his hearing was muffled and he was positive it wasn’t because of the explosion anymore. His blood rushed through his eardrums, pulsating with each beat of his heart.

And all he could think about was that his heart was beating, while Peter’s scorched away in a burning inferno, smoldering into remains of the young, bright boy he once was. How much did it hurt to feel your heart liquefy into a boiling puddle of tissues? Was it as painful as the grief that consumed his right now?

He jumped when a hand laid on his arm, the soft, delicate skin touching his doing nothing to calm his nerves. When he looked over at Pepper, he needed to blink rapidly to gain focus again, unsure of when everything had suddenly become so blurry.

He didn’t let her say a word. “Get the car ready.”

Walking past her was easy. She let him storm away with the weight of the world on his shoulders. He never got past Steve barricading the front door though, his hand shooting out to grip his bicep with frightening force.

“Tony…”

Tony stopped, lips pursed with building anger. Warily, tired beyond what even he could deal with, he looked over his shoulder and at Steve.

“Now is not the time to lecture me about actions having consequences, Rogers.” His voice was low and rumbled like grinding stone.

Steve locked his eyes on his. “Let me go.”

His voice was quiet and yet somehow commanded the room. Steve's hand slowly and carefully let go of his hold on Tony, and with furrowed brows and a sickening sadness that made Tony cringe, he let his own arm drop down by his side.

“Let me tell the kids family,” Steve softly said.

Tony looked at him incredulously. “Are you out of your mind? Is dementia finally kicking in at that old age of yours?”

“Tony, I —”

“She doesn’t fucking know you, Rogers,” Tony snapped. “You think I’m going to send Captain goody-two-shoes to tell this woman her nephew was just brutally killed, that we have no body for her to bury, that we —”

Pepper stepped forward, cutting him off. "Tony.”

Her warning was heard loud and clear and he shot his head in her direction with neck-breaking speed. He didn’t say anything. He was too tired and she held too much sorrow, too much pity and grief for him to deal with.

It was overwhelming — to be surrounded by such heavy emotions, as if his own weren’t enough to deal with. It wasn’t his element, nowhere near the type of environment that he could handle.

There were few things that Tony Stark couldn’t do. This was one of them.
Steve stood his ground. “I have experience with this type of thing. You don’t realize until you have to do it how difficult it can be to tell someone —”

“Fuck off,” Tony growled.

He went to leave, his feet anxious to take him far, far away from everyone and everything that threatened to break him. Steve’s hand grabbed his arm again.

His first instinct was to throw a punch in response, because *God*, sometimes he just wanted to hit this man in his perfect teeth. How dare he try and tell him what he could and couldn’t do, let alone restrain him before he could.

But when his gaze met Steve’s, it wasn’t an expression that angered him. It may have even defused the rising fury that he knew to be easier to deal with than any other pain he tried to stuff away.

His first uncurled, the kind, sympathetic blue eyes pooling back to him.

“You’re in no condition to do this,” Steve said, soft and stern.

It was a trait Tony had come to respect about the man, especially seeing as he personally could never find that middle ground between good guy and bad guy, a gray area that Steve had mastered perfectly. Somehow, facing him, eyes locked so intensely it was almost as if they were having a staring contest, Tony heard more from the man’s aura than he did his words.

And Steve stared back, unblinking. He wasn’t callous, he wasn’t putting him down. They had fought side by side in battle and defended the world from sure destruction time after time. Steve had grown to respect the man, and the suit, and his strengths and abilities that came between.

He didn’t doubt that Tony could do this.

He just didn’t have to.

“He’s right, Tony.” Pepper’s voice was quiet and hushed, still standing across the room, keeping her distance from the two men.

Tony knew that was the straw to break the camel’s back. If Pepper didn’t see him fit to do something, she’d do everything in her power to stop him. He’d have to take his Iron Man suit and fly to Queen’s if he wanted to do it himself, which ridiculousness of the idea aside, he absolutely did not want to do.

He was a coward. Take away his suits, tech, and toys and that’s what was left behind. He’d be the first to tell you that. It was best that Steve went instead of him, at least then May Parker wouldn’t have to face someone as pathetic as he was.

“Fine,” he croaked, clearing his throat. “Happy will take you to Queen’s.”

Tony turned to leave, shaking off Steve’s lax grip. He stopped midway in the hallway, swallowing his lips until a deep sigh broke through him.

He turned back around. “Offer her to come back with you. Or—or to call me. Or…”

There wasn’t much else he could do. These weren’t things he handled, and there wasn’t a playbook on how to treat the family of the deceased child. Especially not when he was at fault.

Steve nodded though, understanding his sentiment.
And that was it — he was done, he couldn’t do this anymore. Steve would handle his dirty work, and he was free to go.

He spun on his heels and hastily stormed down the hallways without a destination in mind. In fact, he wasn’t sure what muscles were even moving his legs, his brain a foggy mess that barely produced one coherent thought. The hallways had become too narrow, and there were too many people walking by, way more than he remembered initially being in the compound.

He needed to get away. He needed to compose himself before he broke, because he wasn’t sure if he could pick up the pieces this time around.

Tony entered his workshop with swift, profound purpose, immediately going to his tool bench once the sliding doors closed behind him. He had no intention of dealing with his inner turmoil. Break now, and there would be no recovering.

“FRIDAY,” he spoke to the AI. “Activate Wormhole Protocol.”

There was a beat of silence, as if the AI was judging him.

“I will need additional authorization for such a request, boss.”

He already had his thumb on the scanner near the furthest wall, the technology running lasers over his skin before beeping with clearance.

“291970160.”

“Wormhole Protocol activated. All unauthorized persons will not have access to this room.”

He designed the protocol after the attack on New York, for when he needed to escape from the pressures of the outside world. That’s what he told himself. He knew it was to prevent an anxiety attack, to keep his own paralyzing inner distress from destroying him. And it should have put him at ease. After the day’s horrifying events, he should have been relieved at the idea of peace and quiet, of solitude, of finally being by himself.

The exhale of air that left his chest wasn’t one of peace, though. It was still shaky, his rib-cage feeling as if it would collapse on himself.


He snapped his fingers, once, twice, and then a third time while he looked frantically around the room for something to work on. Scattered tools laid on the table, papers amiss the mess, but there wasn’t one specific thing he had been focusing on that he could pick up and resume.

Peter had been his focus. Not inventions, not fancy equipment — the chameleon helmet had been his last project, and look at how that turned out.

About how good as Peter did.

He shook his head clear of the thought.

“Fix something,” he repeated the words like a broken record, palms resting against the workbench, eyes darting to find something he could make his focal point. Anything to focus on besides the haunting memory of fire, ashes, and embers filling his lungs, his screams for Peter scratching his throat raw.
Focus on anything but that.

“Sir, Doctor Bruce Banner has tried to gain access.”

Tony wasn’t concerned; he wouldn’t be able to. Right now, he needed to focus — focus on fixing something, building something, repairing something. He knew with unshakable clarity that he needed to occupy his mind.

“FRIDAY, do I have any outstanding projects in the works?” He tapped his foot anxiously on the ground, his nerves jittery and uncontrollable. The silence was painful and made his ears ring — or was that the tinnitus from the explosion that rocked half of the Brooklyn bridge?

“Sir, rest is recommended in your current state. As well, Sam Wilson has tried to gain access.”

“No rest for the weary,” Tony muttered, his tone empty of emotion. “Give me something here, FRI, pull journal data and find a listed project.”

He picked up the nearest tool he could find — a screw-driver, and fiddled with it in his hands. It was cold and smelt of rust. Wasn’t that part of the technique Rhodey had taught him? Five things he could see, four things he could touch, three things he could… he couldn’t remember the rest. And the building nausea in his stomach was intensifying, churning, boiling and making his skin hot.

God, he was going to be sick again.

“I do not recommend pulling from your pending projects due to the current behavior you are exhibiting. For your own precaution, I recommend rest.” FRIDAY spoke with a sense of emotion he knew couldn’t exist.

Her voice had become grating, nails on a chalkboard for him to hear. He pulled up his systems from the nearest computer, the smart screen lighting up holographic interactive images that surrounded him, and his hand pushed through the many controls.

Sweep, sweep, sweep — found it.

“Keep it to yourself.”

“Sir, it goes against my programming to —”

With one wave of his hand, Tony shut down the AI. The room fell eerily quiet afterward. It made his ears ring even louder.

He needed to be left alone. That was the entire point of the damn wormhole protocol. Just like after the attack on New York, just like after the day he found himself nearly dying in space, he couldn’t be around others. The panic in his chest increased with each breath he took, he needed to be by himself.

He needed to focus.

“Okay, fix something, fix something, fix —”

His words became rambles, mumbled and unintelligent even to him. He turned from his computer station and back to the workbench.
Things were blurring together again. First when he looked at Pepper back in the common room, now here. Did he have a concussion from the blast? He never did see Cho afterward, too preoccupied with sending his teams out to the war zone, the ground zero, to ensure Peter was positively, absolutely, no certain of a doubt dead.

Which he was.

It took a flicker of a burn to realize that his sight hadn’t blurred — it never had. It was pesky liquid rising from his eyelids, pooling in a poodle threatening to fall. He blinked them back and away, refusing to let himself shed a tear.

He needed to focus. Five things he could see. He had plenty to choose from, his eyes darting around the high tech workshop in a panicked search.

Somehow, and for some reason, his eyes locked onto the scattered papers on his desk.

The MIT brochures stared back at him, almost as if they were mocking him.

“I just…I don’t know, Mr. Stark.” Hesitantly, Peter set the brochures on the work table they were previously at, stepping back with caution. “I can’t leave New York. What about Spider-man, protecting the little guy? I can’t do that from MIT. And-and I can’t-”

“You can’t what?” Tony snapped in a way that was purely controlled, a vibration of intimidation that shook Peter’s core.

Peter bowed his head, his eyes locked on his dirty Nike’s.

“I can’t leave Aunt May.” His words were quiet, his hand rubbing the nape of his neck. “She needs me, Mr. Stark. I can’t just leave her…not yet.”

Tony squeezed the screwdriver in his hand so tightly that the metal tip broke through the skin, blood trickling out. It didn't hurt enough. It ached, throbbed, and stung, but it didn't hurt enough to distract him from the sickening pain in his heart.

So he did the only thing he could think of.

“Goddamn!”

It took one sweep of his arm to knock over everything on the table. Papers, tools, and random mechanical parts fell to the ground with a clatter and bang. It wasn’t long after that he decided, screw it, the entire table can join them. And then once he knocked the table to the ground, Tony kicked the chair over as well. He kicked it — kicked, kicked and kicked it, slamming it against the wall with the force of his anger.

“Damn it!” he kicked repeatedly, angrily. “Damn it, GOD FUCKING DAMN IT!”

He screamed because he needed to, his voice harsh and jarring, because he had to, because this isn't happening, this isn't real, this can't be real.

But it was. Tony had no ability to change it, no amount of money to fix it, no control over any of it. He croaked as his knees buckled under his weight and he pathetically sank down onto the stool, a deafening headache starting to drown out the scratchy pain in his throat. And he let himself be.

It was like a tidal wave, the grief. Washing over him instantaneously.
He heard the *whoosh* of the sliding doors but never the alert from his AI. Because he shut it off, of course. Though he wouldn’t have needed the warning to begin with. Tony knew exactly who it was.

“You’ve gone too far with your override privileges, Pep.”

His voice was so ragged he didn't even recognize it, wet with tears and clouded with pain. It didn't sound like him at all.

Her voice was steadier than he expected it to be. “Tony...”

He was reluctant to let her near him. To let her feel the anger and shame radiating off him, to see him in such a weak, pathetic state. Yet he never made a move to otherwise stop her. She knew it all, no matter how hard he tried to hide it.

“He was just a kid.” Tony shut his eyes and held them tight. “I’m the adult. I was supposed to protect him. He was just a kid.”

Hunched over on the stool, Tony never moved. She approached him and without any hesitation, without any shame, wrapped her arms around his shoulders and pulled his head close to her, letting him rest in the tuck of her stomach where she stood.

“It’s okay, Tony.” She ran her hand through his hair. “It’s okay…”

It hit him with capsizing quickness. He felt himself pulled forward, as if the weight in his chest was enough to define gravity. The sobs wretched through him and he wailed, like a dying animal, crying in agony.

They came one after another, harsh and loud, until he couldn't breathe, until he was gasping from the exertion of dissolving into his emotions. Her shirt became soaked with his tears, but neither cared. She held him closer as his cries howled in the room.

“It’s okay, Tony.” Pepper’s own voice cracked. “Shhh, it’s okay.”

There was no physical mark, no external catalyst for his distress — he made it out okay. He wasn’t swallowed up by the burning flames, eating away at his flesh and muscles and stripping him of the life he knew. He was okay.

But he was still burning, gasping with panic at flames that didn't exist.

Throat aching, his sobs died to thin, whistling intakes of air, choking on his own tears when they hiccupped in his throat.

“I can’t fix this. I can’t fix this,” he gasped, over and over. “I can’t fix this, Pep. I can’t bring him back.”

Pepper held him tighter, her own tears salty on her lips.

He choked on another sob. “I failed him. I — I failed him.”

She didn't respond. Tony didn't need her to. He didn't need lies and false reassurance. He got close to Peter, he let the kid in, closer than he should have. He knew everyone close to him suffered, but he did it anyway.

He knew that he failed Peter, and he’d fail her next, and the entire team after that. That was his
Dmitri sang the song with a sense of innocence and swiveled on the stool he sat in, rolling across the room and to the table that pressed flush against the wall. He cracked his knuckles, the popping between his joints echoing in the large, semi-empty space.

He had work to do.

Francis set down his plexiglas helmet and adjusted the purple cape strapped around his neck, his irritation evident.

“Shit just got serious. If we’re going to execute this plan, you need to start communicating it with me.”

Dmitri smiled, picking up a gas mask and tossing it over to Klum, standing behind him. He was prepared. He had made sure he was prepared. Though the costumed man fumbled his hands at first, he caught the respiratory mask tightly, eyebrows cocked with confusion.

Francis rolled his eyes. “I don’t speak Russian. I can’t even say your last name, Smer… ve..kawhatever. Whatever you’re singing — it’s going over my head.”

Dmitri turned his back as if he hadn’t heard what was said. He continued to organize the various equipment, his newly acquired, bright, shining white helmet a centerpiece to it all.

Their surroundings creaked, the walls groaning under pressure, but nothing was as persistent as the leaking water from above.
Three knocks.

One.

Two.

Three.

His knuckles tapped hard and precise before his arm fell down to his side, where he interlinked and clasped both his hands together in front of him.

The door opened eight seconds later. He knew, he counted.

Still, looking up from the rugged, blue doormat on the floor below was harder than he expected it to be. Greeted by a woman shorter than him, long brown hair with shining brown eyes to match, her expression glistened with concern.

That concern only got worse when she saw who was at her door.

Steve solemnly looked up. “Mrs. Parker?”

May frantically looked at him, and then behind him where Happy Hogan stood, equally as distressed. Her mouth opened, but she didn’t speak a word. She didn’t need to. Steve knew she was awaiting her nephews return, that she was panicked at Captain America’s sudden presence, and sickened to see Happy, the man who she was well acquainted with, looking anguished and grief-stricken.

Her hand had covered her mouth before she realized it.

“May we come in?” Steve asked.
That concludes Segment 2, folks.

Some things for you to look forward and stay tuned to:

Happy doesn’t get paid enough to buy child sized coffins.  
Tony thought the Accords was a debacle - he was pretty sure Peter’s death would disband them for good.  
Doctor Stranger, Master Sorcerer, at your service.  
Of course it’s an underwater base.  
Save the Spider protocol is activated.

Malen’kiy kroshechnyy pauk vzobralsya na vodnyy nosik…”  
(“The itsy-bitsy spider climbed up the water spout…”)  
“Vniz poshel dozhd’ i vymyl pauka…”  
(“Down came the rain and washed the spider out…”)  
“Yesli vy khotite zhit’ i protsvetat’, pust’ ostavat'sya ozhivayet…”  
(“If you wish to live and thrive let the spider stay alive…”)  
“Potomu chto yego slomanny pauk ne mog snova podnyat'sya.”  
(“Because the itsy-bitsy spider could not climb up again.”)

Your comments and feedback are amazing and I cannot wait to jump into phase 3 with you all. :D
I know I mention this every chapter, but I won’t stop until the story is over - you guys are absolutely, positively amazing and I love you all for your wonderful feedback. I am so, so incredibly happy this story is becoming well received, and that you all are enjoying it enough to come back for the next update!

I guess I should have clarified this back in chapter 1? I don’t know, I don’t really feel it even needs clarification, but now that there’s an audience I guess I’ll state the obvious - I’m not Team Cap or Team Iron Man. This story isn’t about which side was right and which side I believe in. It does focus heavily on Tony, so it does play into how he hasn’t truly forgiven Steve for things, but I’m not hating on either side. It’s about two stubborn ass men having made mistakes and deciding to move on from them for the sake of bettering mankind.

Siberia never happened the way it did, in this story. There was no near-death fight. Siberia happened, but in a sense that all 3 walked away together. That’s my headcannon. I mention it a little more towards the end of this segment, but it’s not vitally important.

What is important is - angst oh my god angst I just love angst so much.

Mild descriptive writing of bodily injury.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
The blue eyes are staring at him.

Just eyes, nothing else. Blue crystals soaked beneath black pupils, cold, dead and lifeless.

Steve’s pained voice echoes in the nothingness.

“You could have saved us…”

Darkness soaks them up, drowning them in a puddle of space and stars. He sees earth in the distance, but the further he reaches, the further it moves. His fingers reach, the tips just out of reach. The planet runs from him.

“Why didn’t you do more?”

He hears the shield break and shatter. When he looks to the ground, pieces of it have fallen on his feet, cutting into his bare toes. The shield his father made. The shield Steve Rogers carried.

Broken and useless.

“Mr. Stark!”

Tony spins around, panicked, looking frantically for who the voice belonged to. He tries to scream, croaking, his voice stolen from him. He grips his throat, pushing his fingers deep into his larynx, desperate to call out. No sound is made.

“Mr. Stark, please!”

He’s crying — the voice, the boy calling for help. He’s so young and sounds so terrified. Tony tries to run, his legs moving relentlessly. He moves nowhere. He runs in place until he can’t anymore, until his legs give out and he’s panting breathlessly for air.

There is no air.

He’s suffocating, dying in space, stripped of oxygen. He can’t scream. He can’t move. He can’t breathe.

“I’m stuck, Mr. Stark — help me, I’m stuck!”

And then the fire engulfs him.

It rises from the ground, wrapping around him like a blanket, coiling around his body and surrounding him until he sees nothing but flames. It’s so hot.

He sucks in a mouthful of air, only to choke on the smoke and ashes. It’s the breath of hell. It burns. It burns the lining of his lungs, the moisture in his nostrils dry up, and he chokes and coughs.

Peter stands across from him. He’s wearing his suit, the blessed, wonderful spider-suit that he created for him. But he’s naked of the mask. He stares at Tony, his eyes full of fear. Tony scrambles over to him, running to him, desperate to save him.
A wall of fire rushes out and blocks his path.

“Peter!” Tony coughs, unable to take in a breath. “You gotta get out. You gotta get out, kid!”

“I can’t!”

The flames roar around them like a monster, spiraling upward.

Peter screams with a sound of pure terror, unfit coming from his childish voice.

“HELP ME!”

Tony yells at him, “Get OUT!”

He watches in horror as the flames dance around the boy, his red and blue suit scorching into black, charred fabric. He howls, raw, blood-curdling screams so high pitched, so anguished that Tony lost his strength to stand, and he falls to his knees. His own body doesn’t burn. He’s not granted the gift of death.

It takes seconds. Only seconds for Peter’s body to incinerate in the fire, blood boiling and skin blistering until it seared away entirely and he was nothing but the muscle that sweltered, like the smelting metal he’d pour out from a crucible.

“Tony!”

Everything pooled to the ground below — his brown eyes, his ruffled hair, his lifeless heart — it all became one pile of sizzling liquid. The flames began to eat at his bones, the white skeleton turning crisp black. Tony can’t move to stop it.

“Why didn’t you do more…”

The skull of a skeleton stared back at him.

“Tony!”

“Tony!”

Tony awoke with a gasp so hard it visibly shook the bed.

“Oh my god…” Pepper breathed a sigh of relief. “Tony, it’s okay. It’s okay.”

For a moment, he sat paralyzed. He was vaguely aware of Pepper gripping his shoulder, that she was saying something to him, but he was too panicked to understand. Each breath came in hard, his lungs heaving for air as if he had been holding his breath.

The screams rang in his ears.

It felt real. His skin was still hot. Burning heat flustered inside him and the room had become too warm, filling his lungs with uncomfortable air. Everything burned.

“Tony, you’re shaking,” Pepper said, her voice trembling.

Looking down at himself, Tony realized that she was right. He was drenched in his own sweat and his arms shook and twitched. His muscles ached with a heat that didn’t exist. No matter how hard
he tried to focus, he couldn’t stop hearing the screaming that echoed in his ears.

Peter’s screams.

He threw the covers off his legs and practically jumped out of bed.

“Tony…” Pepper tried to call out to him.

“I can’t…I….I…” he shook his head and waved his hand, as if he was dismissing the idea of any more sleep. He grabbed his t-shirt and pants off the nearest lounge chair and left the bedroom in a haste.

Rhodey had made the announcement late in the night. He knew he didn’t need to, but it helped him make things official. It helped him solidify what they knew to be true, to subdue any disbelief that may have been floating around. Once he knew that SHIELD had everything under control, he did what everyone else seemed to do — retreat.

Wanda hadn’t left her quarters since they returned from Brooklyn. And though Vision stayed at her side, sitting silently in a chair by her bed, she remained crawled up in a fetal position for hours. Her headphones were never once removed, tucked tightly in her ears playing a newly acquired playlist.

Bruce spent most of his time down in the laboratories. He worked absentmindedly on a few projects before ultimately dozing off on the surface of his desk. It was where Natasha found him, and where she stayed afterward, quietly deciding she hadn’t wanted to be alone.

Sam had lost track of how many times he ran around the facility’s perimeter. He didn’t count in hours or miles, rather how long it took for exhaustion to make his knees weak and legs buckle. When his body gave out, he stayed sitting on the steps near one of the building’s entrances, waiting to see if a star would break through the night’s cloudy sky.

The night wretchedly suffered on, no team member invulnerable to its torment.

Tony appreciated Pepper’s efforts at comforting him — he really did. She was the love of his life for a reason, by his side no matter what his behavior was, gripping his hand and telling him that it would be okay.

But he couldn’t sleep.

If he closed his eyes, if he even blinked, he’d see death. He’d see a charred skeleton ablaze in flames. And the screams, echoing over and over and over inside his head until he —

He couldn’t. No. He couldn’t sleep.

He spent most of the night into the early morning in his workshop blaring music, drowning out the sound in his head until his ears rang so loud it turned his headache into a migraine. Not even that provided enough of a distraction. By the time he left the room, the glass windows surrounding him had shown a sunrise that glistened with beauty, the yellow and orange colors tinting the hallways with a radiate glow that would make even Asgard blush.

He had never wanted it to rain so badly in his life. Cover the sun with clouds and darken the skies
he couldn’t handle the brightness. Not today.

For some time Tony wandered the compound aimlessly, stretching his legs and getting his muscles moving to keep him awake. He was getting too old for these all-nighters. Still, he had no plan to sleep anytime soon. Eventually he made his way into the common area and strolled over to the luxurious kitchen, the brown cabinets illuminated by the sunlight above them, hurting his eyes.

He skipped the coffee grounds and went straight for the Keurig, popping the cup in the device with ease.

“FRIDAY,” he asked the AI, “what’s the status on the team?”

There was a pause of silence.

“In what regards, boss?”

Tony could have rolled his eyes. If he didn’t know better, he’d say that the voice was holding resentment over being shut off last night, her tone bizarrely acrimonious. Sometimes he wondered if he had been creating his artificial intelligence with too many realistic behaviors.

“Who’s here and who flew the coup,” Tony clarified, letting a beat pass before he shook his head. “Actually, no, whereabouts aren’t important. Just tell me who’s not here.”

While she took a minute to process his request, Tony brought the steaming, hot liquid up to his lips. He let himself take a deep whiff before swigging it back in his mouth. His eyes closed as the bitter liquid slid down his throat and into his chest, a warmth encasing him and momentarily silencing the ringing in his ears.

And then the flames came flashing behind his eyelids.

“I’m stuck, I—you gotta help me, Mr. Stark, I’m stuck!”

He jerked and sputtered on the coffee.

“Clinton Barton cannot be located in or around the premises,” FRIDAY answered.

Tony wiped the split liquid from his mouth and rolled his eyes.

“So quick to abandon ship,” he muttered to himself.

He casually made his way to the sofa’s, sitting down on one and clutching his mug in both hands. His back ached, both from yesterday’s fight and from sitting hunched over on a stool for the better part of the night.

“Well, I suppose he was trying to retire anyway,” Tony mumbled.

“He’s with his family.”

The voice caught him by surprise. Looking to his left, Tony saw Steve standing at the doorway, hands deep in his pockets.

He shifted on the couch to face him. “You eavesdropping on my conversation, Rogers?”

Steve didn’t respond. He didn’t seem like he wanted to, looking almost as tired as Tony did. When he approached him, head bowed to the ground and eyes staring at his feet, his five o’clock shadow didn’t go unnoticed. He had never seen Steve without a clean shave before. Tony realized he may
not have been the only one to suffer without rest.

“We’re in the middle of a grade A crisis,” Tony stated. “Who gave him approval to leave the grounds?”

That was when Steve looked up. His eyes seemed hollow, almost empty. A shiver ran down his spine at the memory of those same eyes haunting his nightmares.

“I did.”

Tony pursed his lips. “Of course you did.”

“He did a lot of negotiating with SHIELD yesterday,” Steve defended in a mollifying tone. “We’re all lucky that Hill didn’t put a warrant over our heads for what happened.”

Tony shrugged his shoulders. “Okay? Should I be giving him a gold star?”

Steve sighed heavily. He shook his head with disappointment, internally wishing that things wouldn’t escalate so quickly with Tony. But he understood his frustration and stress and reminded himself to be patient.

History, baggage and fights aside, they were still friends. Steve didn’t want that to change because of what had happened.

He stood idly quietly between the kitchen and couches, waiting for the other man to take the lead in the conservation.

Eventually Tony did speak up. “How’d it go with his aunt?”

Awful. The worst thing he ever had to do. He felt the most guilt he had ever felt before, and there was nothing that could be done to change that. But Steve kept it to himself, opting instead to bow his head and shrug his shoulders.

“I gotta be honest with you Tony,” he softly said. “I don’t know how to answer that.”

Tony wearily looked up. “You just did.”

Letting out a deep breath, he walked further into the room. “I know you’re upset right now—”

“Don’t,” Tony harshly said. “Don’t do that. Don’t act like we’re all buddy-buddy, that you understand me — you know, it’s been a really long day, so if you could just stay away from me, that’d be fantastic.”

Steve wasn’t going to mention that it was seven in the morning. He wasn’t going to mention that he could smell the whiskey in his coffee or that he looked absolutely unraveled and bedraggled. If they were anything alike, which from his experience their similarities were daunting, Tony hadn’t slept last night either.

“Is that how you’re going to deal with this?” Steve walked closer. “By pushing us all away?”

Tony gripped his mug tighter. “What’s your agenda? Why are you here?”

“Would you believe me if I said I was worried about you?”

“Are you worried about me,” Tony asked, “or what I might do?”
“Both,” he answered succinctly.

“You may have forgotten, but this isn’t my first rodeo with death. I may not have lost soldiers before, but I have lost family.” His tone dripped with bitterness. “It’s just another name to add to the list.”

While Tony tried to be dismissive, his exhaustion kept him from masking the truth. Steve knew, either way. His mom, dad, the mentor who turned on him — in the past Tony had even admitted to him that the team was all he had left, and he had almost lost that as well. Some days it was hanging on by a thread. Today was certainly one of those days.

Steve frowned. “Tony…I know this is hard. It’s going to take time and patience —”

“I don’t want to hear your patronizing, condescending PSA’s, Rogers,” he snapped.

Steve looked away briefly, willing himself to control his emotions, if only for the fact that Tony couldn’t handle his own. He suddenly had the urge to return to the gym, his fists aching to release the tension that riddled his body. He could spend all day there, and it wouldn’t make a difference. The punching bags would never relinquish him of the disgrace and pain from yesterday.

He sighed. “We lost him too, you know.”

“You lost him?” Tony scoffed, the sound piercingly angry. “You knew him for a week.”

“You’re right,” Steve agreed. “I wish I had known him sooner, and longer. He obviously meant a lot to you. I don’t think I’ve ever…”

There was a pause. Steve struggled to find the right words to say, more importantly words that wouldn’t stir an argument. Whatever possessed him to sit down on the sofa next to Tony would never be understood. He did regardless. Though he sat mostly on the edge and three cushions away, his close presence had Tony visibly uncomfortable, to the point that he locked his eyes down on the coffee cup held tightly in both his hands.

Steve looked over towards him. “I know you and Pepper have a strong bond, but I have to be honest Tony. I’ve never seen you care for someone like you did with Peter.”

Tony didn’t want to respond. He didn’t even want to be having this conversation. He watched the bubbles from his coffee pop up to the surface.

“You called him ‘your kid’.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Hm?”

“Last week…out on the island…” Steve recalled. “You called him your kid.”

Tony half-shrugged. “Yeah, well, I had couple nicknames for the brat.”

The underlying tension and silence between them told Steve more than he needed to know. It wasn’t the answer he was looking for, even Tony knew that. Still, he didn’t push. He’d like to think even if he had the energy he wouldn’t have pushed the subject, but for now, all he knew was that he was tired. They both were.

It was amazing how one night could drag on for an eternity.

“I’ve kept my fair share of secrets lately,” Tony blurted out.
Steve furrowed his brows, confused.

“I know we agreed not to, after…” He couldn’t say it. “But what you did…what you kept from me…”

On a surface level, Steve understood. Time was barely healing their wounds. No matter how desperately they tried to make things better, their efforts to reassemble the broken pieces of who they were ended up weak and fumbled.

Still, hearing Tony say it aloud was a shot to the gut. He pushed it aside for another day, focusing on the topic at hand before the doubt and defeat could consume him. After all, the super-soldier serum was primarily for his physical appearance. Deep inside, he was still that weak, young boy from Brooklyn. There was no stripping him of that.

“Tony…” Steve warily said. “Was he actually your son —”

“No!” Tony was quick to respond. “Heavens no.”

He made a face, as if the idea was more ludicrous than it sounded, even shaking off a shiver at the mere concept. Steve decided that it fit right in with his personality, almost comforting to know a part of his selfishness was still there, despite the insult that it brought forth. After all, Tony was a loose cannon billionaire who barely knew how to speak to kids, let alone raise one. He was almost as awkward with Barton’s kids as Thor had been.

Steve, on the other hand, always dreamed of having a family with Peggy.

Somehow it seemed unfair.

Tony adjusted himself on the sofa, attempting to straighten his posture in a way that would evoke poise they both knew he didn’t have right now.

“He’s been — he was— hanging around here. A lot. More often than I probably should have let him.” He took a sip of his coffee. “It started after he rejected my offer to join the team. I brought him over to tinker with his suit, nothing more. Then it kept happening, but for other reasons — ‘let me show you this invention, come watch the game, help me upgrade DUM-E.’ The kid was smart. Damn smart.”

Steve briefly bowed his head, masking the flood of remorse that he knew washed over his features like a broken dam. It didn’t matter whether he could be seen or not though, as Tony refused to look his way, his own eyesight locked intently on the table in front of them. Steve didn’t take offense to it — Tony almost never made eye contact, especially when talking about something that was personal to him.

“Last time I had him over — before all this shit went down, before you and Nat started training him, it was to show him that damn chameleon helmet. I kept telling myself excuses. Wouldn’t let him leave through the east wing because I didn’t want anyone to know I was hanging out with a teenager.”

Steve gave a faint smile. “Sounds like you.”

Tony continued like he hadn’t even spoken. “Being honest — being honest with myself…I was relieved the night he snuck in. I wanted him involved. I wanted to show him off. He was like a…little mini-me. I was proud of him. The damn kid couldn’t be stopped. I made him the suit and took it away, and he still went out doing his spider-thing.”
Steve listened intently, unsure of why Tony was being so open with him, yet hesitant to put a stop to it. In a way though, it hurt him. It pained him to hear someone discuss Peter in the past tense. He had met the bright, bubbly boy and knew right then and there that he had such a strong future ahead of him.

It pained him to know that they took that away.

“A building fell on him.”

Steve shot his head up, eyebrows high with surprise.

“An entire building.” Tony went on to say. “I wasn’t there, I didn’t know — hell, he had even warned me about the trouble before it happened. He was alone, and…and he got out of the situation like a badass. Went after some asshole who tried to steal all our stuff. Took down a plane. He did that for us — for me. He didn’t even tell me until months later. Months. I’m pretty sure that was around the time I decided to never let him out of my sights.”

Tony stared ahead, blankly, caught between the present and a memory that he couldn’t escape. “Always going on about responsibility…that if he had the power to do something, it was his responsibility to do it.”

Steve turned his head back to the ground, the sight of marble floors easier to take in than the stress that emitted from Tony. He wearily nodded.

“Very mature for his age.”

‘Too young.’ Steve thought. Too young to hold the weight of the world on his shoulders and too young to leave that world so soon. This wasn’t supposed to happen. Should he have put his foot down back when he could? Would that have even made a difference? The kid was obviously stubborn, doing this long before they got involved. Was it better that he passed in battle with the team he dreamed of working with? Or did that make it worse?

Steve had too many questions and he struggled with each one, keeping them inside. They kept him up at night, depriving him of any sleep. Looking over at Tony, he knew this wasn’t the time to discuss leadership, consequences or how to move forward with the Avengers.

For now, they just needed to be in the present. And cope.

“I knew he could handle things by himself, but…I didn’t want him to have to do it alone.” Tony spoke with a raw emotion that cracked in his throat, “He told me he saw me as a mentor. What a fucked up person to choose as a mentor.”

Tony was quiet when he finished, his words disappearing into his half-empty coffee mug that settled over his mustache and lips.

He wasn’t sure when the coffee had gone cold.

Steve clasped his hands together in his hand, his thumb grazing over his other knuckle as he took everything in. He wished he had known these things sooner. He wished he and Tony were still close enough that the billionaire would have wanted to tell him in the first place.

He wished they had done things differently, not just with Peter, but all the way back to the Accords. Though he believed somewhere a version of him existed who had never been graced with Tony’s forgiveness, as rough and shallow as it turned out to be, he still longed for a different outcome. Maybe if they hadn’t sought forgiveness from each other, Peter would still be alive.
Steve had decided long ago that he wouldn’t live in a world full of ‘what if’s’ and wishes. He dropped that habit when Dr. Abraham Erskine died in his arms, reminding him to be true to himself — to be a good man. But over the past twenty-four hours, he had painfully resorted back to his old habits.

He hadn’t spent as much time with Peter as Tony had, but he felt like what time they shared was unforgettable. He once made a toast ‘to the little guys’, back before a super-serum changed his entire life. Seeing Peter share that mantra was heartwarming. Now that he was gone, his heart felt eerily cold.

Tony had a connection with the kid, though. He could see it, in his eyes, back when he spoke about Peter with such immense wonder — biological or not, it was a twisted version of parental pride that shined through him.

Now with him gone, so was that flicker of light.

“Tony, I…”

Tony shot up from the couch. “Don’t. I don’t want to hear it.”

Steve stood up with him, cautiously waiting to see if he’d dodge his touch before gently laying his hand on his shoulder. Tony didn’t run, he didn’t brush him off — he stood still.

“I’m sorry,” Steve earnestly said.

He wasn’t expecting Tony to look over at him. When he did, his stomach dropped at the sight of blood-shot, red-rimmed eyes locked onto his, the lines and wrinkles around his face sharp and deep in his skin.

Tony frowned, grimly pessimistic. “So am I.”

Happy Hogan had been under Tony’s employment with Stark Industries for over two decades. He wasn’t just the man’s chauffeur, bodyguard, turned Head of Security for the company; they had developed a strong friendship over their time spent together. Happy would say, without a doubt, that Tony Stark was one of his best friends. He’d lay down his life for the man, as the billionaire had done for him in the past.

Over the course of the twenty-some years, he had accumulated a bundle of experiences that would shock any ordinary man. Especially during the past decade that Iron Man came to exist. If permitted to write a book about it all, it’d easily be a top seller.

Back in the day, in his early years when the man was a loose playboy, he had screened women for Tony, ensuring no one was too crazy or dirty to get in his bed. He had bought drug paraphernalia for him when Pepper refused to. And then when he took on the mantle of Iron Man, god did his life get weird. Suddenly he was carrying around cases of the man’s armored suit, driving around undercover Russian spies and personally taking on swarms of creeps in fist-to-fist combat.

But nothing — nothing compared to this.
“I don’t know, you tell me.” Happy waved his hand with aggravation. “You’re the salesman. Sell me something.”

The man, gray-haired with matching beard, quirked an eyebrow in response. “Well… I suppose cost factor needs to be established first. Your basic materials will be the cheapest — bronze, copper. Price goes up with stainless steel. There’s wood, of course — mahogany, walnut, cherry, maple —”

“Boss says to make it the most expensive thing you got,” Happy mumbled, tugging at the tie that had become uncomfortably tight around his neck.

The casket store was creeping him out, on every level possible. He had never stepped foot inside one in his entire life, though he dreaded the day his parents would pass and give him that responsibility. Working for Tony always brought on first experiences, but this was one he wished he had passed on.

“What... what about size? All these — everything on display — they’re too big.”

The salesman stared at him, a blank and emotionless expression written across his face. Happy assumed anyone working here had to be somewhat dead inside to hold this type of job.

“Too big?” he repeated.

“Yeah,” Happy insisted. “The kid wasn’t that big. He was like… well, kind of scrawny. He’d drown in these things. And they’re way too long, he was only... yay high?”

Happy held his hand in the air as if he was measuring the height of someone, reaching to his chest. The salesman blinked a few times, shaking his head.

“We have… child size and adult size.”

His voice was so monotone that it was driving Happy crazy. He tugged at his tie again, pulling it loose.

“Whatever,” he mumbled. “Adult size, whatever is most expensive. It’s not like we’re gonna have a body to bury anyway.”

The salesman nodded, walking behind his desk and pulling up the necessary paperwork for the order form. Happy went to lean against the nearest wall, only to discover there wasn’t one space that hadn’t been decked out in casket displays. He jumped away as if he had been burnt, shuddering and swallowing down the disgust that threatened to make his breakfast reappear.

He had done a lot in the past twenty years working for Stark Industries.

But this was the worst thing Tony Stark ever made him do.

Gathering the team was harder than Steve expected it to be. It took all day to convince them to meet up, some being more difficult than others. He hadn’t wanted to put his foot down and act stern, but he had to get things done. It was his job as their leader.

It was late at night by the time they all regrouped, sitting around the large conference table in one
of the many private rooms within the facility. They came one by one, until Tony was the last of them to join, mountain glass full of alcohol in his hand. He hadn’t even sat at the table with them, rather a seat off in the corner and away from the group. No one dared to comment on it.

Once they were all present, Sam slumped down in his chair, breaking the tension-filled silence.

“I really don’t want to be here right now."

Rhodey looked his way. “None of us do.”

“Yeah?” He sat up suddenly. “Then why isn’t Barton here? Why does he get to go home while we suffer through this bullshit?"

“Sam —” Steve warned.

“Because Clint just watched a boy his son’s age die.” Natasha cut in. "Pardon the man for being a bit shell-shocked and wanting to spend time with his family.”

“I believe we’re all shell-shocked right now.” Bruce kept his voice low and quiet.

“I’m not. I’m disgusted,” Natasha stated, looking to the corner where Tony sat. “And I’m not afraid to speak up either. None of this would have happened had you not involve a child in this mess, Stark.”

He didn’t respond, despite the hostility that laced her tone. In fact, he hadn’t even looked at the group, his exhausted eyes watching his whiskey swirl in his glass. His detachment only angered Natasha further.

“That’s enough. This is not why I asked you to be here.” Steve leaned over, standing at the head of the conference table in front of everyone, his palms pressed heavily against the flat surface. “Clint is with his family right now. He was granted twenty-four hours off base before SHIELD puts us in lockdown.”

The entire group gaped, Tony excluded. While he took a long gulp of his drink, everyone at the table seemed to speak at once.

“What?” Sam hissed.

Wanda shook her head. “That cannot be.”

“Excuse me?” Rhodey asked.

Bruce furrowed his brows. “You can’t be serious.”

“We negotiated the best we could,” Steve explained, hushing the room. “But facts remain — Peter wasn’t an official member of the team. And…he was a minor of age. SHIELD doesn’t want us leaving the facility until they decide how to proceed with this.”

“Proceed?” Bruce asked. “Like…‘putting us in jail’ proceed?”

“Great,” Sam muttered. “We avoided becoming fugitives only to land right back where we were.”

“That’s not the case,” Steve insisted.

Natasha leaned back in her chair, her arms crossed. “Sounds like it to me.”
“Rogers said it himself…we got a minor killed.” Rhodey’s tone was distant, almost formal. “I can’t foresee this ending well for us.”

“We didn’t do anything,” Sam snapped.

Steve banged his palm down on the table, just loud enough to jolt everyone’s attention. His frustration was evident, as was the exhaustion they shared together. Normally well composed and patient, he seemed to be a shell of himself, putting on a show of who he normally was. Once they looked his way, he straightened his back, standing tall over them.

“Listen…” he started. "As difficult as it is right now, we have other pressing matters to deal with. The chameleon helmet is still missing. The magician is still at large. SHIELD doesn’t know who tampered with the Chitarui — now is not the time for us to be at each other's throats.”

Breaking his quiescence, Tony spoke up, “Let them deal with it.”

Everyone swiveled in their chairs to look his way, watching as he sipped his liquor almost casually.

Rhodey shook his head. “It’s not that easy, Tones.”

“Why not?” Tony finally looked up, the dark bags under his eyes visible from the lights from above. “We get involved, we mess things up. We get people killed.”

For a split second, he locked eyes with Wanda, the girl sitting silently at the table. She looked at him long enough to see him return his gaze back on his drink. “If they want it done a certain way, let them do it themselves,” he concluded.

“This is our responsibility, Tony. It’s our mess to clean up,” Steve said.

“No, Disappear-O the Magnificent is not our mess,” Tony argued, apathetically. “I will take responsibility for the helmet — I already have, my guys are working on that situation. But the rest of it is not our problem. And quite frankly, I don’t see it as my problem either.”

Natasha stared at him with disbelief, her jaw slightly unhinged, her forehead creased with animosity. “Are you incapable of letting go of your ego for one god damn second?”

Vision raised his hand in the air. “If I may vocalize a theory —”

“No, you may not.” Tony stood from his chair. “I’m done here.”

He barely took three steps before Sam had scoffed, arms folded over his chest.

“Walking away like the coward you are.”

Steve was quick to intervene. “Hey!”

Tony stopped dead in his tracks. “Say that again, Wilson?”

“You heard me,” Sam bit back. “Everyone in this room knows that you’re responsible for the kid’s death, and now you won’t step up to the plate and make things right.”

“That’s too far, Sam.” Steve stood between the two men despite the fact that Sam hadn’t even risen from his chair.

“Is it?” Wanda asked sharply.
“Yes, Wanda.” Steve turned to face her, his tone a gentle warning. “It is.”

Wanda shook her head. “Why could we not save him? Why was protecting the city more important than protecting our own family?”

Steve frowned. “Because that’s our job. That’s what we do — we protect those who cannot fend for themselves.”

“The kid was trapped.” Sam retorted, sourly. “One of us should have gotten to him.”

“We were ambushed,” Rhodey was quick to remind him.

Natasha cut in bleakly. “That’s an excuse.”

“Yeah?” Sam asked, looking straight at her. “And where were you while we were out in the field?”

Bruce turned to face him. “Sam, we know you’re upset, but you —”

“Don’t. I have just as much psychological training in this as you do,” Sam rebutted.

Bruce stayed calm. “Then you should know this isn’t any one person’s fault. We all did our best out there —”

“No. We didn’t.” Tony’s voice was almost foreign, heavy and slurred. “We could have done more.”

WHAM!

Steve slammed his balled fist down on the table, the wood shaking and splintering in the middle. It was enough to startle the team, some pushing their chairs back in shock.

“Alright, that’s enough!” he shouted, “We are not going to let this tear us apart. We are a team — we have fought hard this year to remain that way. And I understand last night has caused a tremendous amount of stress for us all, trust me when I say I am just as devastated by this. We lost someone. He may not have been an official Avenger, but we all were considering him to be one of us. Part of our family. It is our job to have each others backs out there and we all failed in protecting him.”

The room was silent for a moment, remorseful deliberation falling among the group.

Tony shook his head. “No, Steve, I’m not too prideful to admit that they’re right.”

They looked towards him, and he waved his mountain glass back, an open gesture of admittance.

“You’re right. I’m the reason Parker died out there.”

Steve was past frustrated. “Tony, you’re not —”

Tony ignored him, stumbling forward with slight drunkenness.

“I recruited the kid. I brought him in on that mission. And I failed to get him out in time. I gave him that suit because I saw a great amount of potential in him — I saw the better parts of me that I couldn’t live up to. And I swore to myself that I would protect him, at all costs. I had Happy watching him for the better part of this year, I had every damn protocol I could think of and every Iron Man suit ready to save his ass if he screwed the pooch…and it wasn’t good enough.”
He spoke with a raw clarity that stole the room, the emotion that tinted his words enough to paralyze the others from arguing.

“And I don’t blame him,” Tony continued. “He heard someone in need of help, he went after it like he always did. No problem was ever too small for him. He saw those Chitarui and he knew we were being ambushed, so he prevented anything worse from happening. I don’t blame him, I blame myself. I should’ve taught him more.”

Tony downed the rest of his drink in one swig, barely hissing at the burning alcohol that poured down into his chest. He cleared his throat free of the lump that swelled inside.

“I should have slowed the world down so a boy like that could grow up to be the man he was supposed to become.”

He stared at the empty glass, the reflection of his feet warped at the bottom. No one dared to respond, not that he wanted them to. He didn’t want to hear their pity or deal with their false reassurance. There wasn’t any point in it. SHIELD could lock him up for the rest of his life, and he’d be okay with it.

He was the catalyst to the team’s deterioration and inevitable downfall. One by one, he’d let them down. In a way, he already had.

Tony looked up and shrugged. “So if you want to leave because you don’t trust me, or you don’t have faith in me that I’ll have your back out there — go now. I won’t blame you for that either.”

It was eerie how a few members exchanged nervous glances, as if considering the idea. No one got far enough to make a move; Steve hadn’t even been able to take a breath to speak again.

Tony, so wrapped up in his own disheveled thoughts, didn’t even notice when the room’s walls illuminated with the reflection of a bright, vivid orange. He only turned around when a new voice broke through.

“Tony Stark.” The figure stepped through the portal. “For being one of the smartest people on this planet, you sure are dumb as hell.”

The sound was crackling, like fire sparklers had been lit and then extinguished just as quickly. When the portal disappeared, it left only the man who had arrived through it.

Tony blinked. “And who the hell are you?”

The man squinted his eyes and tilted his head, a sense of brass and prescience emitting from him.

“I’m Doctor Stephen Strange,” he announced. “Master of the Mystic Arts.”

Sam jumped from his chair, quick to attack. “Aw hell no!”

Bruce shot out his arm to hold him back. “Hold on, Sam—”

“No!” Sam pushed past Bruce’s arm. ”No, I am done with this magic bullshit.”

Before he was able to act, Tony held a hand in the air to stop Sam. His eyes stayed locked on the oddly dressed man in front of him.

He didn’t miss a beat. “You’re the one who warned Banner.”

“Apparently not well enough,” Strange retorted. “Your friend is still alive.”
The words were enough to grab their attention, even Steve gaping in shock.

Strange lowered his chin, staring Tony down.

“Peter Parker. The kid is still alive.”

Chapter End Notes

Alright, so fun nerd fact: One of my favorite Marvel series was Ultimate Spider-man. Back when that series was first going on, I had a mail subscription to each new issue and re-read them like you wouldn’t believe. There’s a line in this chapter said by Tony: “I should’ve taught him more. I should have slowed the world down so a boy like that could become the man he was supposed to become.” I’ve borrowed that from Ultimate Spider-man: Fallout. It was originally said by Nick Fury to Mary Jane, and I’ll never forget how hard my heart broke when I read that panel. I really wanted to incorporate it in this fic. So I don’t take credit for it, and I also highly recommend that mini-series.

Now, ya’ll, I am SO F*CKING excited for what’s to come. Like, you guys have no idea. Ohhh it’s about to get so good.

Thanks to Mei_kun for beta-ing this chapter.
I am SUPER excited to finally bring Dr. Strange into this story. I’ve been looking forward to this moment since I first scripted the outline of this fanfic. I am treating him with much love and care to his character integrity, as with everyone else, but also with special consideration that he’s a very…unique personality to handle.

I did want to specify, though, that this is a somewhat novice Dr. Strange. He’s not Sorcerer Supreme yet. He hasn’t thrown out the Crimson Bands of Cyttorak on Thanos. I imagine this story would take place not long after the Dr. Strange movie ended, if I were to follow the MCU timeline. So while there were so, so, so many powers, abilities and tricks I could have made him use (I mean, the man has the ability to just strip people of their powers. That would solve a lot of issues in this story, LOL.) I kept him down to the basics.

Because…you know. I can’t fill *every* plot hole.

“Well why didn’t Dr. Strange just-”

Shhhh. Because.

Because I wouldn’t be able to whump if he did.

It’s all for the whump.

Lastly, my translation of foreign languages is solely from Google Translate. So I’m sorry if I’m actually butchering these words.

pequeña araña is supposed to mean “little spider” in Spanish.
glupyy malchik/Глупый мальчик, is supposed to mean “stupid boy” in Russian.

Mild descriptive writing of bodily injury. Warning for use of involuntary/forced drugging.

Oh yes.

Oh yes.

We’re rolling the ball now.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Hold up, kid, you need backup.”

“I got this, Mr. Stark!”
“Doesn’t matter. I’m heading your — shit!”

Peter wasn’t sure what happened outside the warehouse. The moment he shot his webbing onto the enormous pile of reassembled Chitarui heads, loud explosions crackled through his comm and screams from outside overwhelmed his senses. He spun around, the mountain of alien tech disregarded in the heat of the moment.

“Mr. Stark?” He tried to yell over the chaos. “Mr. Stark, what’s going on?!”

He only heard crackling static and a high pitch buzzing. It reminded him of when Aunt May forgot to pay the cable bill and he sat watching the snow channel for three hours. The hum was painful to his ears, so loud he could feel his eardrum vibrating within his head.

And then it went silent.

“Uhm…guys?” He hated the way the panic made his voice squeak. “Anyone? This thing still on?”

He tapped ferociously at his ear despite knowing that the comms were hooked up through his mask, that there was no one device he could smack back into working. He could feel his suit go offline, the familiar whir of the technology providing a telltale sign that things were shutting down.

Suddenly, his stomach flopped with anxiety. He could hear the explosions from outside, like fireworks shooting off one after the other. It didn’t take him long to realize that the sweat pooling underneath his suit wasn’t just from nerves but from his surroundings.

The once harmless pile of Chitarui heads were heating up, glowing eerily red and orange as they increased in temperature.

‘Oh no,’ he thought. They were ticking time bombs. There was no way he could let that many explode — there was no telling how bad the damage could be. He began to shoot web grenades all around them, trapping them the best he could.

“Okay, Parker, you got this.” He swallowed heavily. “Web ‘em up. Contain them. Then help the others.”

The pile of alien tech had barely been covered when he noticed the rising fog from below, creeping up his ankles and pouring over the ground. It was thick, gray and floated along the floor like clouds of smoke.

He immediately thought one thing.

‘Crap.’

“Not so fast, pequeña araña.”

Peter spun around, his mechanical spider eyes wide at the sight of a green-clad, purple-caped man approaching him. Despite encountering him before, the fishbowl helmet still gave him a hearty chuckle.

“Mysterio!” he greeted with false enthusiasm, his arms out wide. “Not-so-long time, definitely no see.”

The warehouse was becoming incredibly hot. Sparing a glance behind him, he could see the Chitarui heads pulsate with energy, dimming from nothing into hot, fiery red. The encasement of webbing he had spread across them had already melted into white goo.
Of all times for this clown to show up, it just *had* to be when he needed to contain an impending explosion. The timing couldn’t be any worse.

“Mysterio…” the man hummed, the sound echoing from within his helmet. “Felicitous. Almost… foreordained.”

Peter cocked an eyebrow beneath his mask.

“O…kay,” he drawled out, shaking his head. “Hey, you gotta tell me — what’s up with the Spanish?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know.”

“Actually, no, not really.” Peter stepped forward, both to approach Mysterio and to steer clear of the rising heat that began to burn his backside. “What I *would* like is for you to turn yourself in to the Avengers.”

Mysterio titled his glass-encased head. “Oh?”

“Yeah.” Peter pointed an accusing finger his way. “You stole Mr. Stark’s property. Stealing is illegal, you know.”

He wiped at his brow, momentarily forgetting that it was covered by his mask. The panic in his chest was rising with the temperature. If he had any doubt before, Peter knew for sure now that his suit was offline, the temperature regulating feature failing to provide any sense of cooling in the now alarming hot building.

The fog had gotten thicker and had risen up to his waist, obscuring everything behind Mysterio and even covering the smoking hot Chitarui heads.

“That will be the least of your concerns here in a moment, *Gluppy mal'chik.*”

The voice was different, incredibly distinct with a heavy Russian accent. Though Peter could barely make out the figure, he did see an outline approaching him, slowly but surely.

Peter shook his head. “Wow. You guys are really making me regret not picking up more foreign language electives.”

By the time the man was side by side with Mysterio, Peter could see clear as day what he was looking at. The shutters of his eyes went wide.

“Hey…” He gaped. “That’s Mr. Stark’s helmet.”

The man didn’t respond. Fog circulated around him, swirling in thick waves around the crisp, white helmet that he wore. Otherwise, he was clad in all black; a sharp contrast to the colorless device on his head.

Peter stepped forward. “Give that back.”

There was still no response. Peter shook his head in frustration, knowing he didn’t have time to waste. With one swift movement, he lifted his arm and pressed two fingers down on his web-shooter, a stream of webbing heading directly for the man’s head.

He dodged it just as quickly as it came.

One more stream of webbing aimed at him and he rolled on the ground, hidden by the thick fog.
The harder Peter tried to focus on detaining the man, the more his eyes began to burn and an ache throbbed in the back of his head. It was eerily similar to when his the spider bite hadn’t fixed his eyesight and he wasn’t wearing his glasses. The strain was quickly taking a toll on him.

He began to remember what Karen had said that night in Times Square.

“Your enhanced senses struggled greatly to see through the man’s fog,” she had answered. “The strain appears to have given you a migraine.”

The guy was fast and slick, dodging each one of his spider webs. Even when Peter used both hands at once, two separate streams of webbing aimed at him, he evaded the attack. His agility reminded him of Natasha when they trained together at the Avenger’s facility. He was starting to wish they had spent more time in the gym than introducing her to the original Star Wars trilogy.

Peter squatted low to the floor, hoping to be unseen by the two men.

“Karen?” he whispered to his AI. “Karen, come on, give me something here.”

Two feet stepped into his line of sight, stomping on the ground. They hissed out a larger blanket of fog from the tips and heels of the golden boots he wore. Peter looked up, expecting to see Mysterio looming above. Only his reflection stared back at him from the glass helmet.

“Technology dampening nanites embedded within liquid particulates to create a fog,” Mysterio explained. “You should know by now that your tech will not work.”

Peter smacked his lips. “Oh. So that’s what that is.”

“Add a dash of neurotoxin compound to mute that pesky sixth sense of yours.”

Peter took the opportunity of distraction. He raised his arm and shot a strand of webbing to the ceiling, yanking himself up in the process and escaping the uncomfortably close presence of Mysterio.

“Wow, you guys have done all your research on me.” He flipped down from the ceiling. “I’m flattered!”

He aimed another strand of webbing at the chameleon helmet before he had even landed on the ground. If he could latch onto it, he could confine the man in his grasp. When his attack was once more dodged, Peter ended up rolling onto the ground, sliding to a halt on the soles of his feet.

He wasn’t giving up yet. Not while the device was right in front of him. He wasn’t going to let them get away again.

Another web and the man leaned to the side. One more, and he bent backward, the webbing going straight to the wall behind him.

And the Chitarui heads heated up, buzzing with energy that was ready to explode. Peter found himself drenched with sweat and his breaths were coming in hard, feeling like he was breathing straight out of an oven.

“You might want to focus on saving your webbing,” the chameleon masked man said. “Those devices will take down everything around us if allowed to explode.”

Panting, Peter came to a stop squatting low to the ground. He looked between both Mysterio and the other man, and then back at the pile of Chitarui.
How did he know about —
And why would he say…

“You’re behind this?” Peter asked, standing up.

It had been so long since anything, or anyone, had taken him by surprise. His spider-sense was always ready to alert him of danger at any second. So when he was kicked from behind and then both his arms were pulled behind his back, he didn’t have a chance to react.

“I am behind everything, boy,” the man hissed, his Russian accent thick and heavy on his tongue. “Now come with me.”

Peter used the grip to his advantage. He spun to his left. The swift movement shook the man ever so slightly so that only his right arm was being held. He then shot out a strand of webbing that connected with his face, pulling him forward and smacking him into his chest.

He needed to get that helmet off.

“No thanks, I’d rather stay here, thank —”

So distracted in detaining the Russian, he had forgotten about Mysterio. That was, until, a hand reached over to grab his spider-man mask and ripped it off with one fluid motion.

His mouth was abruptly covered with a thick cloth, pressing so hard into his face he could feel his nose squished up against the man’s palm.

“...you.”

The smell was sweet and pungent at the same time. Peter didn’t have the chance to focus on it. His eyes widening with shock. The man wearing the chameleon helmet flickered and blinked, colors of blue, pink and purple fading away in a light show that looked all too similar to when his phone would fritz out.

And then he was standing face to face with himself.

“That can’t be right.’ Peter’s thoughts were hazy. ‘Wait, no, that’s right. The mask. Appearance. He…and I…’

Within seconds his muscles betrayed him, falling lax and useless like wet noodles. His eyes fluttered and spasmed. He could have sworn he — Peter Parker — waved back at him.

‘Huh?’ What? The sound around him became distorted as he fought to stay conscious, everything suddenly slow and warped.

There was no fighting the drug. Ultimately his eyes rolled into the back of his head, his body going slack against whatever, or whoever, held him up.

With Peter held by his grip, Mysterio used his free hand to toss the spider-man mask to impersonation of Peter, who caught it with ease.

They didn’t speak; rather they exchanged a brief, curt nod to each other.

Mysterio teleported out, taking the unconscious Peter with him.

The Russian shoved the mask over his head — the chameleon helmet disguising him as Peter, and waited for the fog to clear away from his surroundings.
Within seconds the building was clear of any offending vapor, and the comms from within the mask sparked to life. He smiled as the frightened, almost hysterical voices came pouring through.

“Kid, get out of there, now!” Stark yelled. “Peter, NOW!”

Briefly looking behind him, he could see that the pile of Chitauri was set to go off any second.

Perfect.

“I can’t — I can’t!” he yelled back, acting in a panic. “I’m stuck, I — you gotta help me, Tony, I’m stuck!”

He never waited for a response. Ripping the mask off and tossing it to the side, he rolled his eyes and grimaced just as Mysterio re-appeared in the room and grabbed his arm.

Within seconds, they were gone, teleporting out of the building in a blink of an eye.

Everything that occurred was simultaneous and almost synchronized. They disappeared as the spider-man mask landed on the ground, and when the mask touched the floor, the building exploded.

Less than one minute later, Iron Man flew inside.

“Peter!?”

His shouts were barely heard above the blazing flames.

The room had fallen completely silent. Everyone seemed to be caught in a tidal wave between shock and disbelief, even Sam backing away with confusion. Tony, however, seemed to be the first to ground himself.

“That’s impossible,” he insisted.

“Trust me when I say, nothing is impossible.” Stephen glared at him. “You should have heeded my warning.”

Stepping forward, Steve directed his attention at Tony. “You know this man?”

Tony didn’t dare to break eye contact with Strange, not even when Steve approached him and stood uncomfortably close at his side. His stare was piercingly angry, highlighting the dark bags that sat above his cheekbones.

“Never met him before a day in my life.”

“Warning?” Natasha stood up from her seat at the table. “What message are you talking about?”

Bruce stood behind her. “When I came back from —”

“It doesn’t matter,” Tony quickly interrupted, turning his head over his shoulder to spare a glance at the others. “He’s too late.”
Stephen cocked an eyebrow as if to say ‘oh really?’ and Tony turned back to face him with lips tightly pursed.

“You’re too late,” Tony repeated.

His eyes were narrowed and he carried a sense of resentment that could be felt miles away. The others didn’t dare to intervene.

Stephen titled his head. “Am I, now?”

”Tony…” Steve looked between them, “What’s going on?”

He didn’t respond. He couldn’t — a sea of unraveled emotions was pulling apart what little was left of him. The desire to hide away and drink himself into oblivion was quickly replaced with an unruly, animalistic need to tell this man everything he had done wrong. Blame him for everything that caused his life to fall apart. Make him pay for letting one of the few people that mattered to him be ripped away.

He knew. And he didn’t help. That alone sent a bubbling rage to course through Tony's veins.

His lack of answer provoked Bruce to step forward, hesitant and nervous as he pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

“He brought me back from Sakaar. From space,” he explained. “He gave me a message for Tony.”

Natasha dropped her shoulders and held in a sigh, shaking her head with exasperation. “Thanks for sharing it with the group, Stark.”

Tony's attention finally snapped. He whirled around on his heels to face them. “You’ll have to pardon me, I’ve been a little preoccupied!”

Rhodey shook his head. “Tony, I told you —”

Steve turned to him, jaw sagging. “You knew about this?”

“I plead the fifth,” Rhodey said, hands in the air.

Steve scoffed, taking a step back. “This is unbelievable.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “Do not start with me, Rogers.”

Steve wasn’t backing down. While the others stared on with quizzical expressions, he approached Tony with his chest puffed out, his movements flowing with stern anger.

“It’s been secret after secret. Peter, the alien tech, now this? If this is your way of getting back at me for —”

“Not even remotely close,” Tony hissed. “I’ll have you know I was planning on telling everyone! Sue me for wanting to figure out what it meant before I brought it to the round table. So on that note -”

He turned back to Strange. “What gives you the right to show up now?”

“I shouldn’t have to be here to begin with,” Stephen's answer was direct and straightforward.

“Oh really?” Tony retorted. “What exactly did you expect to happen when you gave Bruce your
meaningless cryptic message?”

“I had hoped you’d put the two and two together, like the genius you supposedly are.”

Tony barked out a mixture of a scoff and laughter, turning away from Strange momentarily at the sheer audacity of the situation. When he turned back around, he was slightly more composed, though the stress wore heavily on his face.

“This an apology visit? We didn’t crack the code in time, so you want to say sorry for everything going to hell in a handbasket?”

Vision, who had been sitting idly at the conference table, slowly got up from his seat.

“You stated that Peter Parker is still alive, am I correct?”

Wanda looked up, eyes wide with hope. “He is?” she asked fervently.

“He’s not,” Tony spat back.

“He is,” Stephen argued.

Tony arched a brow. “Yeah? Where’s he at then?”

Strange didn’t respond.

The moment of silence gave Tony a sense of vindication, and he nodded his head contumely. “That’s what I thought.”

“Even if I knew, I wouldn’t be able to tell you,” Strange insisted.

“No, of course not,” Tony bit back. “You’d inscribe it in a poem.”

Sam grabbed the sides of his head, rubbing his temples furiously. “Okay, can we just — take a time out here, for a minute? Rewind or something?”

Despite the urgency for answers, they obliged. The moment of silence was much needed, whether the others wanted to admit it or not. While Stephen looked on with a sense of impatience and Tony stood tall with bitter agitation, they used the break from arguing to comprehend the situation.

In a way, the pause gave them the time to remember that they had been faced with much weirder things before. Still, being startled out of their grief and mourning remained a new experience.

Sam finally looked up, drawing in a deep breath. “What the hell is going on? Who the hell are you?”

Stephen looked his way, slightly annoyed at the question. "I’m Doctor Stephen Strange. I’m a master of the Mystic Arts.”

“Magic?” Natasha asked incredulously.

“Something like that,” he answered dryly.

Steve stepped forward with the most poise he could muster up, holding his hands in the air open palmed as if to surrender.

“You’ll have to excuse us. We’ve had some trouble regarding…magic, lately.”
Stephen nodded. “I know.”

“What else is it that you know?” Wanda asked.

“As I’ve said,” Stephen calmly reiterated. “Peter Parker — he’s still alive.”

“Where is he?” Tony snapped, his words sharp on his tongue.

“That…” he paused, holding back a grimace. “I don’t know.”

For a moment, Tony turned and looked at the others with an expression that asked ‘is this guy for real?’ He finally caved with a snort, chuckling and gesturing his hand in Strange’s direction.

“Does anyone else appreciate the fact that Houdini here is able to tell us that Parker ‘isn’t dead,’” his fingers used air quotations on the words, “but can’t whip out his crystal ball to let us know where he really is?”

Stephen stepped forward. “Let me ask you one thing, Stark. What do I have to benefit from being here right now?”

“Did you want to compare whose facial hair is better?” Tony asked, rubbing at his own goatee.

Stephen rolled his eyes. “For the love of —”

“Because I strongly believe I win that criterion.”

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re an arrogant asshole?” Stephen asked.

Rhodey raised his hand in the air. “Everyday.”

Steve stepped between the two men, hand on Tony’s chest while he refrained from touching Strange.

“Why are you here?” he calmly asked.

“My job is to defend this universe from otherworldly threats. I protect reality as we know it,” Stephen explained. “Yours is currently being warped.”

Steve frowned, letting his hand fall from Tony as he slowly stepped away. The others seemed just as perplexed by the answer, staring at Strange as if he had grown four heads.

Only Bruce seemed to understand, removing his glasses and rubbing his eyes.

“Nothing is as it seems.”

Stephen, while staring at Tony, nodded his head in the direction of Bruce. “He understood it.”

“Yesterday my concept of magic involved a fifty-two deck of cards,” Rhodey said. “How are you…how is this even possible?”

Stephen walked further into the room, his cloak flapping behind him. “I harness energy drawn from other dimensions of the multi-verse. In doing so, I am aided by magical patrons. A group of entities known as the Vishanti, a trinity of godly beings comprised of Hoggoth, Oshtur, and Agamotto.”

The team watched as he crossed his arms, forearms overlapping as his index and pointer fingers
spread out like two wide peace signs. There was a pause before he brought them together, his index and ring fingers touching tips.

No one expected what seemed to be a silly ritual to initiate movement from the thick, golden necklace that he wore around his neck. It began to shine a vivid green, so bright that it could illuminate the entire room.

There was a stunned silence as the shimmering and radiant stone cast a light over them all, the shock dissipating only once Vision walked closer, his head sticking out with curiosity.

“Am I correct in stating that is an infinity stone?”

Steve shot his head over to Vision with neck-breaking speed. Bruce and Natasha exchanged an apprehensive glance, and the others couldn’t tear their eyes away from the glowing gem.

Stephen nodded. “It’s the time stone. It has the ability to manipulate time, even beyond where time exists — places like the dark dimension. It was contained inside here, the Eye of Agamotto, under the protection of myself and those who are left in the mystic arts. We have sworn to protect it with our lives.”

“Well, there you go,” Tony threw his arm out, gesturing to the necklace. “That’s our Deus ex machina — use your shiny little necklace and take us back before this all happened.”

“It doesn’t work that way,” Stephen said, looking a bit sour.

Tony furrowed his brows. “You’re saying you have magic, but can’t use your magic?”

“I’m saying, it doesn’t work that way.” he repeated.

“I don’t buy it.” Tony pointed to the necklace, “If a machine doesn’t work, you repair it until it does. If you can’t use your magic on this, you fix that problem until you can. Every equation has an answer and every answer has an explanation.”

“This isn’t science.”

“Science is proving to be a lot more useful than whatever Illuminati black magic bullshit you have up your sleeve,” Tony sneered.

“You throw around the term black magic, but this is far beyond the pale, weak sorcery you’ve been raised to believe in. It comes at a cost…and we are not prepared to pay those prices,” Stephens tone was firm and stiff. “Using the time stone for any reason deemed unjust violates natural law. If I were to have any more information, any more than what I already know, it would drastically change the events set in time. You’re looking at breaking apart the time-space continuum.”

Tony’s argument was on the tip of his tongue.

Bruce managed to speak before him. “The butterfly effect.”

They all turned to look at him, Tony included. Bruce slowly returned his glasses to his face.

“One localized change in a complex system having large effects elsewhere. The theory that a single occurrence, no matter how small, can change the course of the universe forever.”

Wanda looked up at Strange. “You came here to tell us Peter is still alive. You want us to find him.”
Her words weren’t a question, rather an acknowledgment of his task.

Stephen nodded, looking towards Tony. “I have been warned, by the Vishanti, that the death of your ward —”

“He wasn’t my ward,” Tony snapped.

Stephen rolled his eyes. “Whatever relationship exists here — it’s the catalyst. If not taken care of, it will start a chain of events beyond our control of stopping.”

“What chain of events?” Tony asked. “What’s so awful from one kid kicking the bucket?”

“I have not been granted that knowledge.”

Maybe it was the sleep deprivation, or perhaps the day’s events finally took a toll on him, but for a moment Tony stared ahead blankly, unable to think of a proper response to what he was hearing. He blinked, once and then twice, before wearily shaking his head.

“Alright, I’ve entertained this long enough.” He turned around, shooing him away with his arm. “Grab your rabbit and leave through your top hat, or whatever pyrotechnic light show you have in your back pocket. I’m not sending anyone to walk you out, so you’re on your own —”

“Your kid is still alive!” Stephen argued, stepping forward.

Tony spun fast on his heels. “I watched him die.”

“You watched a building explode.”

Tony pointed an accusing finger his way. “That he was in.”

Stephen slammed an open palm into his chest.

And the world stopped.

He felt it before he saw it. A sudden displacement from his body, as if his mind had become its own entity, disconnecting from everything that held him grounded in the real world.

Stephen used one hand to grab the wrist of the finger that pointed at him, pulling him forward. With one fluid motion he slammed his open palm into his chest. The strike was so hard it knocked him off balance.

Or at least, it would have.

He was witnessing real time in milliseconds, possibly even slower. He stared at his own body. His own body, caught in slow motion stumbling backward. Stephen’s hand was still on him, covering the Black Sabbath logo of his t-shirt, the toes of his feet barely having barely lifted off the ground.

With shaking panic, Tony realized that he wasn’t in his body anymore.

He stared at his hands with disbelief. The rough, callous fingers were so faint, so tangible that he could see the floor below him. His physical body continued to fall backward, centimeter by centimeter, the surrounding world around him moving like molasses as he floated away.

And then he was sent soaring.

The air was knocked out from his lungs at the forced momentum and he lost connection with all
that what was around him. He could feel the wind fly through his hair, hitting his skin and sending his stomach in rolling waves of nausea as he flew faster than Iron Man ever could.

It was a blur and spectrum of colors, a roller coaster caught within a kaleidoscope. He was vaguely aware that he was shouting, possibly even screaming, but he couldn’t comprehend anything that was going on. He couldn’t connect with what was around him.

And then he stopped, face to face with dazed, glassy brown eyes.

Young eyes.

Panicked eyes.

Peter’s eyes.

Tony could hear the kid's breathing, each inhale raspy, forced. For one split of a second, he heard a heartbeat. Alive. *Living.*

One blink, and everything was gone.

He came back with a gasp, the inhale so hard that it rattled his entire body. He barely caught his footing, his body stumbling back from Strange's push. His hands reached for his chest with trembling hands.

“What was that!? What voodoo did you just use on me?” Tony didn’t even bother hiding the uncharacteristically flustered tone that cracked with a bit of hysteria.

Stephen was unfazed.

“I pushed your astral form out of your physical form. I utilized the time you spent outside of your body to connect with your memories and seek out Peter’s soul. You saw what I saw. Nothing more. Nothing less,” he explained. “The boy is alive.”

The team, like Tony, didn’t know what to say. They listened to the conservation with confusion and incredulity.

Tony, on the other hand, fought to grasp what he just saw. It was beyond any out of body experience he’d ever had before, primarily because it was a *literal* out of body experience. He still felt light on his feet as if he had forgotten how heavy his body weighed.

“I don’t understand. I saw it. We saw it!” He was still breathing heavy. “There was nothing left of him, his suit, his body — all gone. I even went into that building to find him and….”

The fire spread across his skin. The air became hard to breathe as his chest constricted, the flames that didn’t exist threatening to burn him alive. His fingers clutched tightly at his t-shirt, pulling the fabric away in hopes that it would help him breathe easier. He didn’t know if he had the strength to steer away a panic attack right now.
Normally cool, calm and collected, there was no denying the unraveling of his behavior. He was panicked. He was past panicked, he was full blown frantic. Everything that made Tony Stark having been thrown out the window the moment he thought Peter was dead.

“I’m stuck, I—you gotta help me, Mr. Stark, I’m stuck!”

His blood went cold. The nightmares that had been keeping him awake flashed to the front of his mind and replayed the incident like a movie. But something seemed wrong. Suddenly, something didn’t click.

He closed his eyes to remember.

How did it go down?

How did it really happen?

Remembering that moment was a pain he couldn’t bear; the smell of ashes still present, the burning skeleton in his nightmares ever so vivid, but they were corrupted into something his mind wanted him to believe.

He told Peter to get out. And for the longest time, the kid didn’t respond. But when he did…

“I’m stuck, I—you gotta help me, Tony, I’m stuck!”

His eyes shot open. “I can’t believe I didn’t notice it sooner.”

“Notice what?” Steve dared to ask.

“He called me Tony. When he called for help, when he said he was stuck…he said my name.”

Rhodey shrugged. “…okay?”

Tony looked his way. “The kid never calls me Tony. He’s like the epitome of perfect manners. Which means he was either desperate for help, or — son of a bitch.”

Like pieces of a puzzle, everything began to fit together.

Tony looked at Stephen, this time not with anger and not with disdain, but with realization. “The chameleon helmet. It was the freak show carnie with the chameleon helmet.”

“Wait, hold on a minute.” Steve held a hand in the air. “Are we sure it was Mysterio?”

“And are we really sticking with the name Mysterio?” Sam asked.

Natasha turned her head to him. “You have anything better?”

Sam shrugged. “It sounds…ridiculous.”

“Matches his outfit, then,” Rhodey mumbled.

“His name is Francis Klum,” Stephen explained. “And he’s not working alone.”

There was a pause.

Steve arched an eyebrow. “Well, why didn’t you just lead with that?”
Drip.

Drip.

Drip.

Peter frowned, his forehead creasing. He struggled to grab for consciousness, the leaking water was the first tangible thought his mind pieced together. Each drip exacerbated the pain in his skull.

‘Ugh…’ he thought. ‘My head is killing me.’

The pain originated in his temples, tracing all the way to the back of his head and even trailing down into his neck. It was an aching throb, pulsating with every beat of his heart. For a moment he pinned the nasty migraine on his growing nausea. A brief parting of his mouth told him otherwise.

It was a sweet taste, almost bitterly tart on his tongue. He smacked his dry lips to try and will the sensation off his mind. The the gogginess battled his efforts, insistent on pulling him back under. He tried to focus, letting his mind reel through the numerous chemicals that he could recognize in an attempt to keep himself grounded.

Ether, for sure. That one was easy to pin down. The other lingering taste made his lips tingle and his tongue dry. Chlorine. It brought back memories of lab class and his teacher shouting at them to remember the dangers of…trihalomethane.

“Oh man,” his head rolled to the side. “Was I seriously just chloroformed?”

The sound of wheels rolling on the ground startled him, the presence he had been unaware of making itself known.

“He’s awake.”

Who’s awake?

Oh, wait, he’s awake.

Peter forced his eyes open, the simple task dauntingly difficult with the pressure in his head. It was like his eyelids had become cement bricks, the mere effort of pulling them apart leaving him breathless.

“Then handle him.”

Two voices. Two different people.

Crap.
He looked around frantically, his eyesight fuzzy, the room a giant blur of dark colors. It didn’t take long for his common sense to return and his thoughts to click into place, and he was pushing himself up against the wall in a hurry.

Wall. He was sitting up against a wall.

Peter looked down at himself, his feet chained together and stretched out in front of him, his arms locked tightly at his side. The red and blue fabric of his spider-suit began to come into focus and the hazy film across his eyes dissipated, leaving him to realize that the fog roaming across the floor wasn’t from his blurry vision. As he took in his surroundings he realized that the room was flooded with the technology dampening mist.

He had definitely been taken. Kidnapped might even be appropriate, as much as he hated the word. ‘I’m not a kid,’ his inner-voice protested. Man-napped was more like it.

He had no idea where he was. It was cold, musty and smelt of mildew, not to mention there was abandoned tech all around him. The structure of the room reminded him eerily of laboratory — a high tech lab, one like Stark Industries or even OsCorp Industries. The only difference was that it was dark, very little light provided anywhere. He was pretty sure the dim ceiling lights were powered by weak juiced batteries as they flickered every few seconds.

“Who forgot to pay the electricity bill?”

The moment he spoke, he was cringing at himself. May’s voice had become so ingrained in his head that he could hear her calling him a smart ass for not keeping his mouth shut.

The wheels came rolling again, this time directly in front of him. The sound belonged to a swivel chair and the person sitting on it approached him silently, giving no attention to his poorly thought joke.

It wasn’t hard to figure out who the man was.

For a moment they stared at each other, Peter dazed while he seemed slightly amused.

“Mysterio…” Peter swallowed. “Nice to meet you in the flesh. I’d shake your hand and all, but…”

His eyes motioned to his restraints, where thick straps of metal wrapped around his biceps and bolted him to the wall.

Mysterio rolled his eyes, the action visible without his infamous headgear. He still wore his ridiculous costume, all the way down to his golden boots. The table across from them showed that the glass dome sat next to the crisp white chameleon helmet.

The memory came flooding back to him. He could see it in his mind’s eye — rushing to the warehouse, being confronted by Tweedledee and Tweedledum, and then being very unfortunately outmatched by both of them. Probably not the best nickname for the two, considering his circumstances.

The only problem was, that was the last thing he remembered. He had no clue on how he ended up here.

A wave of fear flooded through him. He didn’t even know where here was.

‘Crap.’ he panicked. ‘Mr. Stark’s going to kill me.’
Mysterio still hadn’t spoken, staring at him like he was some sort of twisted project to be examined. The silence was actually a bit intimidating.

Peter took a deep breath and tried to control his nerves — he’d be a victim if he lost control. He needed to gain the upper hand. What did Mr. Stark always say?

“If you’re ever in a situation where you don’t know what to do, stop and think. That brain is more powerful than any weapon I can give you.”

Right. Okay. Get information. He could do that.

“These restraints are really strong,” Peter said. “Are they made like Cap’s shield? Vibranium?”

The silence brought on a wave of coldness, the chill hitting him all at once, his shoulders shivering. It felt as if it stemmed from the walls of the room, a frigid mist that ached in his bones. Where could they be that it was so cold? It wasn’t nearly this temperature back in New York. The other day he was wearing shorts for crying out loud.

“Come on, Mysterio. You don’t have to be afraid to talk just cause I see those pretty blue eyes of yours.”

Mysterio quirked an eyebrow, staying otherwise quiet.

Peter half-shrugged. “Okay, so I have no idea if your eyes are actually blue, I can’t really see them. But you get the point.”

Drip.

Drip.

With the man being persistently quiet, Peter turned his attention to the leaking water from above, the dripping liquid making a puddle on the far end of the room. Though only a few old, flickering lights illuminated everything, he could tell that the ceiling was breaking underneath pressure, cracks spreading across the cement like lightning bolts. Was it a leaking pipe? Did they need to call a plumber?

He almost opened his mouth. Almost. For once, he restrained himself from being a smart ass.

May would be proud.

“You know, the mask kind of makes the costume, so if you could return that…” he sighed, almost sadly. “That’d be great.”

As much as he missed Karen’s company, Peter knew having his mask back wouldn’t do much of any good. The fog covered the tips of his toes and he could feel it graze against his gloved hands. Mysterio had the room flooded with the stuff, possibly even the entire building they were in. As long as it roamed freely, he had no way of contacting anyone.

He needed to get free — fight back. Do something.

Peter tried to keep his attempts at breaking the restraints discreet. The longer he pushed his muscles against the straps of the metal though, the harder he strained with effort. A grunt unwillingly escaped his mouth, vocalizing his desperation to pop his binds off from the wall he was trapped against.
"Don’t bother trying to break them," Mysterio finally spoke. “You won’t.”

Peter huffed. “I don’t know about that, I’m…” he grunted, pulling himself forward with such strength he was close to dislocating his shoulders. “…pretty…strong.”

He gave up with a gasp, puffing and panting at the exertion. With profound confusion he looked down at himself, baffled as to why he could lift an entire building off his back but somehow couldn’t break free of two metal straps.

“It’s an experimental metal called Adamantium,” Mysterio explained, answering his unspoken question. “Virtually indestructible. You won’t get out.”


As crushing as the fact proved to be, it at least provided him with something to go off of. He was gaining information. Mysterio had said that the fog used nanites to block any functioning technology and even had a neurotoxin to dampen his spider-sense. With the amount enclosing around him, it was safe to say no one could locate him via GPS. He was also held down by a metal that could easily match the strength of Cap’s shield, which while one hundred percent a bad thing, was also pretty cool.

Next, he needed to find out where he was.

“So…this must be your evil lair,” Peter said, awkwardly. “Sweet crib. Much better than the last guy I went up against, although he did knock down his building on top of me, but it was still nowhere near this high tech -”

“Shut him up.”

The thick, Russian accent interrupted him and as Mysterio swiveled his chair around, Peter could see where the voice originated from.

“Aw man, why’s it always the Russians?” he groaned. “It’s so stereotypical. It’s always the evil Russian guy who wants to dominate the world. Dude, you even got the look. Bald head and all.”

Mysterio looked between Peter and the other occupant, the later sitting hunched over a work table reviewing stacks of paper like coursework.

“Why are we keeping him?” he asked. “They all think he’s dead, why can’t we kill him?”

“Collateral,” came the answer. “We keep him until we know for sure plan will succeed.”

Peter’s eyebrows shot high.

“Uhm, hi,” he squeaked. “I’m right here. I can hear you.”

They didn’t even acknowledge him.

“You’re not making sense. Stark thinks he’s dead,” Mysterio reminded him. “That was your plan — goal achieved.”

The bald head shook back and forth. “You still think too small, Klum. Boy is leverage.”

That was when he spun around, a stack of papers still in his hands and glasses pushed low to the bridge of his nose. Though it was dark, Peter could make out a small amount of his facial structure; the man's pale white skin almost blending in with the fog.
“Say they find out his death was greatly exaggerated…say Stark tries to come after us…well, I disembowel boy in front of them all. Leave them intestines as souvenirs. Then I snap Stark’s neck and you return his body to his home with noose wrapped around him. If he won’t do dirty work for us, then we do it ourselves.” He pointed a finger in Mysterio’s direction. “If it comes to that.”

Peter watched the conservation with an ever-growing sense of fear. If there was anything for him to take away, it was that they were both were downright crazy; the Russian more so than Mysterio. He swallowed heavily, forcing himself to emulate false confidence.

“They’ll stop you,” he insisted. “The Avengers. Whatever you’re planning — you won’t get away with any of it.”

For once since Peter saw him, the Russian looked his way, their eyes briefly locking through the weaving fog around him. He turned away before he could blink.

“Handle him.”

Mysterio wheeled his chair back into view, blocking the sight of where the other man sat. Elbows on his knees, he leaned forward with a sick, twisted smile.

“Let’s get something straight, spider-kid. The world thinks you’re dead.”

Peter shook his head in denial. "No they don't —"

“That warehouse that exploded? They think you were in it,” Mysterio smiled. "No one is coming for you. Not even Tony Stark.”

Peter pursed his lips. “You’re wrong.”

“You have no idea what’s going on here. Even if I begin to tell you, you wouldn’t comprehend half of it.”

“Yeah? Try me.” Peter tried to sit up on the ground, forcing himself to seem taller. “I know you stole Mr. Stark’s chameleon helmet and gave it to that wannabe Bond villain over there.”

Mysterio chuckled. “That barely scrapes the surface of how deep this goes.”

“What do you need me for then?” Peter sneered. “You told everyone I’m dead, but why? What’s your endgame here, Mysterio?”

The man was a leaking pool of knowledge, already having told him so much. Had it not been for the other occupant interrupting their conservation, Peter was sure he would have gotten more information from Mysterio.

“Klum. Use your stuff to quiet him,” his voice was deep and snarly. “Now.”

Mysterio smiled, so wide that his yellow-tinged teeth could be seen. Peter’s stoicism rapidly degenerated, watching as the magician crossed the room and gather in his arms an oxygen tank and mask attached to it.

“You won’t get away with this,” Peter insisted. “They’ll find out.”

He squatted down and grabbed Peter’s head, a handful of his hair clutched tightly in his fist to keep him still. Peter fought against him, feeling strands of his brown curls come loose in the process.

“Don’t touch me — get off!”
The oxygen mask was strapped around his face quickly and swiftly, elastic straps the only thing holding it in place. But with his arms restrained against the wall and hands locked at his side, he had no way of ridding the offending device no matter how hard he swung his neck back and forth.

He heard the hissing before he felt the gas. It poured out from the tank sitting next to him and Peter looked to his left with wide, panic-stricken eyes. He wished he hadn’t looked back up, Mysterio’s grin large and his chuckle low, sending goosebumps across his skin.

He began to feel sick almost immediately as the cool air hit his face. The sweet, nauseating gas poured through the mask and against his mouth and nose. By instinct he held his breath, refusing to breathe until his face went red, but he only managed to spare a few minutes before his body betrayed him and he inhaled deeply. Almost instantly his head floated away from him, his stomach rolling.

“Mr. Stark will…find…me.”

Peter lost the fight in keeping his eyes open, his head slowly tilting forward until his chin met with his chest and his body slumped forward, held only by the strong metal that wrapped around his biceps. The world around him dissolved into wisps of fog.

“So if he’s alive, where do you think he is?” Steve asked.

They had relocated to the R&D side of the facility, the computer lab within the room aiding Natasha in her research and verification on everything they discussed. The others, minus Tony, sat at a large round table surrounding Strange.

Tony was off in a corner pulling up his own data with his holographic screens, his arms waving and swiping at the images. They were working fast and working quickly, and the others weren’t afraid to ask any question that came to mind.

Stephen leaned forward in his chair. “I believe this false magician has him held captive.”

Sam frowned, clearly unhappy with what he heard. “Captive?”

“Yes,” Stephen nodded.

He stayed detached, almost seeming cold with his direct answer. The others didn’t hide their horror at the revelation. Some were more obvious, Wanda covering her mouth and shaking her head with teary eyes. Rhodey leaned back in his chair and furrowed his brows. Vision was the only one to remain neutral, observing the conversation silently.

Natasha typed quickly on the computer’s keyboard, not even looking over from the screen as she spoke, “You said he wasn’t working alone.”

“Correct.” Stephen hesitated. “But I haven’t been able to find out enough information on the other culprit. I’ve spent months utilizing every artifact I have at my disposable and I keep turning up empty handed.”

Tony looked up from the holographic smart screens, one hand stuck in the air mid-swipe as his jaw dropped.
“So you expected *us* to know what to do?”

“I expected you to buy me time,” Stephen responded. “Unfortunately, you fell right into the trap they set for you.”

Tony opened his mouth to argue, but Steve spoke up first.

“How do you know about this Francis Klum?” he asked.

“The Orb of Agamotto can detect any magic used in this world and others,” Stephen began to explain. “Earlier this year it picked up manifestations of dark magic originating from a being called Dorammu. He’s a primordial, inter-dimensional entity who wields apocalyptic levels of supernatural power…and he’s the ruler of the dark dimension.”

Bruce swallowed heavily. “Very bad guy, got it.”

Across the room, Tony swiped his hand along one of the holographic images, turning it around so it faced the group at the round table.

“You’re telling me this guy is a force to be reckoned with?”

The image displayed someone who appeared to be relatively normal; a man in his mid-forties, thick black glasses and wavy, unkempt hair. At first sight, he looked like an average civilian.

“He looks more ridiculous without the fishbowl helmet,” Sam mumbled.

“Klum isn’t the threat,” Stephen said. “What he’s done, that’s the threat.”

Tony swiped the screen away and crossed his arms over his chest.

“Sharing is caring.”

Steve huffed. “Says you?”

“It says here that Klum was a participant in one of OsCorps research experiments,” Natasha said, looking up from the computers.

Stephen nodded. “In participating in those experiments, he gained the ability of teleportation.”

Wanda hummed, her own painful memories with experimentation leading her to be biased. She even shrugged her shoulders, unsympathetic to the information.

“That does not sound so bad,” she said.

Natasha frowned, still reviewing the documents. “Why would he voluntarily participate in these…”

As her eyes darted across the documents, Tony walked to her and hovered over her shoulder. Bruce had also risen from his seat at the table, cautiously making his way to the two.

“It wasn’t all that voluntary. Look.” Tony pointed his finger at the screen.

Bruce adjusted his glasses, skimming over the document himself. “He was admitted to a psych ward.”

“Uh, no,” Tony corrected. “He was admitted to a *psych ward*,” the finger quotations were heavily exaggerated.
Natasha sighed. “It was a front. It says here that his brother molested him as a child, and when he sought psychiatric help for the trauma he ended up with these assholes.”

“They probably assumed that patients who were already unstable would be more cooperative in inhumane experimentation,” Sam suggested.

Natasha scrolled through the data. “The money helped.”

There was a pause where she leaned back in her chair, letting the others review the information.

Bruce whistled. “Yeah, that’s a good chunk of change.”

“He never got it,” Stephen announced. “They performed their experiments and released him and everyone else without payment before they were shut down by higher officials. They never considered that they had let loose a psychopathic, mentally unstable man with a vengeance for money and enhanced human abilities to achieve his goal.”

“You seem to know a lot about this guy,” Rhodey cautiously stated.

Stephen briefly looked his way. “I’ve done my own share of research.”

“Why the desire for money?” Steve asked.

“If any of this is true, he wanted fame,” Natasha explained, craning her neck to look at Steve. “He pursued magic — worldly magic — long before any of this. He needed the money to become well known, to be famous.”

Tony scoffed. “The next Criss Angel, everyone.”

“Where did it go wrong?” Steve leaned forward, elbows resting on the round table with his hands clasped together.

“He lost control of his abilities. He began to teleport between universes,” Stephen answered.

Vision, standing quietly in a room, unfolded his arms. “You can do that?”

“He wound up in a universe where a man, going by the name Quentin Beck, ruled as a criminal called Mysterio. Klum began to idolize him, and followed his every move. But Beck wasn’t mutated like he was. This Mysterio made a deal with Dormammu to enhance his illusive abilities.”

“What’d he have to give up, his first born child?” Sam quipped.

Stephen quirked an eyebrow. “He became trapped in his helmet for the remainder of his life.”

Sam clucked his tongue, seemingly without a response to the information. Natasha looked away and back to her research, while Tony stepped aside and pulled up his own screens again.

Bruce, between the two, furrowed his brows with confusion.

“Okay…but what does that have to do with our Mysterio?” he asked.

Stephen stood from the table. “Klum had contact with Dormammu on that universe. He sought to find someone to aid him in his quest. He clearly didn’t understand the threat and dangers that Dormammu held, and he got in way over his head. When he returned to our universe, he re-opened a portal that I had closed earlier this year. That portal sealed Dormammu off from our universe and this Earth, and the destruction he planned to cause. Dormammu and I had an agreement — he was
not to return to our Earth again. Now that the seal is broken, I don’t expect him to uphold his side of the bargain.”

Steve knitted his brows. “And Klum…”

“He’s a zealot of Dormammu. His contact with him brought him back to this Earth, and in so, he’s become a susceptible host for him to enter from.”

“How did we go from not a threat to will destroy Earth as we know it?” Sam asked, sarcastically.

“As I said, Klum himself is not the threat. His actions have proved to be…weak — cowardly. He is incapable of making moves on his own. It’s his presence that proves to be the problem. Once I banish him to another realm, the seal will be closed. It will eliminate the threat of Dormammu returning to this plane of existence,” Stephen said, determination flooding his tone.

“And this other guy?” Tony asked.

“I don’t know his name. I have only been told that if he succeeds with his plan, it will be what causes your downfall, Stark.”

Sam swiped at his nose. “So Mysterio is actually the Igor to Doctor Frankenstein.”

Tony didn’t seem convinced. “You’re telling me that after everything I’ve encountered — everyone I’ve gone up against, two nobody clowns will be my downfall?”

“They made it personal for you,” Strange bit back.

“Woudn’t be the first time,” Tony responded.

Stephen shrugged. “Maybe not. Either way…”

For a moment, the two locked eyes. For Tony, it felt as if Strange was telling him everything that he already knew — that despite the Ten Rings, despite almost losing Pepper and Rhodey and his own life, something about losing Peter was enough to break him. Maybe everything leading up to this had torn him apart so badly he couldn't stand anything else happening. Maybe he was fooling himself by believing that.

The few seconds made Tony uncomfortable. He was quick to return to the computers.

“So we need to figure out where Klum is keeping Peter, and who his boss is in all of this,” Steve recapped. “I assume you’ll want to handle Mysterio once he’s found?”

Stephen nodded. “Finding him has proven to be the difficult part. I’ve spent months trying to pin down his location.”

“I imagine poofing around town doesn’t help that,” Rhodey muttered.

“It’s not just that. I believe he’s under the protection of Dormammu, and in so the other guy may be as well. As long as Dormammu doesn’t want me finding them, I won’t. No matter what spell I concur.”

Natasha frowned. “How are we supposed to find these guys with absolutely zero leads?”

Strange hadn’t broken his stare with Tony. Feeling like eyes were burning into the back of his head, Tony turned around, sighing when he saw that he was being watched.
“Yes, dear?” he asked. “Can I help you?”

Stephen titled his head. “How good are you with meditation?”

Rhodey barked out a laugh.

“Tony’s hasn’t shut off his mind since the day he was born,” he stated, leaning back in his chair with arms crossed over his chest.

Tony pointed his way. “Admittedly, he’s right.”

Stephen went to approach Tony, his cape visibly waving behind him.

“If I can hone in on the temporal lobe of your cortex, I may be able to call the Vishanti long enough to utilize the time stone and see a glimpse of your future — our future — as it stands.” Stephen turned back to Natasha. “It may give us a lead on who Klum has partnered with.”

Steve slowly and cautiously sat up from the table, silent for a moment as he stared down the billionaire.

“Tony…”

His tone said more than his words ever could. The team knew how Tony felt about people getting inside his head, the whole situation with Wanda a scar that would never fully heal. He expected an argument to spin out of control at the very idea that the sorcerer would pry into his inner thoughts.

Tony nodded vigorously, surprising the entire room.

“Alright. Let’s do it.”

For a moment, the group was unsure of what to say, how to proceed. Natasha, sitting at the computers with an eyebrow high in the air, audibly cleared her throat.

“Clint’s ETA is an hour out,” she announced. “Hopefully you’ll have something by the time he arrives.”

Tony took a deep breath in and exhaled with a clap of his hands, rubbing his palms together to release his nerves. He looked at Stephen and shrugged.

“Do we need to light some incense? I’m sure Pepper has candles around here we can —”

Stephen smirked. “Let’s go somewhere that’s more…quiet.”

Tony hadn’t even blinked when it happened.

Suddenly, and with extreme disorientation, Stephen had whisked them out of the research and development lab. He wasn’t sure how, whether it was some Bewitch nose crinkle or magical spell, but they were there one second and gone the next.

He stumbled on his feet, grabbing the nearest object to keep himself from falling over. Looking down at what he had clung onto, Tony was confused to see a sleek, mahogany wood dresser. It was the same model that he had personally picked out to put in sleeping quarters of the New Avenger’s facility.

Looking up, he immediately realized where Stephen had taken him.
Snow piled at his feet.

It covered his boots like a white blanket, soft like powder; innocent, untouched and pure. The cold winter wind whispered against his skin with harsh bites, bitter and frigid.

“Peter…”

He never looked up from his feet. He couldn’t break his eyes away from the accumulating snow, flake after flake dropping down and adding to the layers of pristine softness.

And then the blood trickled down.

One thick drop broke through the surface before three more fell just as quickly, melting through the snow and staining his boots.

“Peter…”

His hands trembled and when he went to look at them they were dripping with red liquid, pouring off his knuckles like running water.

“It’s okay, Pete.”

He wasn’t standing anymore. He was on his knees, hands pressed firmly against the cotton material that gushed blood between his fingertips, the pressure of his weak teenage body doing nothing to stop the flow. He wasn’t strong enough. He never was.

“It’s okay, Pete,” the voice said again, this time grabbing the hand that laid firmly against him. “Listen to me, son, it’s okay.”

He choked a sob. “Uncle Ben, no. Please, Uncle Ben…”

“Hey, hey…” Uncle Ben smiled, teeth stained with blood. “You listen to me, Peter. You-you take care of your aunt, you hear me? You take-care of her. And you take care of-of yourself. You… you have a responsibility, son. You… you have the power…to ch-change the world. And with-with great power…”

Engines roared from above. His head shot up to the sky, the airplane dangerously close to the ground before it disappeared in the distance. When he looked back to the ground, Uncle Ben was gone, only a chalk outline of where he once laid.

“Petey, sweetie, give us a kiss before we leave!”

When he turned around, he wasn’t on the ground anymore. He was standing in the kitchen of his uncle and aunt’s apartment. It hadn’t been remodeled yet — it was older, and he stood low to the ground, shorter.

His mother approached him, arms open wide.

“Oh look at you, I’m going to miss you so much.”
Mary Fitzpatrick Parker. It was the same face he stared at in his photo albums, hairstyle the same as the day when they traveled to Disney Land and body weight similar to his first day in kindergarten. But her voice was warped.

He didn’t remember how she sounded.

“Come on, Mary, our flight takes off at six. We can’t be late.”

The man stood behind her — Richard Parker, brown-tousled hair and shining bright eyes reminding him of...himself. But his voice wasn’t warped, it wasn’t muffled and it didn’t even copy his own likeness. He didn’t even know what his father sounded like.

He never really knew the man.

“Please,” his voice squeaked, a plea crying out. “Please don’t go. You won’t come back.”

Richard, once standing behind Mary, crouched low to the floor where he stood. He could see his reflection in the man’s glasses, a six-year-old boy with tears streaming down his chubby cheeks.

“Promise me you’ll be a good boy, Peter.”

The voice didn’t match the face. Richard Parker stared at him, the voice that he spoke with was distinctively similar to another man. A different man.

He nodded. “I’m good.”

“You—you’re good?”

When he looked up, yellow tinted sunglasses stared back at him. Now, the voice matched the face.

“How are you good?”

His breath caught in his chest, intimidation pouring off the man and making him shake with nerves.

“Well, I — I mean — I’d rather just stay on the ground...for a little while. Friendly neighborhood Spider-man.”

Tony stared at him. The world around them disappeared, blackness engulfing them both. When he looked down, the spider emblem of his suit glistened and sparkled, the blue and red fabric blurring and melting together.

When he looked back up, they were in the workshop of the Avenger’s facility, Tony’s back was facing him.

“Once again, you have gotten in way over your head,” his voice echoed, bouncing off the walls. “You’re the one who wanted to stick to the streets, stay low to the ground, remain in the neighborhood —”

“He was in my neighborhood, Mr. Stark! If you just hear me out —”

Wait.

The words fell from his lips. He looked around. His sight locked on the empty glass case across the room.
“Mr. Stark, I know who took the chameleon helmet! I —”

“No,” Tony spun to face him. “You’re going home.”

He shook his head frantically. “I need help. I need help getting home!”

The eyes that stared back at him flooded with disappointment. He choked on his own saliva, panic tossing his stomach into knots.

“You’re on your own, kid.”

Tony was halfway out of the room. He tried to follow him, to grab him and stop him, but his legs wouldn’t move. They were heavy and weak, and the muscles trembled with fear.

“No. No, Mr. Stark, please! I don’t — I don’t have anyone, I need your help, I…”

He sunk to the ground, collapsing on his backside and hitting the wall behind him. Tony was gone, the lights in the workshop turning off, leaving him in the dark.

“I don’t have anyone, Mr. Stark.” He wasn’t sure when he had closed his eyes, his head leaning back against the wall as the world around him dissolved. “Please don’t leave me.”

He was alone.

He was alone, sitting with restraints that held him against the wall. The oxygen mask forcefully strapped around his mouth poured in chemicals that left his mind drugged and hazed. Peter’s eyes were half-lidded, red and swollen as they spasmed every few seconds, the hallucinations running his mind ragged.

The Star Wars posters were the first thing to give it away. Tony looked around the room, taking in his surroundings with bewilderment and slight agitation, his skin flushing hot at the emotion that ignited within.

“Why are we here?” He realized that he wasn’t asking, he was practically demanding. The mere smell of the room was upsetting him, Peter’s lingering body wash still somehow ingrained in the bed sheets behind him.

“I figured it would be the quietest room around,” Stephen answered. “And it’ll keep you grounded in your focus on the boy while I tap into your subconscious.”

Tony shot his head over and narrowed his eyes. The man had gall and nerve that he wasn’t sure he could handle right now. He didn’t know if he had the energy to handle it right now.

“You don’t have the slightest clue on how my brain works,” he muttered.

He watched as Stephen slowly sat down on the tan colored carpet, his back stiffly straight as he crossed his legs over one another. Tony hadn’t realized he wasn’t paying attention until Stephen cleared his throat, motioning with his head for him to join.

For a moment, he hesitated, eyebrow cocked in the air at the concept of sitting on the floor. He ultimately caved with a deep sigh, lowering himself to the ground, slapping his hands down on his
knees with impatience.

“So…” He clucked his tongue. What’s up, doc?”

Stephen had his eyes closed.

“The Vishanti will not grant me the power to use the time stone in this matter. They have made it…abundantly clear that I am not to know this information. I will need to use methods I don’t normally use. I will only see glimpses — small bits, possibly only one fraction in time. It may be enough to give your team a lead,” he explained. “But I will need you to stay focused. You cannot run from your thoughts. It will only make the Vishanti aware of my presence. The last thing we need to do is make them angry.”

“Right. Makes sense,” Tony, staring at his hands, couldn’t contain the sarcasm from dripping off his tongue.

“Tony…” Stephen opened his eyes. “I understand your doubts. I’ve been there.”

Tony looked up, his tired and bloodshot eyes connecting with Stephen’s. He couldn’t contain the weariness that pulled heavily at his shoulders, his posture a slumped mess compared to the other man.

Stephen softened his expression. “Before this — before I started this life, I was a neurosurgeon. I believed strongly in western medicine. I never, in my wildest dreams, thought these things were possible. But the mystic arts have helped me save many lives, as well as my own.”

Though his eyes seemed magnetic, Tony fought the pull with what bitterness he had left in him. He rolled his eyes and focused on his crossed legs, his hands sitting in the open space between them.

“Sweet. Sentimental. Let’s get this over with,” he said wryly.

Stephen shook his head, just slightly. He adjusted himself, resting his forearms against his thighs with a deep, controlled breath. Tony watched as he closed his eyes once more, seemingly in his own world.

He had expected more magic. Tony frowned, disappointed as he waited for another light show from the necklace or even some form of world stopping illusion to take over. Minutes passed that the two sat across from each other, only the chirping crickets from outside to be heard.

Tony looked over at the large bay window, mentally making note that if he could hear the bugs from outside his top of the line facility, he needed to pay more for soundproof walls. Peter had been here an entire week and hadn’t said a word about such an offending noise keeping him awake. Yet again, the kid lived in Queens, so he could probably sleep through the most aggressive construction taking place.

“Stark,” Stephen firmly spoke up, eyes still closed. “Focus.”

Tony huffed a sigh and scrubbed his face with one hand.

“Yeah, sorry, having a bit of trouble with that,” he admitted ruefully. “You brought me to the bedroom of the kid I thought I had gotten killed two days ago.”

His eyes remained closed. “He’s not dead. You saw it yourself.”

Tony shrugged. “Why does it matter so much? I gotta know, why is it so important that Peter’s
Stephen shook his head, this time with more frustration. His arms dropped from his legs and he looked up at Tony, clearly struggling to control his own patience.

“I have been granted the privilege and honor to see many things into the future, many timelines and possible outcomes. I’ve even changed the events in time before. Never has the Vishanti warned me that my knowledge of a foreseeable event is prohibited.”

Tony frowned, almost startled at the information. It seemed just when he had a grasp on earth’s mightiest hero’s, another one always showed up. A part of him was relieved to know the world would always be defended by others out there, but there was still that side of him that hated to be surprised.

The past couple of days had held a lot of surprises for him. He was more than ready for a vacation from it all.

“I do not know what makes Peter special,” Stephen continued, “and I certainly do not understand why you’re the key to our future — but you are. Losing him means losing you. The fate of the world will rest in your hands one day, Stark.”

Stephen paused, for a moment looking away until finally turning back to Tony, head cocked to the side.

“That hurt me a lot to say,” he admitted.

"Didn't hurt me to hear it."

“Don’t let it go to your head.”

“Eh, too late.”

Stephen rolled his eyes, the brief moment of humor leaving as soon as it came. He returned his arms to his legs, his trembling fingers positioned oddly together as he concentrated once more.

Tony took a deep breath and tried to hone in his mind, closing his own eyes this time. The crickets chirped, his own breath echoed in his ears and he faintly heard Strange whisper under his breath.

“Clear your mind…”

He was never good at meditation. If he had an idea for an invention, he could focus on it for months. If you gave him an object to fix, he’d do his damnedest to repair it. But meditation meant silence, and silence usually followed uncomfortable thoughts.

Howard, his mom. Afghanistan, Obadiah, Vanko, Hammer, Killian…

He shook his head, fighting to steer his mind in the right direction. These people brought his demons to life, they weren’t who he needed to be fixated on. They were people that made his life hell. People who were out to get him. Loki, Barnes, Ultron —

‘Come on, treat this like a problem. You can fix this. You can fix yourself.’

Tony growled, the sound muted in his chest. He knew he could never fix himself. It was a joke to even trick himself into that. But he was lucky enough to have people around him to get him through the day. Pepper, Rhodey — hell, though he hated to admit it, he had the entire team of
Avengers watching his back. He may be a hot piping mess, but he’d never have to be one alone.

And Peter. The kid was glued to his side whether he wanted him to be or not. Peter never saw the bad in him. Even with his entire history laid out in newspapers and in recorded media, Peter shrugged it off as though it didn’t bother him.

“You’re not that guy anymore, Mr. Stark.”

He had so much life in him. Even on his worst days, the kid smiled with more love than Tony could ever give back. For the longest time he had believed he was grooming the kid to be like him, but he soon realized that having Peter in his life was making him the better man, not the other way around. He made every beat of his heart worth it.

Peter made him want to be a better person. To not let his baggage and trauma control his life. To spend the evening in bed with Pepper rather than in his workshop because life was short and he didn’t know how long he had with her. To make more time with Rhodey, because they had been friends for decades and the man deserved better than what company he had been providing. To forgive Steve because mistakes shouldn’t always define the man.

“When you can do the things I can…but you don’t, and then the bad things happen, they happen because of you.”

For a moment, Tony stopped breathing. He didn’t realize it but the air halted in his chest, his forehead creasing as he focused so intently and so deeply on the memories that made his arms quiver and his eyes twitch.

But he could see it — he could see a young Peter; sitting on his bed in his queen’s apartment, the kid all but starstruck at the concept of talking with Tony Stark. He could see him ripping off his Spider-man mask, giddy and excited at his first team-up with Iron Man. And for one short moment, he could feel him, his own arm wrapped around the lanky but built teenager as they walked away from the island together.

For a moment, he felt at peace.

Stephen was the one to come out of his trance with a gasp, a thud on the ground that startled Tony back to the present. From the way his clothes shook, Tony could only assume something magical had happened.

And he missed it. Well, darn.

“What’d you see?” Tony was quick to ask.

Stephen furrowed his brows, eyes darting along the floor with confusion.

“You.”

Tony frowned, slowly nodding. “I would assume as much.”

Stephen shook his head. “No, you. Running your company, as CEO.”

His voice seemed softer and slightly deeper, his shock unreadable as he continued to search for answers within his own mind.

Tony tensed up. “That’s Pepper’s job.”
“You were in control, but you seemed…power hungry. A tyrant. You ran it like a dictator.”
Stephen finally looked up at him. “You were…megalomaniac.”

Tony quirked an eyebrow and smirked. “Thanks, darling.”

The sarcasm went unnoticed. Stephen shook his head and slowly sat up from the ground.

“No, no…” he muttered, studying Tony for a moment. “I don’t think it was you — I don’t feel it was you. It felt like…an impersonation of you. Someone acting as you.”

The realization sent shock waves through his nerves. Still seated on the ground, Tony shot his head up, looking at Stephen with wide eyes.

“The chameleon helmet.”

Stephen watched as Tony scrambled off the floor as quickly as he could, darting to the door with lightning speed.

“FRIDAY, call Pepper to the R&D room.” He looked behind him, motioning for Stephen to follow.

“Shall I tell her what for, boss?” the AI asked.

The two were briskly walking down the hallway before they knew it, Stephens cloak rustling behind him as Tony’s head titled low with unwavering determination.

“Tell her we’ve had a breach.”

Chapter End Notes

Ohhhh, the mystery is unfolding!

A massive, words-are-not-enough thank you to Shoyzz for creating beautiful artwork that depicts Peter in this chapter.
Though this is not the Mysterio used in my story (Far From Home used Beck whereas I've used Klum) I absolutely adore Shozzy's depiction here! Worth the share!!!
And huge thanks to Mei_kun for beta-ing this chapter.
First things first, folks. As always, thank you tremendously for your amazing feedback. Don’t underestimate how much I appreciate every comment you guys give – it’s really what keeps me going with this.

Fun Nerd Facts!

The line said by Wanda in this chapter is taken from Avengers Vol 1 84, “While I live and until I die, I’m an avenger.”

The reference to the hospital fire is from the first Avenger’s film, when Loki tries to startle Natasha by stating the awful things she’s done in her past. It’s also mentioned within a deleted scene of The Winter Soldier, in which Pierce mentions that when Natasha leaks all of the info to the internet, all her dirty deeds will revealed - Budapest, Osaka, and The Children's Ward. I couldn’t help but elaborate on it.

Doctor Strange really is at an odds of sorts with Wanda/Scarlet Witch in the comics. There are some iterations where they manage to get along, but for the most part, he does not appreciate her uncontrolled, chaotic magic. I figured I’d bring that into this story a bit. Fear not, they end up working together in the end!

More nerd facts in the ending A/N!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

True to his word, Clint had arrived back at the facility within the hour. He was sitting with the others when Stephen and Tony re-entered the R&D room and was quick to sit up from the table to approach them.

“This the magician?” Clint asked.

Natasha’s brief nod answered his question. The others didn’t move, too engrossed in reviewing the new information to be bothered. Steve, in particular, seemed to be in deep thought.

Stephen extended his arm, the two meeting in the middle to shake hands.

“Doctor Strange,” he greeted. “And please, do not refer to me as a magician.”

Clint quirked an eyebrow. “What should I refer to you as, then?”

“Sorcerer is sufficient.”

Clint couldn’t restrain himself from laughing. A few chuckles in and he realized Strange was serious, the man’s expression deadpanned and slightly insulted. He released his grip and turned to look at the others.
“Sorcerer…are you for — is this a prank, you guys?”

Tony briskly walked by him, but not before giving him a firm pat on the shoulder.

“No hidden cameras today, Barton.” He made a beeline across the room before Clint could even respond. “Pepper!”

Spinning around, Pepper immediately jogged over to meet Tony, her heels clicking loudly against the marble floors.

“Tony, what is going on?” She paused, her forehead creasing as she took in Stephens appearance. “Who is this?”

Tony waved his hand dismissively. “Long story, no time to explain. I need your help.”

She frowned. “With what?”

It didn’t take much for her to realize the severity of the situation. Tony, who had been drinking himself into oblivion most of the day had quickly sobered up. There was a light in his eyes that she saw all too often, a sparkle of determination and purpose, but this time it seemed almost frenzied. She could feel the impending fight radiating off of him. Whatever he called for, it was important.

Tony locked eyes with her. “I need you to comb through the employee database for anyone who may have quit, resigned, no-showed — anyone from Stark Industries who was assigned to the New Avenger’s facility and who left the company in the past two weeks, I need their names.”

“What — why?” Pepper knitted her brows, confused. “That’s something FRIDAY can do. That’s something anyone can do.”

Tony nodded.

“Yes.” He shook his head. “But I don’t trust my technology right now.”

“You don’t trust…” Pepper gaped. “Tony, you gotta tell me what’s going on.”

“I don’t think I can get you up to speed fast enough —”

She narrowed her eyes and crossed her arms. “Try.”

Her tone wasn’t one to be argued with. Tony heaved an exaggerated sigh and ran his hand through his unkempt hair. He briefly looked to the ceiling, not that there was anything that caught his attention, but rather to give himself a brief moment of composure that ultimately never came. His gaze turned back to Pepper before she had even blinked.

“Oh, okay, well for starters, the wizard here is telling us Parker is still alive, and —”

Pepper’s eyes went wide. “Peter’s still alive!?”

It was Tony’s turn to look at her disapprovingly. He cocked his head to the side, and she winced while cringing in on herself.

“Sorry. Continue.”

He didn’t waste a second. “I think the chameleon helmet was stolen by someone from within Stark Industries.”
Hearing this caught the attention of the others. The team was quick to turn their focus on the two, while Steve didn’t waste a moment in rising from his chair and walking closer to them.

“You think we’ve been compromised?” he asked.

Tony nodded, wordlessly. It was enough of an answer for Steve, who softened at the obvious weariness that etched deep lines on his friend’s face. Wanda cautiously approached them both with her arms tightly wrapped around herself.

“What did you see?” she asked. “When he looked in your head, what did you see?”

“I didn’t see anything.” Tony declared, nodding his head to Strange. “He, on the other hand…”

All eyes looked to Stephen. He stood tall, not one to be intimidated by the growing tension.

"I saw a glimpse of the future as it stands right now. The time stone showed me Stark — or at least, a version of him, running his company in such a vicious matter that I’d easily compare it to dictatorship,” Stephen explained. “Of all lives and possibilities for me to witness, that is what was chosen, and I assure you...nothing of it felt right.”

Tony pointed at him. “What’s the word you used?”

Stephen squinted an eye. “Megalomaniac?”

“Yes, that!” Tony turned back to Pepper. “Come on, when have I ever been a megalomaniac?”

She shrugged innocently. “You once fired the kitchen’s chef for overcooking your Peking Duck.”

“That was being an asshole, not a megalomaniac,” he defended. “And seriously, not even the dog would eat that burnt piece of meat.”

“We never had a dog,” Pepper argued.

“But if we did —”

“Okay, I don’t understand,” Clint interrupted. “What does that have to do with the facility being compromised?”

“If I may vocalize a theory…”

Vision’s voice seemed to catch them by surprise, as if a few members had forgotten he was still in the room. He had been quiet during most of their discussions, not that it was unusual to his character. For him, it was time he could calculate and soak in knowledge. He usually restrained from speaking unless it was vital to the conversation.

With that in mind, Tony turned to look at him, hand gestured in the air.

“You’ve been quiet the past couple days, Vis – have the floor.”

Having been leaning against the nearest wall, Vision stood straight and walked towards them all, his attention explicitly directed at Tony.

“If you are indeed assuming that someone from Stark Industries has stolen the chameleon device, is it possible that the individual is seeking your wealth?” he suggested. “Possibly use this time of weakness in your personal life to steal your identity and assume control of your company?”
The theory must have been one they shared — Tony was quick to snap his fingers with excitement.

“Bingo.” He practically bounced on the heels of his feet, the unfolding information renewing what energy his body had lacked.

Stephen titled his head, confused. “And this chameleon device is…?”

No one wanted to answer the question. Rather everyone was quick to turn to Tony, each team member sharing the same accusing and resentful glare.

Despite the room staring him down, even Rhodey seemingly furious with him, he spread his arms wide.

“A helmet containing microchip, nanobot technology that scans and recognizes up to 1.4 billion facial features, analyzing the appearance of any moving, walking, talking thing to duplicate via electrical impulses through its sensors,” he said, presenting the information like he would at any Stark Expo.

Stephen wasn’t impressed. He was astounded and seemingly dumbfound but was far from impressed.

“Why, in God’s name, would you create something that dangerous?”

“Um,” Bruce pointed his pen in their direction. “I don’t think you know Tony that well.”

Tony rolled his eyes exasperatedly.

“Thank you for the vote of confidence,” he snapped. “It was to help us. Make things easier for us. It wasn’t supposed to get in the wrong hands!”

“Okay,” Clint drawled out, confused. “But how does this Mysterio fit into any of that?”

“Wealth,” Natasha spoke up. “He wanted money. And partnering with someone who has plans to assume the life of a billionaire is a sure fire way to get some.”

Clint seemed overwhelmed, scrubbing at his face with a bout of exhaustion that they hadn’t witnessed in his absence. The others, while not nearly stunned, still struggled at grasping the new information thrown at them. Not even two hours ago they were in mourning. Thankfully, the idea of an impending threat and rush to find Peter was enough to keep them grounded.

Pepper, on the other hand, wasn’t past the shock of it all. She grabbed Tony’s arm to pull him towards her.

“Tony, this is insane,” she said.

He couldn’t argue with her. “I know.”

“You need to get security on this, and the FBI, and —”

“I know, I know.”

“This is not normal!”

He threw his hands in the air. “It’s our normal!”

“If this guy has already infiltrated the company — no, this isn’t even up for discussion. A child
was kidnapped, Tony, and who know —"

“Listen, sweetie.” He gently grabbed the arm that held his. “I know its a long shot. And I’m a broken record when I say this, but you are the most capable, qualified —”

“Trustworthy person you know.” She sighed, heavy enough to visibly lift her chest. “Give me an hour.”

He smiled back at her in a way that she hated, because he knew it made her melt in her heels. It was the most he could offer her in gratitude right now.

“Thank you.” He almost turned away before calling out. “I love you.”

She briefly turned to look at him as she left. The nod of her head and sparkle in her eyes spoke the words for her. Her demeanor was nothing short of hurried, charging out of the room with purpose.

There was barely a break in conversation before Clint sat down, or more accurately plopped down in an empty chair by the others, crossing his arms over his chest.

“So while she’s doing that, somebody want to fill me in on all this?”

Peter woke up gagging.

It arrived harsh from his throat and burned in his chest. The second retch came just as quickly, taking control of his body and pulling him inward with convulsions and spasms. Vomit came rushing up his esophagus before he was even aware that he was awake, pouring out from his mouth and into the oxygen mask strapped around his face.

His head screamed, his lungs ached. They felt red hot and raw. He struggled to catch his breath, each inhale met with a gasp or gurgle of his own stomach’s content, unintentionally sucking the fetid mess back into his mouth as he rode through the waves of sickness.

‘Oh god...’ he thought, the words repeating in his head. ‘Oh god, ow...’

Eventually, the weight on the mask became too much, the caustic fluid bringing it down far enough for Peter to breathe in fresh air. It sat weakly on his chin, the elastic straps pulling at the skin behind his ears. The acidic smell that dribbled from his lips made him gag what bile his body could produce. The sound clucked in his chest, a harsh blend of a hiccup and retch.

Tears stuck to his eyelashes, and with what strength he could muster, he surveyed his surroundings. The darkness was persistent and oppressive, the only illumination being the few flickering lights from above. With no windows to show the outside world, there was no way of telling if it was day or night.

He still had no clue where he was.

He wheezed greedily, gasping like a fish out of water. It wasn’t until he had replenished his body with the cold, musty air from the room that Peter realized just how sweet and nauseating the gas had been.

And he had been inhaling it, for who knows how long.
He immediately deduced that whatever was it was, it wasn’t just chloroform.

‘Hallucinogenic…’ he trembled and spluttered in panic, eyes open though glazed and unfocused, pupils dilated like space saucers. He couldn’t do that again. He couldn’t go under that crap again. There was no telling how much time had passed. All he knew was that it felt real, and it felt bad. The idea of it happening again was making him hyperventilate with panic, choking on the messy spill around his mouth.

His head hurt so much. He knew he needed to focus, but the task had become incredibly difficult.

Around him, he could barely make out two outlines of blurry, fuzzy figures moving and talking. Their voices were muffled and distant. It seemed to take forever for his brain to click on, reminding him that he was in trouble. These were bad guys, they took him, and he needed to get away from them.

Their conversation was indecipherable to his ears. Peter ultimately stopped trying to focus in on it, settling for ignorance and sinking into a stupor.

He needed a strategy, a plan to escape. But he was so disoriented. And afraid. Afraid that if he went under again, the delusions would be worse.

Afraid that waking up would be more painful.

Afraid of waking up here, wherever here was.

The confidence he had when he was first taken was long gone, and he knew deep down in his cramping gut that he needed help.

He wasn’t aware when his breaths became shallow, only when each exhale exited his mouth as a frail rasp. Distantly, somewhere in the back of his clouded mind, he knew that was a sign of trouble. Faintly though, he assumed it was a good thing, considering the mask still hung low to his chin and hissed out dangerous gas that tickled his nostrils. If he didn’t breathe as hard, he wouldn’t breathe as much in.

That was a good thing — he needed to stay focused.

The metal that wrapped around his arms and connected him to the wall became the only thing holding him up. His body slumped forward and only rose with each wheeze from his chest. Peter never really understood the difference between losing consciousness and falling asleep before. He was naive in thinking they were both similar.

Now he could tell what it felt like to be on the verge of passing out. His skin suddenly felt flushed and hot despite the cold that made him shiver; his heart beating wildly, fast and out of sync. It made him incredibly lightheaded and dizzy. His muscles shook with tremors that reminded him of when he would skip lunch and his blood sugar got too low. Considering he didn’t know how long he’d been here, it was a very real possibility that he was suffering from just that.

He needed to stay focused. What would Mr. Stark do in this situation?

Peter scoffed a weak chuckle. ‘He’d escape…with a box full of scraps.’

He should have listened to the team back at the bridge. Maybe backup was a good idea after all. There wasn’t even any point in him going inside that building, it was obvious nobody needed help, and he had been tricked. Mr. Stark had to be furious for him disobeying their orders and getting into this mess.
Especially considering they thought he was dead and all. Right. That wasn’t exactly going to play into his favor.

Hell, after this, he’d listen to Mr. Stark yell at him until he graduated high school. He’d let the man visit him at college on a weekly basis to lecture him. If it meant getting home, he’d personally hand scrub each Iron Man suit with a toothbrush.

The voices continued to speak, but they sounded like his head was underwater. His eyes were becoming so heavy. Maybe if he just closed them for a second. Just a second.

Just a…

---

For once, Pepper’s voice was heard before the sound of her high heels.

“Tony!”

While the entire team was quick to look at the door, Tony was the only one to approach it. She practically stormed into the room, file folders tucked neatly under her arm.

“What’d you find?” he was quick to ask.

She paused for a moment, meeting him halfway. “You’re not going to like it.”

He scoffed. “As if I liked anything that came before this?”

She sighed and frowned. They ultimately resumed position at the round-table where she spread out the papers. Rhodey, Steve, and Natasha were quick to gather them in their hands.

“There was one result. Walter Cortez, an employee in the IT department, was last seen the day after the facility was broken into. He never returned to work.” She pointed to the documents that Rhodey held. “The strange part is, Cortez was an employee of thirty years. He was hired when your father still ran the company.”

“Oh god.” Sam rubbed his temple. “Is this one of those ‘three months until retirement’ situations?”

Rhodey skimmed through the files. “Why would an employee of that much tenure just walk out?”

“He didn’t. He couldn’t have,” Tony muttered under his breath. “There has to be more behind this.”

“There is, actually,” Pepper announced. “His key-card was last used the night your chameleon helmet was stolen. According to Happy, he was never on the schedule to work that day. Happy also said he was the employee assigned to review the security footage of the break-in. The last time his employee ID numbers were accessed was to watch the security feed of that night.”

“Oh no, that’s not suspicious at all,” Bruce dryly said, leaning back in his chair while fidgeting with his pen.

“Then nothing?” Tony asked.

Pepper nodded. “Then…nothing. No show.”
Tony looked away and ran a trembling hand through his goatee. He wanted to be furious. He wanted to know why no one bothered to tell him this, regretting the fact that he held information that easily could have prevented this whole debacle. But even in his frazzled mind, he knew there wasn’t a point. He wasn’t involved in the day to day activities of the company anymore. Even someone like Pepper didn’t need to be informed of an issue human resources could easily handle.

People quit all the time, tenure or not. He needed to move forward with it.

“FRIDAY, get me security footage on Cortez’s last known presence in the facility,” Tony demanded.

The AI barely needed a minute to process the request.

“Playing now, boss.”

The largest flat screen monitor in the room began to play the footage. Chairs that weren’t facing the computer turned to do so; Tony walked closer to get a better eye on what they were seeing.

One old man, exiting the Avenger’s facility. The video wasn’t even worth a bucket of popcorn.

“Nothing seems…out of the ordinary,” Rhodey noted.

It played, rewound itself, and played again. Bruce chewed on the tip of his pen, studying the image intently. Even Vision couldn’t find anything strange. Tony pursed his lips with confusion, and just when he was about to disregard the theory, Natasha’s voice cut through.

“No.”

They all turned to look at her.

Natasha slowly stood from her chair. “There’s something here.”

Tony’s brows went high, impressed at whatever she had been able to find. She walked to the computer and stood by his side, close enough to the screen that she could touch it.

Natasha didn’t look away when she spoke. “Pull up previous footage from earlier this year.”

Tony looked at the ceiling. “You heard the woman, FRI.”

The AI was dutiful in responding to the request. Two separate screens appeared before them, one playing the footage they had already watched, the other dated earlier in the year.

They all remained quiet, even Stephen unable to find a difference in the videos. Natasha studied them like school work though, her eyes rapidly darting back and forth.

The silence broke when she pointed to the screen on their left, the one replaying events dated last week.

“That’s not Cortez,” she announced. “Watch…the man on the right, he has a mild limp. His knee buckles every third step, and he has a twitch in his left arm.”

“There could be many reasons for that,” Sam argued. “Maybe he went on, or off, medication?”

“Maybe…” Natasha hummed. “But that doesn’t explain his hair.”

She pinched her fingers together and then spread her arms out, zooming in on the footage. She then
tapped the smart screen and paused the image, right as the man had his back turned to the cameras.

“That’s a wig.”

Pepper’s jaw dropped to the floor.

“How can you possibly tell….” she shook his head, suddenly remembering who it was that was speaking. “Right. Of course.”

Clint nodded, seeming contemplative. “So this is somebody who gets their kicks impersonating people…makes sense he’d want that device.”

“I don’t think he ever broke character. Surely not enough for security to catch on and pin him as a suspect.” Natasha stated, carefully reviewing the footage.

Steve approached them both. “Then how do we find out who was behind the wig and mask?”

Strange audibly cleared his throat, taking a step closer to Natasha.

“I should be able to assist with that.” He pointed to the monitors. “May I?”

Natasha took a step back, gesturing to the screens. "It’s all yours.”

He didn’t waste time. A few movements of his hands, accompanied by a vivid orange glow and the entire computer was engulfed in his enchantment. His fingers trembled as he concentrated on the task at hand, the surreal magic rendering the others speechless.

Tony quickly turned back to Pepper. “I need you to stay in the compound again tonight.”

It was enough to make her break the stare she had on the sorcery.

Pepper gaped. “Tony, I have to fly back to – ”

“Conference call, work online, I don’t care what it takes. You can’t leave this building.” He grabbed her hand and pulled her close. “This is the only way I can protect you right now, Pepper. Please. I can’t lose you too.”

The plea wasn’t just vocalized. It diffused off Tony like an exploding bomb. She knew he would cling to anything he had control over, especially in circumstances where all control was out of his grasp. This was certainly one of those instances.

They locked eyes for a moment and the desperation that flooded through his enough to soften her. She calmly nodded.

“Okay,” Pepper said. “I’ll be in the east wing if you need me.”

Tony nodded back, and she kissed him softly on his cheek. “Good luck.” she softly said.

He was going to need it. Briefly closing his eyes, his hands gravitated to his unkempt hair, and he pulled at the locks for what seemed like the twentieth time within the hour. The act only aggravated his persistent headache, but it was enough to keep him present. He had a lot to focus on, and he couldn’t let the stress get to him.

He was good at staying calm under pressure. He could do this. He didn’t have a choice — Peter was counting on him.
Pepper hadn’t even left the room before Rhodey stood up, palms pressed firmly on the table in a way that spoke business.

“Okay, so, while that’s happening…” Rhodey briefly motioned to Stephen with his head, “Tony, we need to get in touch with SHIELD.”

His hands quickly dropped down to his side, and Tony spun on his heels.

“Uh, no,” he said bluntly.

“What do you mean ‘no’?” Rhodey shook his head exasperatedly. “Yes, Tony, they need to be made aware of this. They’re currently under the impression that we got the kid killed.”

“But we didn’t,” Tony argued.

“But they think we did,” Rhodey bit back.

“And remember, they’ve put us all on house arrest as of…” Clint looked at his wristwatch, “two minutes ago.”

Rhodey gestured towards Clint. “All the more reason to brief them. Let them know we have resources to fix this problem.”

Tony found himself rubbing at the back of his neck where all of his problems and frustrations seemed to migrate to. He huffed a deep breath and approached the table.

“Okay, Rhodey, take a minute to think of what you’re saying here,” he started, “You want to tell SHIELD, that a magical sorcerer is using his magical abilities to magically tell us that the kid is still alive?”

“They’ll have us all in straitjackets before dawn breaks,” Sam muttered.

Rhodey shook his head. “With the Accords dissolved, we’re bound to report to them. That’s the agreement we made, and we need to stick to it.”

Bruce pointed a finger in the air. “In all technicality, I never made that agreement.”

Tony waved his hand in Bruce’s direction. “And is that a mess we really want to deal with right now?”

“We’ll have to deal with it eventually.” Natasha remorseful stated. Her eyes locked intently on the floor below her despite knowing that Bruce was looking her way. She didn’t want him to see the sorry glare that she knew she couldn’t hold back.

Clint spoke up, “I can’t imagine fighting the red tape on this one. You know how they run, the bureaucracy they live by…they’ll want all the paperwork in hand before we can even start up the Quinjet.”

“That’s time we may not have. As it is the kid’s been gone almost two days,” Sam reminded them.

“Rhodey’s right though,” Natasha said. “When the Accords were turned over, we promised one hundred seventeen nations that we’d resort back to the jurisdiction of SHIELD.”

Wanda hugged herself tighter. “They only allow us to work when they see fit. I will not wait around for permission to save one of my family.”
"Okay, first off — timeout. I am not trying to have another Accords fiasco.” Rhodey held his hands out in a passive manner. “I’m only saying that if we pursue this without briefing SHIELD, we could end up in a lot of trouble.”

“We don’t have the time,” Steve spoke up.

Rhodey shook his head. “It only takes one phone call —”

“And if it were you, Colonel?” Steve asked, looking up from the table, “If you were captured, would you want us to waste every second we had in our hand’s filling out paperwork instead of saving you?”

The room fell quiet. Only the crackling from Strange’s magic could be heard. Ultimately Rhodey relented and sat back down in his chair, making it clear he didn’t want to fight. As he did, Steve sat up from his. He took in a deep breath before addressing the room.

“Peter’s out there…and we don’t know what trouble he could be in. I can’t, in good conscience prolong a rescue mission, especially when there’s no telling what we’ll find when we get to him.” Steve looked to them all. “And no, I don’t want another Accords debate either. So I promise you that whatever consequences come from this, I will take full responsibility for. But you have no obligation to be involved. You can choose to stand by us, or stay back. For now, I’m pushing forward. You’ll need to decide what you’re going to do.”

Tony grimly nodded, stuffing his hands deep in his pockets before addressing the room himself.

“Captains orders,” he stated.

Natasha finally looked at Bruce, who was staring back at her. Sam and Rhodey exchanged apprehensive glances and Clint watched as Wanda stepped forward.

“I joined you in this fight with the promise that we will avenge those who deserved better.” Wanda’s voice seemed pained, determined. “I will not let Peter face the same fate as Pietro. I will fight for him with my last breath. While I live, and until I die, I am an avenger.”

Clint was at her side almost immediately, a curt nod of his head showing his approval.

“Girl said it better than any of us could.” He laid a hand firmly on her shoulder. “I’m in.”

Vision nodded his head. “As am I.”

“Here here,” Sam said, hand in the air.

“I’ll help in any way I can,” Bruce offered, though his eyes were still locked on Natasha. He was aware of where she stood in the Accords battle that he had been absent from. He spoke with a sense of concern. “Nat?”

She paused before finally looking his way. “I’m unfortunately very familiar with playing both sides against the middle. Steve is right, SHIELD will take too long in processing our request to advance. If Peter’s still out there, you bet I’ll be shooting first and asking questions later.”

Something was disturbing in her tone that nobody wanted to question. Tony noted it, but didn’t waste time focusing on it. He turned to the only person left in the room.

“Rhodey?”
He sighed and shook his head in a defeated way that Tony was all too familiar with. It said ‘I’m not happy about this, but you know I’m by your side.’

“The kid needs our help,” Rhodey said. “I’ll take a damn court-martial if it means getting him back.”

For once in what felt like forever, Tony smiled. It was small and barely curved his lip upward, but it was there. Knowing they were on the same page made his chest relax, and his heart beat with a little more ease. Because really, he couldn’t handle petty politic arguments right now.

The fact that the entire team would take a hit for Peter, well, that was just icing on the cake. The kid really did have a way with people. If this didn’t prove it, Tony didn’t know what would.

“If you’re finished here —” Stephen had stepped forward, politely interrupting them.

“Yes, Christ, we’ve been waiting on you,” Tony grumbled. “What did you find?”

“See for yourself.”

He stepped back and away from the monitor. The glowing magic dimmed around the edges to reveal the same footage they had watched before, but with a different man on the screen.

Wanda looked at it with amazement.

“Your magic…” she furrowed her brows, turning to him, “it is able to do that?”

Stephen cocked an eyebrow. “With enough concentration, yes.”

A beat passed that Wanda looked between the monitor and back at him.

“How?”

His expression hardened, but he never turned to look at her. The avoidance hadn’t gone unnoticed on her end. He had even taken a step back when she approached him.

“Pulling energies from other dimensions involves organized, purposeful focus,” Stephen explained. “It utilizes power in a much more precise and controlled way that your chaotic abilities could not achieve.”

The insult hit hard. Wanda frowned, turning away from him and retreating back to Vision, who stood by himself reviewing the footage. She found herself peering back to him every so often, otherwise keeping to herself.

Tony stepped forward, deliberating on what to do next now that the screens showed the true identity of the man.

“Alright,” he started, “I’m going to have FRIDAY begin a facial data recognition on this and —”

“Don’t bother,” Natasha’s voice was hoarse. “You won’t find any record of him.”

The room went cold. Her announcement had even Stephen at a loss for words. Always the bold and resolute person in the room, she seemed to cave in on herself, the attention directed towards her making her slightly nervous.

“His name is Dmitri Smerdyakov.” Natasha stated, not once looking away from the monitor. Her expression remained painfully neutral, aside from the crinkle of her brows against her forehead.
Steve could tell that she was burning with hidden emotion though, as her nostrils flared and the color had drained from her face.

Raising an eyebrow, he asked, “And you know this because…”

“We worked together. In the KGB.” Her voice was small, low in tone with shame that could be seen in the redness of her checks.

“Okay.” Tony crossed his arms over his chest. “Explain.”

It wasn’t a request, it was a demand. His eyes bored into her accusingly, his voice practically dripping with anger. Normally she wouldn’t let him speak to her in such a disrespectful way; she let him have this one.

Natasha spared a glance his way before breaking the hardened silence. “It was a long time ago, back in the Red Room Academy. I was still training in the Black Widow Ops program when I met him.”

Bruce cautiously stepped forward. “I thought that was a program for females only.”

“It was. Because of its success, they created the male equivalent. They dubbed it the Wolf Spider. Dmitri Smerdyakov was the only participant.”

“What happened?” Rhodey asked.

“The program didn’t last long,” she went on to explain. “Dmitri proved to be an effective killer, possibly better than all the girls combined. He accumulated more body counts during his time in the program than some of the tenure spies there. But out in the field, he couldn’t be controlled. He was ruthless. And that’s saying something, coming from me.”

“Playing dress up? What’s that about?” Tony asked, his words clipped and frosty.

“It was his skill — obviously still is. He became known for his mastery in disguise. In fact, his ability to impersonate was what caught the attention of the KGB. The most I remember about him is that he would take any assignment that came his way.” Natasha finally looked up at the others. “Any.”

Sam seemed to understand what she was getting at, looking at her grimly.

“Even the dirty work nobody else wanted.” he plainly stated.

She nodded. “Those jobs paid the most.”

“What happened to him?” Steve asked. “When the program failed?”

“I don’t know. The last I saw of him was an assignment we shared together in Argentina. It...didn't end as planned. There are unnecessary casualties. He got overzealous, and an entire children's hospital burnt down.” Natasha looked down at the ground, her lips pursed tightly with anger. “The children never got out. So you can imagine I was happy to never speak to him again.”

Clint frowned, his chest heaving with a restricted sigh. “Nat—”

“Don’t.” Her tone was sharp, hissed through clenched teeth. Clint backed away.

Steve studied the monitor. “You’re telling me the KGB just let this man walk away?”
“No,” she replied bluntly. "He was blacklisted and made an outcast, and from the stories I had been
told, when they burn you — they burn you good."

Rhodey shrugged, confused, “And now he wants to assume Tony’s life to…have power and control
over Stark Industries?”

“Yeah, well, he can take that from my dead and cold hands,” Tony added tiredly.

Natasha shook her head. “No. It’s not that. It’s not about power. Dmitri…I never knew him well,
no one did. But he was always after the money. Everyone knew he took the highest paying jobs, no
matter what they were. He’s probably been living his life under multiple different identities since
he was burned. Which means he’s probably had this plan for a while, Stark.”

Tony rubbed at his forehead.

“At least five months,” Stephen spoke up. “That’s how far back his impersonation of your IT
employee goes.”

They were directed back to the monitors, where Stephen had run through months of footage until
stopping roughly five months back. And he was right, the real IT employee left the building and
Dmitri, his disguise useless under Stephen’s spell, re-entered the next day.

Steve approached him. “You said you might be able to locate them if we discovered who Klum
was partnered with. Now that we know it’s this Dmitri person, can you still do that?”

Stephen hummed in thought.

“Locator spells typically only work best with a tangible object to connect with. A strand of hair
from your friend Thor provided me with the ability to locate his father here on Earth. It’s the
foundation needed to conjure the magic.”

Tony rolled his eyes dramatically. “Where’s the ‘but’ David Copperfield?”

Stephen looked at him through the corner of his eye, pausing for a moment to restrain himself from
snapping back.

“But if you give me enough time, I believe I can find you something.”

Tony furrowed his brows. “How much time we talking about here?”

“I’m not sure. At least give me until the afternoon.”

He gaped. “Twelve hours? Are you seri —”

It happened so quickly that Tony’s exhausted mind didn’t have a chance to process it. The thick,
red cloak that attached to Stephen’s shoulders suddenly flew off and had wrapped itself around
Tony’s mouth, so fast he couldn’t speak another syllable.

He stared at the offending object with wide eyes, the cloth wrapped around his head like a gag.
When he looked back up, he could see Strange staring him down, clearly annoyed.

Rhodey hid his laugh by coughing.

Tony shot him a heated glare.

Bruce smirked.
Disregarding the others, Tony looked back at Stephen, pointing to the cloak wrapped around his mouth.

When he spoke, it came out only as a muffled mumble. "Nhhhgg—"

Stephen stepped forward, “I’m sorry? I can’t understand you.”

Tony tilted his head, and his eyes narrowed harshly. He spoke again, but his voice was muted beneath the cloak. At this point, if his expression could kill, Strange would at least be knocked out cold on the floor.

“I still can’t...you’re going to have to speak up, Stark.” Stephen pressed a finger behind his ear, “Unless, of course, you’re saying that you’ll give me the time I need. Is that what you’re trying to say?”

Tony found himself looking up at the ceiling again. Wearily, he wondered if he had the number of tiles memorized by now. When he looked back at Stephen, his anger had dissipated enough for the cloak to unwrap itself from his mouth.

“Okay, first off, that’s gross.” Tony wiped the back of his hand against his lips. “Who the hell knows where that piece of outerwear has been. Second off —”

“Tony,” Steve’s voice warned.

Tony didn’t even need to look Steve’s way. He let out a sigh, his shoulders falling with the enormous amount of stress building on him.

“Do what you need to,” he muttered. “Just find them so we can find him.”

Stephen nodded. It was short and curt but spoke more than words could. It told Tony that he understood the gravity of the situation. Right now, that was all Tony needed to know.

“Ms. Romanoff?” Stephen turned to her. “As you’ve had connections with this man before, would you be willing to aid me in this search?”

Natasha scoffed. “Getting inside my head isn’t all that easy. I can’t promise I won’t make it difficult for you.”

He gave a small smile. “I thrive off a good challenge.”

Having nothing left to lose, she shrugged and nodded. Stephen held two fingers out directly in front of him and began to move his other hand in a circular motion. The act sparked a form of magic they had witnessed him appear with, the bright crackling orange portal leading to her own sleeping quarters in the facility.

Magic was definitely one thing she wasn’t sure she could get used to.

Steve calmly approached her, his demeanor silently asking if she was okay. She turned to look at him with a weary smile.

“The wizard and I are going to go hold hands for a little while,” Natasha joked. “You going to be alright here?”

“Yeah,” Steve nodded. “Try and get us some info, okay?”

“That’s my plan.” She looked at the portal, and then back to him. “What’s yours?”
Steve hesitated on answering. His own eyes looked around the room, the team clearly exhausted both physically and mentally.

“Everyone here needs to get some rest,” he answered. “I have a feeling we have a fight approaching that we need to be prepared for.”

He knew the others wouldn’t have a problem following through with his orders. But Steve wasn’t surprised to watch Tony clear out of the room. He wasn’t even surprised that the man practically ran out, quick to leave the group before another word could be said. He knew Tony well enough that after everything they had just discovered, he’d be extremely on edge. Steve didn’t want to fight with him, not now. If that meant leaving him alone until more information was revealed, he’d do that.

And that’s how Tony ended up back in his workshop, the double doors automatically opening for him. He hadn’t even reached the nearest computer before he was speaking to his AI.

“FRIDAY?”

“Yes, boss?”

He collapsed into the nearest chair, the wheels sending him rolling across the floor until he reached his U-shaped steel table. “Mark 37 — tell me, what are the statistics, where do we stand with it?”

Tony was quick to rattle off demands. Luckily for him, he built his AI to respond even faster.

“The project is currently eighty-seven percent complete. Would you like me to bring up journal data to review the remaining requirements that will need to be completed before the suit can become functional?”

He shook his head. “No need, FRI. Take the project and copy it to a new hard-drive, and bring up the schematics and blueprints for the original design. We’re going to be tweaking it around a little bit.”

He watched as the blue holographic screens appeared in front of him.

“Project data copied. Would you like to rename the original file folder?”

“What ideas was I throwing around?”

“Extremis 2.0, Badassium Nanosuit, Bleeding Edge –”


“And the copy?” the AI asked. “Would you like to name it as well?”

The question had him scrubbing at his face. He’d need a lot of coffee to continue to pursue this tonight. His hands were still rubbing at his eyes when he answered.

“Preferably, no. Throw it in a protocol bank.” He leaned back in his chair. “We’ll call it…’Save the Spider’ protocol.”

“Sounds good, boss,” she said. “What changes can I be of assistance with?”

He clucked his tongue and scooted the chair away from his desk, the wheels spinning him in a circle before his feet planted on the ground to stop himself. He pinched his fingers together and
then spread them wide apart, an array of screens lighting up the room.

“I want to prepare the suit for zero technological function. Once the nanites build the first layer of armor, I want all of this —” he swiped away the screens to his left, multiple windows spreading out. “Gone. It’ll all end up inert anyway.”

Tony watched as those very same windows began to disappear, blinking away one after the other. Slowly, the room that had been illuminated with the blue holographic images started to dim in darkness. Only a few images remained, and his face became the only object that reflected with the light.

“My calculations tell me that will strip forty-two percent of nanotech from within the suit. You will need to find a substitution to uphold the armor. The neurokinetic user-controlled morphologic nanoparticle bundles can exist within an environment of technology blocking substances, but will be unable to perform further actions once exposed to such a thing.” FRIDAY informed him.

A larger screen appeared in front of him, showing an outline of a man’s body with the suit forming onto it. It replayed the process in a loop.

“The replacement should be able to seal the nanites as a second layer of muscle and protection onto your body like originally intended. It will fail to serve any purpose outside of that.”

The news was music to his ears. Tony took the image and enlarged it, immediately cataloging the work he’d need to get done. As long as the armor could stay connected to his frame, he’d be set to go. Granted, the original plan was to utilize the nanotech with much higher functioning purpose, but that would have to come another day.

There was no way he could fight in a nonfunctional Iron Man suit. Even in Mark 46, as lightweight as the suit had been, it would still be twice his body weight. He’d be a walking, useless cinder block in the bulky armor.

No, he needed something that would protect him without weighing him down. Something that would shield his entire body. He didn’t need his repulsor blasts or rockets — his fists could do the manual work for him. He had a feeling they’d be more than capable in the heat of the moment anyway.

“Trust me, it’ll serve more purpose than you think,” he muttered.

“What replacement particle are you considering, boss?”

It was a million dollar question, and unfortunately one he couldn’t buy his way into answering. His mind, usually easy to process and compartmentalization, couldn’t focus on one solid object. He couldn’t just tell FRIDAY what he was considering because for once, he was caught between too many other thoughts. Where was Peter? Was he okay? How were they going to get to him? What were they going to find? Would they be able to find him? What was he going to tell May? Would Pepper stay safe? Was it a smart move to leave SHIELD out of this?

Tony swiped at his nose and studied the blueprints. If this was going to happen, he needed to make it happen. He needed to focus, and do the one thing he did best.

“We’re going to kick it old school, FRI,” he said. “What do you think of magnets?”
He was a mechanic. He’d invent a solution for the problem, just as he had done so many times before. Because come hell or high water, he’d get Peter back. There was no questioning that.

Coming to was less painful the second time around. Peter groaned, his head lolling to the side and resting on his shoulder as he forced his eyes to open. The first thing he noticed was the smell — putrid and acidic, a combination of vomit and chemicals. The second thing was the film that stuck to his mouth, a layer of vomit that had dried up.

‘Ugh,’ he thought, his eyes squeezing shut. ‘Gross.’

The third thing he noticed was the oxygen mask, while still hanging loosely around his chin, failed to provide any sort of gas. No hissing, no whirring — there wasn’t anything pouring out. The bile and chunks of sickness had since dried in the plastic, lifting the weight but still not falling back in place over his mouth.

Peter peered his eyes open. ‘The tank must be empty.’

The last thing he noticed was the sound. Or more specifically, the lack of any sound. It was so quiet that his ears were ringing, and he could hear each pulsate behind his temples from the ever-growing migraine. He planted the bottom of his feet firmly on the ground and lifted his bottom off the floor, adjusting himself to sit straight against the wall. It allowed him to better view his surroundings.

He was alone.

The space they were keeping him in wasn’t so big that he couldn’t see each corner of the room. Sparing a glance all around, he quickly determined that the Mysterio and his wannabe Bond villain had left him by himself. Looking back at the now empty gas tank, he realized that if they were smart, they’d return to put him back under.

“Aw, hell no,” Peter mumbled, spitting to the side what saliva was in his mouth. There was no way he was letting that happen again. He needed to make a move now, while he was still in his own mind and not trapped in some messed up hallucinations.

He reviewed his situation again, tapping the heels of his feet on the ground to let the shackles clatter against the cement. Getting those off would be easy if he could regain use of his arms. But from his experience last time, there was no way his strength could break him free. The Adamantium, whatever the hell that was, proved to be too strong.

‘But the walls aren’t.’

The inspiration came suddenly, and Peter craned his neck to try and look behind him. He tapped the back of his head against the wall, wincing at the pain it caused. The echo told him everything he needed to know — the walls were made out of steel. His lip curled slightly upward, but the jaded, drugged smile didn’t last. The strength that held his head up seemed to vanish, and his chin fell down to his chest.

He closed his eyes and mentally prepared himself. His breathing came in heavy and fast the longer he pumped himself up, mentally chanting with a ‘now or never’ attitude. He slammed the soles of his feet on the ground and bent his knees high to his chest. Caved in on himself, he took one last
deep breath in and pushed forward.

The grunting came quickly, but the shouts came faster after that. The fabric on the feet of his spider-suit began to tear against the cement floor as he struggled to hold his ground.

“Grrrra—...ahhh!” he growled between his clenched teeth until the bottom of his feet finally met the wall behind him, and he sat kneeling on the ground. The pressure against his shoulders was immense, he could feel his muscles ripping and bones crunching against each other. If he continued, he’d surely pop something out of a socket.

But what mattered to him was that he could hear the wall behind him cave and crumble. The more strength he used pushing himself away from the wall, the more the steel began to break away.

Until finally, triumph broke through him, and he ripped away with a force that shoved him face first to the ground.

‘Yesyesyesyes!’ he panted and heaved, resting his cheek on the cool floor. It felt nice. ‘No time Parker, come on, get up. Get out!’

Laying on the ground felt better than he imagined it would. The coldness eased his flushed skin and the pressure on his stomach quelled his nausea. Plus, he had been so dizzy and so lightheaded that finally being horizontal stopped the world from spinning.

Only when a flash of something sharp entered his mind did he remember the severity of the situation. For once, his intuition kicked in, replacing the role of his spider-sense. Danger. He needed to get out. He didn’t need his spider-sense to know that.

He rolled to his back, the large chunks of steel attached to him clattering as he did. With weak swings, he practically karate chopped the metal away from his body and ripped apart the shackles around his ankles. The Adamantium straps were still bolted to each side of the steel metal, but he was free from it.

Stumbling to his feet proved to be harder than he initially anticipated. His first attempt landed him on his backside, and his second had him tumbling on his hip. He had to cling to the nearest wall to stand up.

He ripped the plastic oxygen mask off his face and tossed it to the ground, noticing in the process that his wrists were bare of his web-shooters.

‘Crap. I need to find them. Where’d they put them?’ Peter shook his head, stumbling forward. ‘Not important. Find ’em later. Get out now.’

He could do that. The exit to the room wasn’t far, and he stumbled the entire way there, using the walls to keep himself balanced. Outside he found was a hallway that contained a fork in direction. His eyes darted left, right, and then straight ahead.

He settled on straight. It had to lead him somewhere.

In hindsight, he should have known better. Maybe if he weren’t so hazy from the hallucinogenic drug he would have thought twice about his predicament. He knew for sure that if the fog weren’t blocking his spider-sense it would have warned him in advance. Unfortunately, neither of these things happened, and Peter stumbled forward in the hallway, stepping on a deck of playing cards in the process.

The glass walls appeared around him almost instantly. His mind didn’t register the difference at
first, and he blinked frantically, even scrubbing at his eyes with frustration. All around him was a reflection of himself.

That’s when he realized he was caught in one of Mysterio’s illusions. He had activated a trap.

“Are you freaking kidding me!?” he spun around, trying to find a source of the magic. “This dude is so extra!”

He tried to recall what had happened last time in Times Square. He vaguely remembered something similar happening, in fact, it was on the tip of his tongue. But he couldn’t place it. There was a way to get out of this, he was sure of it. He just had to remember it.

His legs buckled and he fell to his knees, smacking down hard on the ground before dropping to his backside. The drug was still messing with him. His head pounded and he was still so dizzy.

“Great,” he mumbled, “Okay, just need to escape from crazy man’s crappy fun house. No problem, right?”

His breathing was starting to come in heavy. With resignation, he let his hands fall to his side and his head sink low to his chest. He’d figure this out. Once the room stopped spinning, he’d figure it out. He had to.

‘Because no one is coming for you.’

Peter looked up, his bloodshot eyes reflecting back at him from the glass walls. Perhaps it was the drugs messing with him, but for the longest time, he stared at himself. Still in his Spider-man costume though without his mask, he seemed like a shell of who he was. Like it wasn’t actually him in the mirror.

Because, for once in the longest time, he looked a lot younger than he felt. He saw the boy everyone else did, young and vulnerable and incapable of handling himself. For once in the longest time, he felt vulnerable. Spider-man made him feel tall and strong, capable of doing anything. Right now, he felt like weak Peter Parker. He couldn’t save Uncle Ben. He was unable to stop the smugglers on the ferry. And he failed at catching Mysterio before they stole the Chameleon helmet. Peter Parker was all these things. And Peter Parker was dead. At least to everyone else.

He gripped his head in his hands, squeezing his temples tightly to try and steer the pain away. He’d figure this out. He had to.

Because no one was coming for him.

Chapter End Notes

LOTS of dialogue and exposition, I know. But it’s all gearing up for chapter 17. Holy moly chapter 17 is going to be some good shit. If, god forbid, you’re dozing off right now, at least stay tuned for chapter 17.

Alright, it’s time we talk about our two baddies!

Mysterio is a fun character. Really, he is – he gets a lot of shit for being a cheesy villain, but he’s done some seriously F-ed up stuff. In “Old Man Logan” he tricked Logan into killing everyone by making him hallucinate that all the X-men bad guys
were after him. He basically walked in like “Yo, Wolverine, thanks for doing my dirty work.”

But Mysterio is also multiple different aliases’s. The true, original, one of a kind Mysterio goes by the name of Quentin Beck. Badass motherFer. This is the Mysterio that I’m sure the Spider-man sequel plans to use. He died (in the sense that all comic book characters do, which means he never really died) and two other people took on the mantle. Daniel Berkhart, and Francis Klum.

This story is using Francis Klum. While I ADORE the evilness of Quentin Beck, I wanted Klum’s tortured background and enhanced abilities. Also, Beck is a mastermind type of villain, and Klum is not, which comes into play down the road with our other baddie. I didn’t want to sacrifice character integrity too much, in the sense I didn’t want to use Beck and just give him mutant/enhanced powers, so I’m rolling with Klum. Francis Klum’s backstory does involve sexual molestation from his brother, but the canon stops there - everything involving Oscorp and the origin of mutation is for this story only.

Chameleon was always one guy, Dmitri Smerdyakov, master of disguise, and a brilliant method actor and impressionist. Canon-wise: He is a spy. There are versions where his belt buckle transforms him, and then other versions where his transformation is a mutated power. But his backstory, like a lot of other comic book characters, can go on for pages. He’s a great villain and has definitely always entertained me, so I highly recommend any series he’s in.

However, I break his canon at that. Unless there’s a universe/series I’m not aware of, he and Natasha/Black Widow have never had contact. They weren’t in the KGB together. The Wolf Spider Program IS a real thing in the comics, but Dmitri wasn’t the man involved, and the story was so unimpressive that I wouldn’t recommend it to anyone. I’m simply taking it and twisting it around to fit into this fic.

Thanks to Mei_kun for beta-ing this chapter.
I’m still so incredibly blown away by the response to this fic. Your love and support is immensely appreciated! But remember, I’m writing this for YOU, for YOUR entertainment. Don’t be afraid to speak up and let me know you’re enjoying it and what you’d like to see going forward. This is a universe we share together!

Eight hours of sleep was overrated. Tony discovered that early on in his life. As long as he obtained enough REM cycles, he could easily go two to three days with a few naps here and there. So he slept between the processing sequences that rebuilt his Mark 37 armor. FRIDAY would inform him of the time-span that the suit needed to re-sync and he would utilize the break from working to doze off. His neck was greatly unappreciative to the awkward sleeping positions, but he kept going. DUM-E eventually brought him a stiff pillow that he laid down on his worktable.

The brief moments of rest also provided him with inspiration. Somewhere between the suits final syncing procedure and his fifth nap did he start working on analog web-shooters. It wasn’t a thought he wanted to consider, but the chances of Peter having any weaponry to defend himself was slim to none. From his own experiences under captivity, the kidnappers didn’t typically let him keep his Iron Man armor. It wouldn’t surprise him if the kid were bare of his spider tech, especially considering no matter how many times he ran searches on the suits tracker, he never came back with any results.

He hated the idea of Peter out there, somewhere, without his suits defenses. It made him sick to his stomach. In all honesty, he hoped that the new device wouldn’t be used at all, but he wanted to be prepared.

He was in the middle of testing the web-shooters when Rhodey entered the workshop.

“Tony, FRIDAY said you were — whoa!”

Rhodey sidestepped just in time for a thick stream of webbing to smack straight against the automatic doors. Following the strand with his eyes, he found it originated from Tony; his hand outstretched and two fingers pressed firmly against the device strapped around his wrist.

He arched an eyebrow. “What’s this about?”

Tony lowered his arm, detaching the web-shooter in the process.

“Reinforced webbing fluid,” he answered. “I tweaked Peter’s formula so that the tensile strength is enhanced from 1.3 gigapascal to about 1.8. It’s not much, I could only do so much with a couple hours to spare. I had to sacrifice the imbibed esters, but I figured if the kid’s going to be using these we won’t want the stuff to dissolve anyway, right?”

Tony fiddled with the sleek metal gadgets, and Rhodey watched with an empty expression, trying
to process what he had just heard. Looking around he noticed that the workshop was a mess, per usual, and Tony hadn’t changed from the casual attire he wore last night. His *Black Sabbath* t-shirt was wrinkled and stained with white goo.

Rhodey motioned to the devices that Tony unstrapped from his wrist. “And the bracelets?”

“Not bracelets.” Tony tossed them onto the nearest table “Completely self-functioning web-shooters. The kid first designed them like this, I just slimmed them down a bit. If *Penn and Teller* want to make our tech obsolete, I’ll be ready with a backup plan. Though I’m pretty sure my upgraded design works fine as analog — I’m not taking any chances with these freaks.”

Rhodey wasn’t surprised. Decades of being Tony’s friend stripped him of the ability to feel that emotion. He didn’t know if he should comment on the clutter that surrounded them or the new inventions his friend clearly spent the evening focused on. In the background, he could see a new Iron Man suit being put together by multiple robotic arms.

“Did you even sleep last night?” he settled on asking.

Tony hadn’t looked up from the floor, resolving instead to kick a pile of discarded webbing aside with his shoe. “Did you?”

DUM-E approached them both and attempted to sweep the webbing aside. Rhodey took a step back so the machine could clean the mess.

“A little,” he absentmindedly answered.

“Same here,” Tony muttered, looking at DUM-E when it began to make a whining noise. Hands on his hips, he motioned to the webbing that stuck to the broom’s bristles. “What did I tell you? Why would you even try to do that?”

Rhodey, sadly, expected the deflection. He shook his head and sighed deeply, knowing that the most honest answer he’d receive from Tony would be the dark bags settling underneath the man’s eyes. His appearance always spoke more than his words ever did.

“Strange and Natasha are back.” He pointed to the door behind them. “They’re waiting for us in the east wing lab.”

Tony’s neck shot up at record speed.

“Great.” He was already out of the room. “Let’s go.”

Rhodey stayed behind for a moment, watching DUM-E struggle at untangling the webbing from the broom, the goo sticking between his metal clamps and causing the robot more frustration. He rolled his eyes and walked away, deciding it was better to leave that mess for someone else to clean up.

Tony was already halfway down the hallway when he caught up to him.

“You have any Scotch?” he asked, taking a sharp corner. “I’m starving.”

Rhodey rolled his eyes. “How about coffee?”

The rest of the team were already waiting for them by the time they arrived. They sat in their respective chairs around the long table, only Strange and Clint maintaining standing positions. The latter didn’t surprise Tony, considering how the archer always insisted on watching over the room
like a hawk. The coffee, of course, was of abundance given the circumstances.

Approaching the team, Tony noted that Natasha seemed oddly fresh for someone who had spent the night awake. Her abilities in espionage never ceased to surprise him.

Strange, standing off in the nearest corner, nodded his head at his presence. The bottom of his thick, red cape turned upwards in what Tony could only imagine was an inanimate object’s version of a wave. The greeting felt like he was being mocked, and he furrowed his brows, quickly deciding on steering clear of the magical outerwear.

He pulled up a chair to the table, leaning back with his arms crossed over his chest.

“Well,” Tony started, “anything good?”

Natasha stood from her seat, leaning over and pressing down firmly on the table. As she brought her hand upwards, the holographic 3D image of a building illuminated the room. Clint kicked away from the wall he rested against, moving forward to get a better look.

“When have I ever been one to disappoint?” Natasha asked.

Rhodey stood by Natasha’s side, bringing up his own screens that contained numerous government reports.

“Turns out you were right about something being fishy with OsCorp,” he told Tony

“Son of a bitch,” Tony muttered, sitting up from his chair and spinning the 3D image with a flick of his hand. “Where were the bastards even hiding this?”

The building wasn’t large, maybe a quarter size of the Raft, if that, but it was extensive. Numerous layers with schematics designed for some serious scientific practice. It didn’t seem like something that could be so easily hidden from the public's eyes. Tony pinched the image with his fingers and zoomed in, the enlargement allowing him to better study the design.


“The Bermuda...” Bruce stuttered, looking at the others. “The Bermuda Triangle?”

“It gets better.” Natasha dryly said. “This entire base is underwater. At least thirteen-hundred feet in the ocean, built on some sort of rock structure.”

Rhodey scrolled through his data screens. “I did some research. Turns out this is the facility OsCorp was using for their enhanced experimentation's. Klum must have told Dmitri about it, and they decided to use it as a base of operations.”

“I thought you said the government shut them down,” Steve said.

“They did. That doesn’t mean they had an obligation to destroy the facility.” Rhodey answered.

“It’s in the ocean. With the money OsCorp pulls, they probably left it there to rust.” Sam didn’t hide the disgust in his voice.

“Why the hell didn’t we know about this?” Tony asked, directing his question towards Natasha.

She shrugged. “The government handed it off to SHIELD, who quietly took care of it. You know how they work. Its a need to know basis and they didn’t think we needed to know.”
Tony scoffed, flicking the image to standard size and sitting back down in his chair. Of course SHIELD would hide this from them. They loved to bring the team in at last minute and catch them up on details as they went. It made him feel a little less regretful on not briefing them about Peter’s rescue. With a twisted sense of pleasure, he was almost looking forward to seeing how they enjoyed being told information after the fact.

Natasha changed holograms, switching from the underwater facility to what easily resembled a very large mechanical pumping system.

“Here’s the kicker. That fog Mysterio’s been using? The one that knocks out our tech? It was created so they could hide the base.”

Vision hummed and rubbed the bottom of his chin. “Of course. Build an underwater base of operations in the Bermuda triangle where paranormal activity rumors already exist.”

Rhodey nodded. “No one would blink an eye if an aircraft crashed there.”

“Which, if they’re using the nanite mist, it will,” Tony stressed, pinching the bridge of his nose with frustration.

“And they are,” Stephen spoke up. “Mysterio’s not only using it for his own personal gain, but they’ve used it to keep the building surrounded after OsCorp abandoned the facilities. They’re completely off the radar.”

Sam scrubbed his face with both hands. “So I take it we won’t be getting the quinjet over there anytime soon.”

Steve leaned forward in deep thought, and Tony leaned further back, fingers still pressing tightly on the bridge of his nose. The stress filling the room was heavy enough to suffocate them, so when Natasha gave a small, empty smile, the others were quick to pay attention.

“Luckily for us,” she said, “we have a new element on our side with this one.”

As if he had forgotten all about the magician, Tony’s head snapped up, and he spun his chair around to face Strange. He wasn’t even worried about hiding the desperation that, by now, was permanently ingrained in his features. If the man noticed, he didn’t draw attention to it.

“I should be able to get you there with my sling-ring.” Stephen pointed to the golden metal object he retrieved from his cloth belt. “If you allow me to help you, I’ll able to open a portal directly into the facility. You’ll find the Parker kid, and I’ll banish Mysterio to a realm that Dormammu cannot enter from.”

Tony was already out of his chair before Stephen had finished his sentence.

“Okay? So what the hell are we waiting for?” He impatiently clapped his hands together. “Let’s go!”

“We all can’t go,” Steve spoke with a solemn understanding that had Tony floored.

“We all can’t – and why the hell not?” he paused, his brows releasing from a tightly knitted scowl to gut-wrenching realization. “Oh. Shit.”

His first instinct was to look at Rhodey, and the bulky leg braces attached to his lower half. The man’s jaw was visibly firm, and his arms were folded over his chest, head low to the ground.
“With them using that fog to hide the base, some of us will be up shit creek without a paddle if we’re exposed to it,” Rhodey stated.

Tony briefly laid a hand over his face, rubbing at the tired muscles around his eyes. He didn’t have the strength to look at his friend when he spoke. “Rhodey —”

“It’s fine. Really,” Rhodey cut him off, hands up in a passive manner. “If I stay behind, I can keep SHIELD off our backs for a little while. It’ll buy you some time.”

The answer didn’t make Tony feel any better. His shoulders dropped under the growing pressure that made his back and neck ache.

“I’m going to have to stay with him,” Bruce announced.

Tony wasn’t the only one to express confusion over the statement. The others shared the sentiment, looking at Bruce as if he had grown three heads.


Bruce waved his hand in the air, sputtering on his words before finally finding his voice.

“I — I can’t go in there, Nat,” he said. “An underwater base? If...if the other guy comes out, everyone there will be screwed. I can’t risk that.”

Right, of course. Tony was beginning to feel thrown off at the amount of obvious knowledge that he should have already been making connections too. His mind felt like a frazzled mess, like a computer that had short-circuited. He clasped his hands behind his neck, turning away as Steve rose from his chair at the table.

“Okay. Then we’ll split up — make teams.” Steve said. “One group will stay behind in the event of any unforeseen circumstances. Since we don’t know what these two are planning, we’ll need some of us here ready to defend at any moments notice.”

Wanda also stood up from her chair. The others turned to look her way, her behavior similar to Vision in a sense that she only really spoke when she found it necessary.

“With all due respect, I am not staying back,” she insisted. “I am going.”

“Same here.” Clint stepped forward. “Good ‘ol fashion arrows are just as deadly as the ones that electrocute.”

Natasha’s eyes stayed low to the floor. “I’m going.”

The deep, threatening tone caught Tony’s attention, and he couldn’t help but turn and look at Natasha. Her glare held piercing anger that couldn’t be ignored, weighing heavy on her features. For a moment the room went cold, even Strange slightly taken aback.

Steve didn’t dare touch it. He turned to look at Vision, the android still sitting next to Wanda.

“Vision,” he started, “can you stay back with Rhodey and Bruce? I think it’s best someone as powerful as you stick around in case they plan an attack while we’re gone. We don’t want to put all our eggs in one basket.”

He nodded. “I can do that, Captain.”

“Sam.” Steve turned to look at him. “I need you to stay back as well.”
Sam’s entire demeanor changed in a millisecond. “What!?” he exclaimed, his jaw unhinged.

Steve bit his tongue, seeming as if he was expecting a fight.

“Your wings —”

“Screw my wings, Steve!” Sam rose from his seat, slamming his open palms on the surface of the table. “I was a para-rescue, damn it! You can’t possibly think it’s a good idea to bench me. What if the kids been hurt, what if he needs medical treatment?”

“Hopefully we can get him back here in time for that,” Steve answered.

“You’re going to rely on ‘hopefully’? You’re seriously going to sideline the one guy who was trained for this?”

“Sam, Steve’s right.” Natasha intervened. “We need you back here in case something goes wrong.”

“That’s bullshit,” Sam sneered, finger pointing in her direction. “The only reason you get to go is that you want to be the one to put a bullet in Dmitri’s head.”

Steve shook his head. “Sam —”

“Do you realize what you’re asking me?” He turned back to Steve. “This is going against everything I lived for. If that kid is hurt and I’m not there to help him...”

He didn’t want to finish the sentence, which was a good thing considering no one else wanted to hear it. They knew, subconsciously, the prospect of encountering an injury with a captured victim was likely, but no one in the room wanted to put Peter in that scenario. It hurt enough just dealing with the concept of him being taken.

“I get it,” Steve insisted. “I get it, Sam, I do. And it’s good to know you care for him.”

Clint smirked. “It’s actually kind of sweet.”

“Shut up,” Sam hissed.

“But I need you here, leading the team,” Steve continued. “I’m counting on you to take up my role while I’m gone.”

Sam held his stare for a minute, ruthless and unblinkingly until he finally resigned and sat down with a huff. Any other day Tony would say he was pouting. But he didn’t have the energy for jokes right now. As it was, he had lost four vital members of his team in the mission.

“Tony —”

He whirled around, eyes springing wide open as he viciously shook his head.

“Oh hell no!” Tony practically yelled. “You don’t have a say in this one, Cap. I’m there. End of story. I have a suit roaring to go, one that’ll kick them off their feet even with that damn nanite mist. I’m getting my kid back.”

Steve sat quiet, caught between stunned silence and mild awe at the display of affection. It didn’t go unnoticed that he called Peter ‘his kid’ again. The thought tugged a smile at the corner of his lips.

“I...wasn’t going to argue with you over that,” Steve said. “I wanted to make sure you had a plan
before we attacked.”

Quick to notice the attention he had drawn on himself, Tony rolled his eyes.

“You know me, Rogers. My plan is to attack,” he answered.

Clint shook his head. “We need to know what we’re getting into before we go. We’re useless if we go in blind. How fast can we get the blueprints for this base?”

“I’ll need to find a way into a few servers…” Natasha was already reviewing the work she needed to get done. “Give me the afternoon, at best.”

“Seriously? We’re just going to piss away more time?” Tony waved his hand in the air with annoyance.

“They’re right, Tony,” Steve said. “We can’t give them the upper hand by rushing in. We need to know the structure of the base and decide if we’ll split up into teams when we do get there.”

Bruce wet his lips and rested his elbows on the table. “While having Wanda and...Doctor Strange here is certainly on our side, it wouldn’t hurt to have someone else with magical abilities.” he paused, eyebrow high in the air. “Like...a God?”

Stephen was quick to catch on, resting against the wall and shaking his head.

“Thor is on another world right now. He’s got some...family issues to deal with.”

“What about Tic-Tac? Maybe he could help us out again,” Sam mentioned.

Tony huffed. “Scott Lang and his shrinking tech? He’d be useless to us.”

Stephen stepped forward, approaching the team with such assurance that it could easily give Tony a run for his money.

“There’ll be six of us against two of them. In all actuality, the most they have on their side is the leftover tech from OsCorp...and Stark’s helmet.” His disgruntled tone hadn’t gone unnoticed. “We take that away, we’ll win this battle.”

“You’re pretty confident for someone who isn’t allowed to voodoo the outcome of this said battle.” Tony quipped.

Stephen pursed his lips, shooting daggers in his direction. “We leave once your team can review the layout of the base. Be ready by then.”

Natasha had already begun work on infiltrating the servers to gain the facility’s blueprints. Her concentration seemed unbreakable, her fingers typing on the keyboard with precise speed. Clint was by her side doing what he could to help, pulling up different holographic screens with a wave of his hand.

Tony decided he had dealt with enough. An aggravated and slightly exaggerated huff rattled his chest; he darted out of the room, muttering under his breath the entire way. It took everything within him not to call on his Iron Man armor and leave immediately. If it were truly up to him, he’d have told everyone to screw off, head down the East coast by himself and put an end to this problem. Playing as a team with others was fine when it didn’t involve rescuing his kid from two madmen in a fucking underwater base.
But they were right. He hated admitting it but going in blind meant failure. They couldn’t afford failure right now — Peter couldn’t afford failure.

He briefly looked down at his wristwatch, noting the time on the digital face. It was a little over two full days since the accident on the Brooklyn Bridge. That was about forty-eight hours too many for Tony to be comfortable with. He wouldn’t say it out loud, hell he wouldn’t even linger on the thought, but there was still the excruciating, troubling possibility that he’d find Peter dead. Forty-eight hours was a long time to be gone.

With painstaking stubbornness, he refused to think about anything besides the heartbeat he had heard so vividly, so loudly in his ears, accompanied with soft, brown eyes that made his chest ache. Peter was still alive. He had to be.

“Tony, hey!” The voice broke him from his thoughts. “Wait up, man.”

Tony came to a halt, spinning around on his heels, shaking with frustration that he could no longer contain.

“Rhodey, please, not now. I can’t...” His hands balled into tight fists. “I know you’re pissed, okay? Don’t think I haven’t noticed how you’ve been lately. It makes me feel like shit to see you like this.”

The words flew out of his mouth before he could think of what he was saying. Everything was starting to pile up on his conscience, weakening the strength of the filter that normally kept him calm and composed. A frazzled mess wasn’t even remotely close to how he was acting, and he knew it, but he was so damn far out from his element. Between the big aspects like Strange’s magic to the smaller things, like waiting on the team for a rescue mission that should have taken place forty-eight damn hours ago.

Why was he still standing here? Why weren’t they taking action?

He suddenly realized Rhodey had been trying to get his attention, his eyes turning to focus on his friend.

“Tones, I’m not...I’m not mad,” he said. “I’m frustrated, sure. But I’m not mad.”

Tony threw his hands in the air, his expression all but defeated. “I’m trying. I really am, I’m trying.”

Rhodey nodded. “I know you are.”

“Clearly I’m not doing a good job at it, I mean look at you, but I’m –”

“You’re doing fine, Tony.”

“I don’t want to keep you out of this.” he continued as if he hadn’t heard the man, his voice gruff and ragged. “I want you there, fighting with me.”

“I know, man. I want to be there, too.” Rhodey stepped closer, laying a calm hand on his shoulder. “But I have a purpose here. Don’t be sorry about that.”

Rhodey meant it. If the heavy emphasis on his final words didn’t clear his point, Rhodey squeezed Tony’s shoulder a little tighter for reassurance. It was his way of saying ‘you gotta keep it together, man.’ the encouragement in response to his obvious unraveling. There was a strong flood of emotion that poured off of Tony, making him visibly uncomfortable, looking anywhere but straight
ahead.

Emotions were another thing that was far out of his element. Magic, teamwork, and emotions. It was enough to make him want to fly halfway across the world. He didn’t sign up for this.

‘Neither did Peter.’

Tony suddenly looked Rhodey dead in the eye. “I gotta get him back.”

The pain in his voice was a kick to his teeth. Rhodey released his grip on his shoulder, patting it briefly, noting that Tony’s bloodshot eyes glistened with moisture he refused to let escape. It bothered him to feel the abnormal desperation burn off his friend like a raging fire. After all, there were very few times that Tony allowed himself show such raw emotion to others.

“I know you do.” Rhodey evoked trust and faith that Tony was envious of. “And you will.”

Their conversation was cut short with the interruption of a high-pitch ringtone. Tony bit back an exasperated sigh and Rhodey wordlessly nodded his head, turning back to the lab and leaving him to answer the call.

He whipped his cell phone out from his pocket, checking the caller ID before deciding to answer.

“This better be good, Happy.”

Tony could hear rustling on the other end, the uncertain quietness only penetrated by the sound of a car turn signal.

“Boss,” Happy’s greeting was tainted with disgruntlement. “Parker’s Aunt wants to know when the funeral arrangements will be made.”

Funeral arrangements for – Tony hissed between clenched teeth, momentarily forgetting that the rest of the world was under the impression the kid was still dead. The back of his free hand rubbed harshly at his forehead, leaving the skin pink and irritated.

“There’s not going to be a funeral.”

There was another pause as he took a corner in the hallway, this time accompanied by the sound of the car shutting off. He could almost see Happy turning the key to the engine with furious haste.

“There’s not going to be a — what the hell do you mean, there’s not going to be a funeral?”

Tony sighed.

“It’s a long story.” God, he felt like that was the fifteenth time he had said that in the past few hours.

Happy scoffed. “No. You know – absolutely not, I draw the line here. I let you get away with Rogers doing the dirty work for you. And it was one thing to do the casket shopping for you. I did that as a favor, as your friend —”

“Listen to me, Happy.”

“You’re not my boss, and you know technically I don’t even work for you anymore. That was done out of the kindness of my heart.”

Tony stopped walking. “Hap, you gotta —”
Tony removed the phone from his ear, placing it directly in front of his mouth and yelling, “Happy, shut up!”

There was a beat of silence that followed. The few employees of the facility that wandered the hallways stopped and stared, not that Tony cared. Trying to will what patience he had left, he took a deep breath to calm himself and slowly placed the phone back to his ear.

“Screw you, Tony.”

“You’re so sweet,” his words dripped with sarcasm. “Hey, by the way, the kid is still alive.”

“What?” Happy was quick to respond. “Why didn’t you say so!”?

Tony was afraid if he rolled his eyes any harder, they’d pop out of his socket.

“I’m going to choose to ignore that,” he said. “Listen, I know I’ve asked a lot from you lately. You’re right, you don’t technically work for me, you don’t have to do this —”

“What do you need?”

Relief washed over him like a tidal wave. Right now, he’d take any positive thing that came his way, and Happy’s willingness to help was an example of the small things he refused to take for granted. It seemed like when the entire world was out to get him, the small things were all he could rely on.

“I need you to stall May Parker,” Tony said. “Just let her know it’s being taken care of, but don’t actually start anything yet.”

“I bought a casket yesterday.” Happy stated with confusion. “It’s a nice casket.”

Tony hummed in thought. “Can you return those?”

“I imagine not. It’s probably not an item people typically return to the store, Tony.”

“Whatever.” Tony returned to walking down the corridors. “It doesn’t matter. Just — whatever you do, Happy, do not let her know about this.”

“Don’t let her know that her nephew is still alive?”

“Exactly. We have a plan. We’re going after him, but...” Tony struggled to find the right words to say, “if we find him, and he’s not...if he’s...”

His throat began to feel oddly tight, and his heart had started beating two paces too fast. The unspoken words were an anxiety attack waiting to happen, the image of Peter’s corpse fresh behind his eyelids. Laying in the pile of the rest of the Avenger’s bodies, lifeless, haunting his mind even when he was awake.

Tony viciously shook his head.

“I can’t get her hopes up,” he settled on saying.

Luckily, Happy was content with the answer. “Understood, boss.”

He was walking down the stairs to the bottom floor where his workshop was located when a
thought entered his mind. “Oh, and don’t let word get around. The next twenty-four hours, keep it sealed tight. SHIELD won’t let us release any official statements until they clear the case anyway, but we don’t want to raise suspicion by retracting an obituary.”

“You got it.” Happy paused, the engine to his car roaring in the background, “And Tony?”

“Hm?”

“I really...I really hope you find the kid.” He gave a soft chuckle. “Hell, I’ll babysit him whenever you need after this.”

Tony smiled. “I’m holding you to that, pal.”

“Wait, then I — hold up —”

“Gotta go, Hap. Drive safe.”

He ended the call before either one of them could say another word. Standing in the center of the workshop, he slowly stuffed the cell phone back in his pocket, looking up at the finished Mark 37 Iron Man suit in front of him.

Screw magic. He had science.

Peter had fallen asleep.

Feebly rolling onto his back, he let out a low groan, his hand reaching up to his neck in an attempt to knead out the forming knot in his muscles. It was the most frustrating knowledge to wake up with.

He couldn’t even remember when he closed his eyes. He hadn’t tried to fall asleep, it just happened. Judging from the dryness of his mouth and the way his back ached, it was safe to say it wasn’t a quick power nap. With no clocks or windows around, he had no way to tell what time, or even what day it was. Here, he just existed.

Rolling to his side, he saw his reflection looking back at him. Right. He was stuck in Mysterio’s not-so-fun-house.

The good news was, his head throbbed a little less than it had before. He’d easily rate the pain on a scale of eight from being a twenty-three. The events started to fill the holes in his mind one by one until he remembered the root of the situation. That being, if he didn’t move quickly, he’d be back under the influence of that disgusting hallucinogenic again.

Sitting up, Peter distantly realized that either of the two psychos hadn’t come after him. He had broken out of their restraints possibly hours ago, and he was still here, trapped in some technological house of mirrors.

‘They said they were after Mr. Stark’s money...’ Peter thought, running a hand through his tangled and greasy hair. ‘They must be out doing whatever...plan they have.’

The realization would work to his benefit. He needed to make a move, and fast before.
He slowly stood from the floor. “Okay, you’re without your web-shooters...your spider-sense isn’t working with all this stupid fog...and you don’t know where you’re at. Things could be worse. Things could be so much worse.”

His attempt at self-assurance wasn’t working. The sound of his own voice, though, provided some sense of calm, the noise grounding him back to reality. Even after sleeping the drug off, he still felt hazy. The hallucinations had felt so real. He struggled with shaking off the memory of Uncle Ben dying in his arms, the chill from the building was not helping him forget that miserable winters night.

“Focus, Parker. Step one, escape the funhouse from hell,” Peter muttered to himself, spinning in a circle to examine his surroundings.

The glass cage was dark, and only his reflection looked back at him. Touching the walls, they felt as real as real could get. Maybe if he ran through them, they’d break down.

He shook his head. Illusions didn’t work that way. He had to disable the trick. Which meant – Karen’s voice echoed in his memory.

“The walls are projected via the cards on the ground. I believe if you eliminate those, your surroundings will reappear.”

“Oh, thank you, Karen!” Peter exclaimed, smiling for the first time in, well, who knows how long.

He bent down to the corner, brushing his hand against the rough cement in search of –

Found it. Card number one. He ripped it in pieces and immediately did the same with the remaining three cards. Though nothing physical actually fell to the floor, the illusion flickered and shattered away like broken glass. He watched it happen with a sense of amazement.

“If I weren’t in a life or death situation, I’d definitely want to know how that works.”

Peter looked behind him quickly, ensuring no one was at the other end of the hallway before taking off. His feet pounded heavily against the floor. He bumped into the walls as he took corners, four to be exact, the third one leaving him confused and concerned.

There wasn’t an exit in sight. There wasn’t even a window nearby.

Just when he began to worry that he was running further into whatever building they had trapped him in, he landed somewhere with light. It was an open space, a huge laboratory that had staircases leading further down. There were large tanks against the walls, but they were empty. Everything was empty and shut off, aside from the few flickering bulbs from above.

Peter was starting to assume that wherever he was, the place had been abandoned.

KkkkrrrrreeeaKKK!

The sound made him jump and clutch his chest in shock. He held his breath, his eyes darting around frantically to find the source, waiting to see if someone had snuck up on him. His spidey-sense was useless right now, nothing to his advantage that would warn him of anything.

There was no one was to be found.

‘Or he’s hiding. Ready to pounce.’ Peter hesitantly stepped down into the large open space. ‘I so
hate being pounced on.’

He felt incredibly naked without his spider-sense. They had flooded the building with the fog, and it had made a significant difference on his awareness. Trying to be the most mindful that he could, Peter noticed that the place was eerily quiet. It didn’t stop his heart from beating a thousand miles per second, and he began to worry that he’d drop dead from a self-induced heart attack. He could hear the blood rushing in his ears.

Only the walls made noises, creaking under pressure.

It reminded him of that really old movie Titanic when the girl was walking through the flooded hallways with an ax to save Leonardo Dicaprio’s character.

Peter stopped, his face scrunched up in horror. Why would he think of that? That was the least comforting thought to have. He shook it from his mind. The last thing he needed right now was more stress, and the concept of being in a sinking ship was definitely causing him unnecessary anxiety.

Walking out of the laboratory, he came into another hallway, this time with a much brighter light at the end.

‘Okay, good! You’re getting somewhere, Parker.’ He sprinted down the hall. ‘See, crazy thoughts like that won’t do you any good. As if you were on a ship. That’s nonsense. I’m sure there’s a very logical explanation for whatever sound...’

Peter stumbled to a stop at the end of the hallway. His jaw dropped, and his blood ran cold, sending shivers down his spine.

He finally found windows, large ones that reached from the ceiling to the bottom. The pale blue light from the ocean reflected across his face as a swarm of fish swam by, his wide, stunned eyes following the creatures across the aquarium like walls.

KkkrrrrreeeeaaaKKK!

Peter gulped.

Wherever he was, he was underwater.

The building was entirely underwater, deep in the ocean, like way down in the sea and he literally pinched himself to make sure he wasn’t hallucinating again.

He was wrong. Things got much worse.

“Gluppy mal’chik,” the Russian accent made him flinch, breaking him out of his dazed shock. “You’re not supposed to be here.”

Peter cringed. Yeah, things just got so much worse.

Chapter End Notes
As always, HUGE thanks to Mei_kun for beta-ing this chapter.
At the time of writing this, nothing has been confirmed, but there are some serious rumors floating around that Mysterio and Chameleon are the villains in Spider-man: Homecoming’s sequel “Far From Home.”

...Marvel? Are you reading this?...I’ll work for soda and crackers. Scratch that, I’ll work for free. Scratch that, I’ll pay to work for you. Wait, that’s not right...

Lmao. But for reals. If that happens, I will lose my sh!t. These two baddies are definitely worthy of the big screen. Until then, I hope my fic can entertain the waiting time for the film!

*(1/27/2019 unnecessary return to author's note to edit in: Lmao it happened and that's awesome and I just love it.)*

Now, holy moly jeezy louysie, you guys. I’ve been dragging you along for 15 chapters to get to this point. God bless every one of your patient souls for sticking around this long. Seriously. I started this fic as an “Oh me oh my I’m going to whump the hell out of Petey pie!” and somehow it managed to take 15 long chapters to get there.

I promised the whump, though. I promised it so hard and I plan to deliver it...so hard.

Because the rest of this story is whump and glorious hurt/comfort. You have my word on that.

The Russian translations will be at the chapter’s end A/N.

Warning for descriptive writing of bodily injury.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Peter cringed, closing his eyes and hoping that the voice was, in fact, all a bad dream. He froze, standing still like a deer in headlights, refusing to breathe in the absurd fear that it would give away his already exposed position.

‘Thinkthinkthink.’

The footsteps pounded against the floor, brisk, hurried, then to a full sprint charging towards him and —

‘Panicking. Can’t think. Work on instincts.’

Peter dashed down the other side of the hallway, arms swinging hard up and down as if he could use air for purchase to run faster. He collided on the nearest wall, bouncing off it and stumbling forward. The raging shouts got his feet steady under him.

‘Instincts bad. Instincts are so bad!’

He stomped off the ground, using the momentum to bolt forward. It put him further ahead of the crazy Russian; a small victory that allowed him elbow room to breathe away from panic.

“Teper’ ya sobirayus’ ubit’ tebya, kusok der’ma!” The man’s voice snarled like a rabid animal.

Peter nearly stumbled to the ground again, pushing his palm on the floor to right himself, giving him a good boost for his next sprint. “Sorry! Don’t know what that means!” he yelled back, finding his voice.

A fork in the hallway was up ahead. Peter turned left. He didn’t know where he was going, he could be running in circles for all he knew, but he needed a place to hide and fast. His gaze skittered around him, searching and then realizing that the new area was much, much larger than where they had been keeping him. Wherever he was running to, it was the outskirts of this, this thing. Building. Ship? Submarine? He passed by a set of large glass windows, the sight of the clear ocean water twisting his gut into knots.

He had zero clue where he was.
Peter abruptly stopped, reaching a dead end. He spun around, watching the man slide to a halt. The color of surprise immediately wiped off from his face as he tilted his head low, and stomped forward, a snarl curling his mouth.

“You. Come with me,” he demanded.

Peter spared a fleeting glance behind him at the wall and swallowed heavily. He didn’t have any choice but to fight.

“Okay,” he shoved the feeling of imminent terror aside for false confidence. “But first...— high five!”

The action led the man to block what he thought was an oncoming punch. Peter held his hand in the air, and he went to deflect it with an open palm. The man’s hand got stuck to his like a fly on flypaper. Peter watched with a sliver of giddy satisfaction as the man pulled and yanked, unable to break free. Between hiding and gaining the upper hand, the latter was indefinitely risky but rewarded better chances.

“Whoops, looks like you’re stuck with me!”

The humor was far from genuine, a feeble attempt at distracting himself from the panic fueling his adrenaline. Peter kicked him on the chest, yanked him forward, and used the momentum to flip the man over his back. A loud thud resonated as he smacked down to the ground.

“Hey, while we’re stuck together,” Peter crouched low to him, “why don’t you tell me about your fascination with Mr. Stark’s helmet? The chameleon device. Is that what you want to be? A chameleon?”

A growl was the only response he received, deep and monstrous. In his young life, Peter had never heard such a cold-blooded sound before. A gripping chill slithered up his spine.

A brutal kick to his knee had him yelping, the distraction enough for their hands to lose entanglement. He barely saw as the man flipped up from the ground. By the time he regained his footing, his arm was forcefully yanked behind his back.

“Ack!” Peter tried to wiggle out from the grip, but a blunt force hit his side and he smacked against the glass window with a grunt. He struggled to catch his breath, the air knocked from his lungs and the man’s body weight now pressing against him firmly, his ribs aching under the pressure.

“Dmitri, Volchiy pauk, Chameleon...” A fist clenched a handful of his hair and yanked his head back, “the names are plentiful, and they mean nothing.”

His breath was hot and steamy on Peter’s bare neck, leaving a damp mark that had him blenching. Grunting, Peter kicked him from behind. It loosened his grip enough for him to bend low, tumbling away.

“Really?” Peter hoped his voice didn’t sound as frightened as he felt. “Because I think the names kinda matter. They make us who we are, you know? Like, I’m Spider-man and all. You clearly know that. Chameleon suits you.”

“Has anyone told you, mal’chik, that you talk too much?” Dmitri sneered.

Peter kept his head still as he looked all around, his eyes darting wildly at his surroundings. It was either run past Dmitri–Chameleon–Russian nickname he couldn’t pronounce, or continue fighting. He wasn’t exactly excelling at the latter.
“Yeah...it wouldn’t be the first time,” he muttered and gulped.

This really wasn’t looking good for him. For a moment, the two froze. Peter struggled to catch his breath — Dmitri hovered silently, contriving his next move like an animal after his prey. He stood tall and confident, the glass windows to their side casting a glow from depths of the ocean. Peter saw a flicker in his eyes that could be easily discernible, even in the dim light between them. There was no fear, no fright or panic.

It was murderous. He was out to kill.

Peter made a mad dash past him, sprinting down the corridor with fast feet. Dmitri was hot on his tail. Once again he used the walls to his advantage, waiting for the right moment before he kicked off the side as Dmitri turned the corner, landing a solid kick on the man’s chest.

Dmitri was barely fazed. He may have stumbled, but he recovered quick enough to grab Peter’s arm. He yanked him back, hard. The swift movement tossed Peter straight into the wall on his right, and a kick to the back of his kneecaps had him on the ground. Stars danced around his vision at the impact.

There wasn’t a moment to spare. Peter struggled to dodge the next attack, and the one after that. They came fast, too fast for him to keep up with. His days as Spider-man were spent catching bank robbers and muggers, never fighting like he was now, throwing hit after hit, letting the adrenaline mask the pain from each blow to his body.

Peter’s punches were sloppy, panicked, desperate. If he managed to land a hit, it only furthered to anger the man. He was breathless and drenched in sweat, absolutely terrified. He felt like he was in a twisted game of cat and mouse, and he was the mouse that couldn’t get away.

Dmitri, on the other hand, moved in exact, smooth precision. Each throw meant to crush each block. He wasn’t skilled, he was an expert.

Peter slid on the ground from a blow to his stomach. Looking up, he barely had time to roll as Dmitri came to attack him again. He stood no chance at winning without his spider-sense. The man moved with such sharp agility that could easily give Natasha a run for her money.

‘Must be a Russian thing.’ Peter wasn’t sure where the thought came from, almost laughing at how ridiculous it was. Russian or not, this man was going to kill him if he didn’t do something. His mind screamed one thing – ‘get away get away get away get away!’

The hits came one after the other. Dmitri swung, but Peter darted aside. He followed up with a kick to the man’s face. It must have done the trick; Dmitri fell back clinging to his nose with a slew of Russian curses.

Peter ran – fast and hard. He took two turns before finally deciding on entering a room. When he slammed the door shut, he allowed himself a second to catch his breath, chest heaving as he rested his forehead against the cool metal.

His chest burned and his legs trembled, threatening to give out and collapse beneath him. ‘Can’t stop now. Gotta keep going. Gotta get out of here.’

Adrenaline sent energy coursing through his body, but it didn’t provide him the answers on how to escape. His sweat-drenched suit trapped the chill to his skin. The place felt colder than New York in the winter time, no hallway or room free of the frigid air that hurt his lungs.

‘Things gets colder the further in the ocean you go...and this entire building is underwater.’
His face crumbled with the sickening realization that he was truly, actually, totally under the sea. There was no walking out of this building.

And there was no changing that fact. He frantically looked around, desperate to find anything that would help him. His focus came at a struggle with the fear that made his heart beat ten times too fast.

‘If this place is in the ocean, that means they needed a way to get down here, right?’ Peter began to feel his way around the room. It was too dark for him to see anything aside from outlines of lab equipment. The only light he had to work off of was the large tank across the way, glowing eerily green with the substance still inside. ‘Maybe they have diving suits laying around or something.’

One step at a time, he began to walk down a flight of stairs. The metal creaked beneath him, making his shoulders jolt from paranoia with every step. Slowly, carefully, he explored the room with a tiny bit of interest and then with rapidly growing alarm. He was right in assuming the place had been abandoned, but for the life of him, he couldn’t understand why so much tech was left behind.

“I wonder if anyone even knows this place exists...” he murmured under his breath.

Peter looked to the corner of the room, walking towards the large tank that reached from ceiling to floor. He quickly determined that whatever the substance was – a thick eerie goop floating inside, it couldn’t be safe. The glowing was almost nauseating to see. The green reminded him of Adrian Toomes. He shook the thought away. He really didn’t want to deal with that right now.

And that’s when he saw it. Engraved on the cement portion of the tank, illuminated over the green glow and clear as day was the company logo OsCorp.

‘Crap.’ His breath halted in his chest. ‘OsCorp. That’s not good. Not good at all.’

The walls groaned under pressure.

KkkkrrrrreeeAAAAKKK!

Peter spun around with his fist out in defense. Chains suddenly rattled loudly from above, echoing everywhere, drawing nearer and nearer. His mouth dried, the fog made it impossible to see five feet ahead of him.

‘ShitShitShitWhere–’

The harsh kick to his chest sent him flying into the nearest wall.

Peter heard it before he felt it.

A sickening squish and a horrifying crack.

His vision burned into white nothingness.

The next crushing impact to his chest ripped a scream from his throat, pain searing into his every pore, the wet squelch of ripping flesh a distant cruel echo.

Peter gasped and spluttered. There was no thinking straight, no evading or planning his next move, he couldn’t even breathe without a fiery volcano erupting around him. Only when he felt someone forcibly grabbing his face did his vision start to return.
“You malen'kiy kusok der'ma!” Dmitri squeezed his cheeks with his one hand, forcing him to look his way. Peter wheezed between the fingers clenching at his jaw. “You think I care about you? You think you are important?”

With his free hand, Dmitri shoved Peter back, the sound of flesh tearing smothered by his hoarse cry. He could feel the metal moving in his body, or more accurately his body moving around the metal. Though Dmitri had his face gripped tightly, Peter forced himself to look below, horrified at the long, jagged pipe protruding from his abdomen.

Dmitri yanked his face up and over to him. “You are nothing, you hear me? You are pathetic, glupyy mal'chik. An infant pretending to be hero. You messed with wrong man, and you will die because of it.”

Peter could barely hear him over the frenzied pounding of his heartbeat in his ears. He scrambled to reach down and grab the offending object that had invaded his body. He gritted his teeth to stop a sob and pulled and pulled and pulled, his gloved hands unable to get a firm grip, his trembling fingers slipping on blood, and sliding away with globs of skin and torn muscle.

When he managed to get a hold on the pipe he gripped it, hard, clenching onto it, his muscles spasming and his eyes prickling. The horror of the situation was tainted, mixed with fear and pain. His breathing turned into hysterical, panicked wheezing.

He couldn’t breathe. He couldn’t breathe he couldn’t breathe he couldn’t breathe —

Dmitri squeezed his face harder. He gasped and immediately cringed, the movement shooting white burning sparks through his nerves.

“No one is coming for you, mal'chik-pauk. You will die here, alone and forgotten.”

Dmitri’s free hand grabbed his shoulder, and with a cruel force he yanked him forward. An anguished scream split Peter's throat raw, a tortuous howl choking off into nothi—

When night arrived, a full moon could be seen outside in the cloudless sky. By then, Sam had given up on his run, having lost count of how many times he lapped around the facility in an attempt to burn off his anger. The sun had long since set, and he found the nearest wall to rest again, finishing off his water bottle with ease.

He was mildly surprised when a knock on the glass caught his attention. Craning his neck, he saw Rhodey behind him attempting to open the door he was leaning against. Moving to the side, he let the man step outside with him.

“Hey,” Rhodey held his hand out, offering him a fresh cold water bottle.

Sam didn’t hesitate to take it, twisting the cap off. “Thanks.”

He drank half the bottle in two swigs, dropping it down to his chest to twist the plastic cap back on. His breathing was starting to come in a little easier, and the aftermath of his run was already starting to kick in, the tremble in his legs provoking him to lean further back against the door.

His eyes didn’t divert from the vast sky over them.
“Of all nights for it to be a harvest moon,” Sam said, shaking his head and wiping the sweat away from his forehead.

The moonlight splashed down onto the facility, casting a blood-orange light over their faces. The soft shimmering glow reminded him of late autumn, the warm air only intensifying the comparison.

Rhodey turned to look at him, eyebrow high in the air.

“You superstitious?” he asked.

Sam didn’t look down from the sky. “I wasn’t before.”

Rhodey couldn’t help but notice the light seep deep into the crevices of Sam’s face, his forehead creased with stress that was hard to ignore.

He couldn’t help but ask, “You okay?”

Sam hesitated on answering, just long enough for Rhodey to turn his body slightly towards him. His head finally bowed low to the ground, a deep sigh heaving his shoulders.

“No, I’m not,” Sam admitted. “I’m honestly not cool being sidelined like this.”

Rhodey nodded. He had assumed as much, but it was always better to hear it from the source.

“I feel you.”

The response must have triggered something within him; Sam shot his head up fast enough to give Rhodey whiplash. Sam’s body turned to him fully, looking at him with apologetic eyes that Rhodey hated. Pity was a bitter pill to swallow.

Sam frowned. “I— damn, man, I didn’t mean to—”

“Don’t sweat it,” Rhodey waved his hand dismissively. “You know, I flew one-hundred-thirty-eight combat missions before this. I was happy to fight each one. They needed to be fought. But not being able to fight this one...”

He looked up at the sky, taking the sight in with a sense of fondness. There was something about the vast open space that left him feeling nostalgic, both as a pilot and as Iron Patriot, the latter a name he was more than happy to drop. War Machine still got out there from time to time, but not as frequently as he had become accustomed to.

Something was discouraging about being restricted to the ground. It wasn’t where the two of them belonged.

Rhodey folded his arms over his chest. “They’ll find him.”

Sam knew he spoke with a false sense of encouragement. There was no guaranteeing the outcome of the mission. He nodded, returning his gaze to the bright orange moon.

“Yeah,” he agreed. “They will.”

Back inside the facility, Natasha found herself entering the medical wing, dressed head to toe in an older, less electronic version of her Black Widow gear. She looked around, noticing that Bruce stood amidst a crowd of different employees, most dressed in lab coats and scrubs. A clipboard in one hand, the other pressing his cell phone tightly to his ear. Everyone walked around him with meticulous purpose, like organized chaos he wasn’t part of. He stood out like a sore thumb.
“I know — I know, it’s...it’s very last minute. I’ll update you with everything I have. It’s...not much, we actually haven’t, uh — we haven’t...” Bruce trailed off, noticing Natasha standing quietly in the corner. “I gotta go, Helen. Tony’s people should be arriving for you soon.”

He ended the phone call, slowly approaching her. She took in his appearance, noticing the change to his own lab coat. His glasses sat slightly askew on his face, his fingers awkwardly reaching to fix them.

“We’re uh, we’re heading out,” Natasha said.

Bruce nodded. “Yeah? Okay...okay, uhm...be safe.”

She forced a smile. “Yeah. We will.”

A lingering moment stood between them, a pause that held tension they could barely breathe through. It was clear he was in the middle of his own work, having mentioned he’d be spending his time preparing the medical staff for the aftermath of the mission. With Ultron having destroyed Dr. Cho’s cradle, there was no telling what work they’d have ahead of them. Natasha was silently glad to have him back from Thor’s company in the wake of what was to come.

With nothing more to say, she ultimately turned on her heels and headed for the exit.

“Natasha, wait,” Bruce called out. He watched as she turned to look at him, her eyebrow high in the air. He nervously cleared his throat. “Listen...everything with Dmitri...I mean, it’s all coincidence, at best.”

For a second Natasha was unsure of what to say, staring at him with a blank expression. A small, sympathetic smile tugged at the corner of her lips.

“I know.” She swallowed hard. “It doesn’t help me, though.”

Bruce frowned. “You couldn’t have prevented this. Just because you knew him you couldn’t have —”

“But I could have,” Natasha was quick to interrupt him.

He stayed silent, his eyes urging her to continue. She bowed her head, finding the floor more manageable to look at than him. “After that children's ward burned down, after he killed...I held a gun to his head. Loaded and ready to pull the trigger. I was furious. I wanted so badly to see his brains splatter on the floor. But I didn’t shoot. I don’t know why. It wasn’t like my ledger was clean. He’d only be more red to add to the pile.”

While her shoulder twitched in an attempt to shrug off the subject casually, the tears that welled in her eyes told him how she really felt.

“Now, I really wish I had made that shot. Years later and he’s still hurting children.” She wiped at her eye and took a deep breath, grounding herself.

Bruce cautiously stepped forward. “I think you’re being hard on yourself.”

She gave an empty smile. “Maybe. Either way, I’ll make him pay — for those children, for Peter, for all of this.”

Her lips pursed with solid, unshakable determination, the kind that made even Bruce slightly nervous. She pulled her shoulders back and gave a curt nod, and he could tell she was ready to
leave, obviously having stayed too far out of her comfort zone. What provoked Bruce to speak was beyond him.

“You’re good, you know.” He waved his hand around in the air as if it would clarify his thoughts. “With Peter, I mean.”

Natasha furrowed her brows. “What do you mean by that?”

“I just mean...” Bruce paused, struggling to find the right words to say. “You have good maternal instincts. Surprisingly enough.”

His chuckle wasn’t met with a positive reaction. Natasha only seemed more upset over the statement.

“It doesn’t matter. It’s not like...either one of us can...”

She wanted to look away, yet her eyes had grabbed onto his like magnets, pulling her closer. Momentarily it felt as if they were back at the Barton farm, the fresh smell of his shampoo rising off his wet hair and the soft feel of her bathrobe still tickling her skin.

Bruce gave a small smile; sympathetic and sad — but still somehow holding hope.

“Maybe not. But maybe this is enough.” He reached for her hand, waiting until she latched onto his to entwine their fingers. “Maybe something like this is all we need.”

Like always, he allowed her to make the next move, a simple gesture that Natasha never took for granted. She found herself close enough to his chest that his breath was warm on her face, and she stared into his eyes with a thoughtful expression that told him she was deeply considering his words.

The team – their makeshift dysfunctional family – it was what kept them bonded together. Normal was never a part of their lives from the get-go, so maybe this was their way of having children. Raising the next generation of superheroes to be better than them so that the world could be better than what they experienced.

She squeezed his hand before letting go. “We have to go.”

Bruce nodded. “Be safe.”

He had reiterated what was said before, but with a firm understanding, Natasha changed her response.

“I will.”

Down in Tony’s workshop, he stood center on the platform that once held his Mark 37 armor. Arms outstretched, it had begun materializing around him nanite by nanite; the once clunky suit replaced with microscopic pieces of technology. It covered everything but his head, stopping short of his neck. For that, Tony reached over to the nearest table, snatching an older Iron Man helmet underneath his arms.

“Okay FRIDAY, let’s test this bad boy out.” Tony clipped the helmet onto his head, reminiscent of his older suits. “Deactivate the nanites. Let the magnets do their work.”

“Deactivating in three, two, one...”
There was an audible whir that followed with a slump of Tony’s shoulders, his knees buckling slightly under the additional strain. He waited a second before bending down and then jumping up, ensuring the armor would stay connected.

“Okay…that’s what I’m talking about,” His voice echoed through the helmet. “A little heavy, but that’s expected. A–plus work there, FRI.”

The two automatic doors behind him swished open, and he clicked off his helmet as Pepper came walking in.

“Tony?” she called out. “What’s going on? You wanted to see me?”

He hopped off the platform, laying his helmet to the side.

“Pepper! Hey, yes, come here, I don’t have much time. I wanted to talk to you before we head out.”

Tony looked down at his wristwatch, noting that there was only a handful of minutes left before he needed to regroup with the others. He had to make this quick. Noticing that she was preoccupied looking at his new, sleek armor, he decided to grab her and pull her close.

“Listen, before I do this…I need to say something.”

He squeezed her hand, and she frowned with a sigh, the disapproval all too familiar.

“Tony, don’t —”

He held his other hand in the air. “Just…hear me out. I’m only going to muster up the courage to do this once. I need you to know that…well…I mean, I love you.”

Pepper’s demeanor immediately softened, and she blushed in a way that made her freckles stand out. “Oh Tony, I love you too. But you’re going to find Peter, and come back with him. You’re going to come back.”

He loved it when she smiled, even more so when it came with that fierceness of determination. She always managed to hold such a strong belief in him. How, he never understood, seeing as most days he couldn’t believe in himself.

“I know,” Tony said, clucking his tongue. “But I don’t know.”

“Tony —”

He wagged a finger. “Ah-ah, don’t break the mojo.”

She scowled at him, but he continued nonetheless. He didn’t want another New York incident, trying to make a phone call that would never be received. If he was going out into the unknown, he didn’t want to do it with lingering regrets.

Looking at Pepper in front of him, the love of his life, the woman who had been by his side through it all — not letting her know those things, that would be his biggest regret.

“Pep…all along it’s been you. Thank you for that. For keeping me grounded long before I ever realized it was you keeping me grounded. You take such good care of me. And things are going to be different after this. We’re not going to keep doing this barely seeing each other bullshit. We’re going to have a life together,” he said, honest to God meaning it. “But I need you to know, just in
Tony locked eyes with her, knowing the unspoken words had easily translated. She feared, had doubts on his return; every mission could be the last. But it wasn't just about him not returning. Not now. Not with this. If he returned without Peter, he could never give the promise of returning to her as the same man she loved, as the same man who loved her.

Pepper stepped forward and slowly lifted her hands to his face, her palms tenderly cupping his cheeks. He watched as she leaned in and pressed her lips against his, softly yet firmly, holding the kiss for a long second. Her skin was cool against his flushed face, and he couldn’t help but lean into it.

For that one quick moment he melted in his shoes, the tension he harbored ceasing as the world slowed down for them both. When Pepper pulled back, she made sure to give the strongest smile of confidence she could.

“Go kick some magical ass.”

In the laboratory, Stephen waited for the others to regroup. Sitting cross-legged on the conference table, he meditated quietly, staying calm even when he sensed a presence behind him.

When he cracked one eye open, his suspicions were confirmed. Wanda walked around him, eyeing him with curiosity. He raised an eyebrow in response.

“You do not trust me,” she stated, out of the blue.

Stephen lowered his arms onto his thighs, his trembling fingers resting on his knees. Though he expected the subject to be brought up, he chose his next words carefully.

“It’s not you that I don’t trust,” he responded.

Wanda titled her head. “Then what?”

Her accent seemed twice as thick with the emotion laced behind it. Stephen didn’t answer. His eyes stayed focused straight ahead, remaining calm despite the agitation that she emitted.

Wanda crossed her arms. “I do not know about you, but we do not go into a battle harboring distractions that could cost the lives of others. If we are to fight by each others’ side, it is best if you say why it is you cannot trust me.”

Stephen uncrossed his legs and with one smooth motion, dangled them over the edge of the table where she stood. He was then on his feet and looking straight at her, the sudden movement taking her by surprise.

“Wanda, dear, it is not you I don’t trust. It’s your abilities,” he admitted. “You’re inexperienced and you lack training. There is a chaos inside you that you cannot control. A very dangerous chaos.”

She frowned. It was surprising to her that his words didn’t feel like an insult, instead they only seemed like an observation. Unfortunately, it was one she was all too aware of. The painful memories of Lagos still haunted her, the magic she possessed harming people even when she meant only good.

She wouldn’t have that happen again. She straightened her back and looked firmly at him, doing her best to let what little confidence she felt outshine the doubt.
“Then let us hope that chaos protects my family tonight.”

Stephen nodded. “Let’s.”

For one blissful second, Peter forgot where he was.

He opened his eyes slowly, his lids barely lifting past slits. They felt so incredibly heavy, like concrete bricks had been attached to his lashes. He wasn’t at home, was he? Definitely not at Ned’s. Wasn’t he staying at the Avenger’s facility? That didn’t seem right. Maybe he was –

A harsh gasp tore through his chest. He choked when it came out of his throat, his frame recoiling against the wall as spasms seized every muscle in his body. Agony hit him all at once, burning inside him, spreading from his chest across his spine and into his stomach from back to front.

It was everywhere.

He couldn’t breathe. One attempt fired shock waves through his entire core.

‘Oh my god oh mygodohgodohgod.’

He was trembling, shaking apart, the back of his head clattering against the wall. The desire to curl up on himself was strong, but the metal wrapped around his biceps was even stronger, cruelly denying him the small mercy. His strength rapidly fled him, the mere act of lifting his head to look at his arms a disabling effort. They had him restrained again, surely the same metal from before. There was no way he could get out this time, he couldn’t even entertain the idea. Hell, he couldn’t even move his toes without his vision going white.

Looking back down, he could scantily make out the wound on his stomach, the growing wet spot closer to his side than the center of his abdomen. The entire right side of his hip was drenched. He could only imagine his back looked just as bad. He remembered hitting the wall with force, his front bearing an exit wound to the pipe he had been impaled him on.

The realization was hitting Peter almost as hard as the pain was. He had been impaled through and through. He had been shish-kebabed. The concept was too real to grasp onto, and the wetness puddling around his thighs told him he was losing blood, losing it fast, losing too much.

Peter smacked the back of his head against the wall, fear making his heart beat in a pace that didn’t feel normal, not that any of his body felt normal at the given moment. His legs futilely writhed on the floor and his hands clenched and unclenched into fists, all the while he rasped for air and choked on sobs he didn’t have the energy to let out.

He was going to die.

He couldn’t escape, he couldn’t move, and he could barely breathe. He was sitting in a pool of his own blood. He was, without a doubt, going to die.

“Gah-ahh!”

The thought finally broke the cry he had been struggling to hold back. It was weak and full of air, bringing forward a panicked slew of sobs he couldn’t control. The next cry came before the last
had finished, and Peter sat hyperventilating on the floor, his face screwed up in hot agony. Every
breath that escaped his chest rippled an ungodly pain through him. It was as if a creature was
eating him from the inside.

His bottom lip quivered almost as strongly as his entire body shook. He was going to die here,
alone. No one was going to save him because they thought he was already dead, and he had failed
at saving himself. It was hopeless.

He didn’t want to die. He didn’t want to die, he was too young — he hadn’t even graduated high
school yet. He wanted to go to prom, he hadn’t even gone to prom yet. It couldn't be his time yet.
There was so much he hadn’t done and now he was going to die having never done it. He
spluttered and gasped wet and raspy sobs, one after the other at the uncontrolled, panicked
thoughts.

_God _it hurt. It hurt so, so much. His nails scraped against the cement floor, every nerve in his body
ignited and screaming, blood gushing from both open wounds and pooling around him, making
him shiver. It was cold, the liquid was making him so cold.

With a sickening realization, Peter realized he was _extremely _cold. Sweat dripped down from his
forehead and stung his eyes, shock setting in faster than he could understand what was happening.

The weight of his body slumped him downward, and he lolled to the side, only kept up by the
binds around his arm. He didn’t know what to do. All he could focus on was each breath, unable to
ignore how the next one would bring more pain than the last. He was so cold and so tired, and his
vision was fading, an unsettling gray color teasing at the edges. This was beyond the feeling of
passing out. Ultimately deciding that keeping his eyes open was draining his energy, he closed
them shut, spots of red, white and black dancing beneath his lids.

Peter wondered what his last thoughts would be. He tried to think of Aunt May, Ned and MJ, the
Avengers and Tony...he tried to focus on anything besides the blood, the copper smell that burned
his nose. Besides the pain. Besides…

Besides... he... he...

He didn’t want to die.

He doesn’t want to die.

Please...please, _please._

_I don't want to die._

Steve was pulling on the brown gloves to his Captain America uniform when Tony came marching
into the lab, a renewed energy taking the room by storm.
“Alright, let’s rock and roll!” He pointed a wagging finger at them all, “We’ve wasted enough time as it is.”

Steve fiddled with the edges of the gloves, not daring to argue with the man. There was a time and place for their petty disagreements, and right now he simply wanted to focus on the task at hand. Eyeing Tony from head to toe, he took note of the dull, gray and colorless armor that gripped him tightly. Seamless and smooth, the metal almost seemed to wrap around his body like a new layer of muscle.

He wasn’t the only one to take notice, Clint raised an eyebrow at the new design.

“An entire suit that will be held together by magnets,” he dryly stated. “What will you think of next, Stark?”

Clint tossed his pack of arrows over his shoulder, buckling the straps over his chest with an audible click. Tony shot his head in his direction, his forehead creased.

“Who knows, the cure to world hunger?” The quip was sharp and unamused.

Caught between fidgeting with the leather frays on his gloves and eyeing the shadows underneath Tony’s eyes, Steve could clearly see through his facade. His energy may have stolen the room, but it was fueled only by temporary strength, passionate anger, and desperation. It was something he always noticed about Tony — the man ran off of fleeting emotion. It was what made him so dangerous.

Wanda walked closer to them both. “I do not think I understand the point. If the suit does not have any technological function, what is the purpose of it?”

“Armor. Lightweight protection.” Tony knocked his knuckles on the chest plate. “No penetrating these bad boys.”

Steve noticed as Stephen approached the group, the cloak rustling behind him.

“Are you good with your plan?” he asked.

Steve looked over at him and nodded. “We split up into teams once we arrive in the facility. Wanda and Natasha will stick with me. This way Tony and Clint will also have a...” he paused on the word, “magical component on their side.”

The concept was still foreign to him, Wanda’s abilities something he only recently came to grips with. Doctor Strange was a whole new element that shook the cores of his beliefs. Tugging at the edges of his gloves one last time, Steve decided to take the fact in the same way he had everything else — accept and move on.

Tony visibly rolled his eyes at the idea of being paired with Strange, so dramatically it was almost childish. Natasha smirked, having seen it from her position across the room.

“Play nice, boys,” she sarcastically said.

On any normal occurrence, Steve knew Tony would have easily engaged in a witty comeback. His decision to stay quiet only intensified the hot anger radiating from him.

He tried to shake it off, knowing there was no point in bringing it to everyone’s attention. With one swift movement, Steve swung his shield onto his back, the vibranium metal clanging against his harness.
“Wanda, Natasha and I will be taking the west and north sides of the building. Clint, Tony, Doctor Strange — you guys cover ground on the east and south.” Steve instructed. “Remember, the structure loops around from the back. If you haven’t found Peter on those perimeters, it’s important to re-group at the central point. We won’t have our comms to rely on for communication.”

“Aye aye, Captain,” Tony gave a fake, sloppy salute. His hands went from his forehead down to his side, provoking Steve to eye his wrists with curiosity. The glisten of silver bands stuck out like a sore thumb among the dim gray and black Iron Man armor.

Steve furrowed his brows. “What are those?”

Tony briefly looked down at his hands, eyeing the devices as if he had momentarily forgotten they were attached to him. The wanly frown that engulfed his face had Steve’s gut twisting with apprehension.

“Web-shooters,” Tony answered succinctly. “If the kid needs them, he’ll have them.”

Steve watched as he tinkered with the silver bands in a similar fashion to how he was nervously fidgeting with his gloves. The thing was, Tony had easily polished the act of holding a neutral expression. His words were clipped, and his features were deadpanned, but there was something in his eyes that Steve latched onto. It was there, strong and encompassing, even if he couldn’t put words to it.

Doubt.

The emotion could be read like a book. Steve knew the man was worried, doubtful that even with the Avenger’s charging in, even with Captain America and Iron Man trying to save the day, Peter would still have the need to defend himself. He wouldn’t deny that it was a smart move to think about such a scenario. Even so, he wasn’t going to let that happen.

Steve gave a curt nod of his head. “Hopefully he won’t.”

Tony never looked up at him, his hands absentmindedly adjusting and tugging at the devices. Steve could only imagine what it felt like. How it would feel so wrong. The device was a symbolism of the hero it belonged to. They were Peter’s, not Tony’s. Spider-man’s, not Iron Man’s.

“Hopefully,” Tony mumbled.

Something inside Steve finally broke. When Tony briskly walked past him, attempting to reach the rest of the team, he grabbed his bicep tightly, stalling him from moving any further.

“You good?”

Tony looked over at him, stone-cold sober with exhaustion that sank deep in his bones.

“I will be once we get this over with,” he answered.

Steve didn’t let go of his grip. “You know we have your back on this, Tony. Right?”

Tony shook him off, his brows furrowed.

“And what’s that supposed to mean?”

Steve had a million different thoughts raging in his head, things he wanted to say yesterday and the day before that burning a hole deep inside him. They didn’t have time for it, though. The others
stood across the room waiting for them both. With resignation, he settled on the most straightforward answer he could.

“It means we’re going to find him.” Steve tilted his chin low, eyes locking onto Tony’s. “And we’re all going to come back, together.”

Tony paused, his tongue running across his teeth before he popped his lips together and vehemently turned to Steve.

“Let’s get one thing straight, Rogers. Whatever we’re about to walk into, the end result is bringing Peter home. If for one second, there needs to be a decision made between the kid, or me, or anyone else, you best believe the kid comes first. Every time,” his tone was deep and rumbled like gravel. “Is that clear?”

There was a quiet moment between them, one only filled with the suffocating tension from Tony’s demand. Steve honestly didn’t know how to respond at first.

“That won’t need to happen,” he insisted.

“Look me in the eye,” Tony demanded, the lines on his face tight. “He comes first. Is that clear?”

Steve was at a loss for words. The self-sacrificing, almost parental drive and commitment both concerned him and solidified his own doubts. The intrusive realization he had been denying since the night the chameleon helmet had been stolen finally rang true to his ears.

He had come to accept that Tony had changed from the man he knew. That was obvious the day he showed Peter off to the team. Staring at him now, the flood of emotions pouring off from him – doubt, fear, panic, an unhindered compulsion to hurt those who had hurt his family – Steve came to realize those changes not only made him a different person – but a better one.

A handful of years ago, they once stood in a similar position, Steve insisting that Tony was nothing without his suit, that he knew men without such fancy armor worth ten of him. Tony stood next to him now all but stripped of his technology, eager to run head first into a battle they were unsure of. Ready to sacrifice himself for someone he felt was better than them all.

Steve wouldn’t let that dedication go to waste.

“If it comes to that,” Steve preempted, “then yes.”

Stephen stepped forward, tall and confident among the disarray of skepticism that roamed between them all.

“Are we ready?”

While Stephen looked at the team, Steve kept his eyes locked on Tony. They refused to look away from each other, a silent conversation taking place. It was only when the sound of crackling static caught their attention did they turn to the source, a bright, vivid orange portal appearing in front of them both.

Steve nodded. “As ready as we’ll ever be.”

The other side of the portal was dark and emitted a strong, cold wind that blew through their hair. One by one the team stepped through until Stephen was the last to enter, the portal closing behind him.
Dmitri stormed the empty hallways of the OsCorp base and took a sharp corner with precise speed. His anger was hot and evident, and the sweat that dripped down from his bald head shinned from the windows casting the ocean’s light. As he came to a sudden halt, a cloud of smoke emerged from nothingness.

“They’re coming,” Dmitri sneered.

Francis Klum stood amidst the thick, swirling fog, and Dmitri didn’t have the patience to wait for the smoldering vapor to clear the air. His words were harsh as he snapped at the man, the plexiglass helmet reflecting his face like a mirror. The sight had him growling, a deep sound emanating from his chest.

He hated the sight of himself.

“They’re — who’s coming?” Klum’s voice resonated through the helmet. “Stark?”

Dmitri charged past him, only aware that Klum was following by the sound of his cape rippling like a waving flag.

“Stark and his playmates. We need to move and fast.”

Klum jogged to catch up. “What? Hold on, how do you know —”

“I know everything, Klum,” Dmitri scolded. “I no longer have access to Stark Industries database. Walter Cortez’s employee numbers have been flagged as security threat. The encrypted files containing this base’s forced cessation have been accessed by Colonel James Rhodes of U.S Air Force. It is only matter of time before they arrive.”

“I thought this place would be safe, I didn’t know —”

Dmitri spun to face him, hands clenched into tight fists.

“Zatknis!” he shouted, his breathing heavy. “The Oz weaponry — what is left?”

“The Oz...” Klum paused to think. “There should still be pumpkin bombs in the incubator room. But Dmitri, those things are untested, and this building is already unstable.”

They took a corner and entered the nearest room, the door already wide open. Dmitri immediately headed to the closest table, gathering the white chameleon helmet under his arms.

“Good. Go, get them.”

Whereas Dmitri was quick to gather his belongings, Klum paused at the room’s entrance. In the corner was the kid they had captured, still restrained to the wall but surrounded by a pool of dark liquid. It didn’t take a genius to know it was blood.

“What the hell?” Klum finally said. “I thought he was our bait! The spider-kid’s no good to us dead, what the fu —”

Dmitri snapped the clasps around his neck, securing the helmet on both sides with force.
“He was our bait. And he served his purpose. Stark is coming, right? So I will personally snap his neck between my own hands.” Dmitri approached Klum, somehow more intimidating with the helmet attached to his head. “He will meet his demise coming for boy. You get bombs, I will detonate and flood them in this godforsaken hellhole. You teleport us out to safety. Understood?”

Klum nodded. “Blow this place to smithereens. Got it.”

A low, weak groan caught his attention. Klum snapped his neck to the source, watching as the kid made a disgusting gurgling sound, a moan and gasp forming together a pathetic cry.

“And him?”

Dmitri stormed away, his shoulder knocking into Klum’s.

“He’ll die here with others.” He turned fast on his heels, a gloved finger wagging fiercely in Klum’s direction. “Follow my orders, and I will get you your money, Mysterio.”

Klum gave one curt bob of his head, the shiny, round plexiglass helmet surrounding it nodding in understatement. Within seconds a cloud of smoke replaced where he stood.

Dmitri took one last look at the trapped boy, his body slumped forward and only held to the wall by the Adamantium bands that were bolted around his arms. With a sharp stream of curses muttered under his breath, he swiftly turned and left the room.

Chapter End Notes

Told you so.

“Glupyy mal'chik”/“Stupid boy.”
“Teper' ya sobirayus' ubit' tebya, kusok der'ma!” /“Now I’m going to kill you, piece of shit!”
“Volchyi pauk.”/“Wolf Spider.”
“Mal'chik.”/“Boy.”
“Mal'en'kiy kusok der'ma”/“(You) little piece of shit.”
“Mal'chik-pauk.”/“Spider-boy.”
"Zatknis'!”/"Shut up!"

Comic book references: These should be pretty self-explanatory, but the "Oz weapons" aka Pumpkin Bombs are weapons of the Green Goblin. I'll yield any excitement now - said villain doesn't exist in this story. It's groundwork being laid down for chapter 17.

GOD I love chapter 17 so much.

What can I say but...oh me oh my, I’m going to whump the hell out of Petey pie.

As always, HUGE thanks to Mei_kun for beta-ing this chapter.
Tony clenched his teeth at the unexpected onslaught of the slicing bitter chill that suddenly shrouded his whole body in a frigid embrace. He was entirely unprepared for the drastic drop of temperature, having left the compound with his Iron Man armor absorbing his body heat. Within seconds the warmth in the metal laying across his skin bled away to be replaced by bitter sharp coldness that burrowed deep into his bones.

He wasn’t the only one that that felt the arctic hospitality of OsCorp’s base. Looking at the team, he watched Natasha’s breath leave her mouth as a cloud of vapor, and Wanda tightly hugged
herself, shivering like a child without their winter jacket. They weren’t protected with armor like he was. He wondered how long they’d last before the chill became a problem.

Tony shuddered himself. Thirteen hundred feet under the ocean and it was no ray of sunshine — literally, he noted. There were a few flickering wall fixtures down the hall, watts of electricity dim and poorly powered, but after Strange closed his portal, it became their only source of light. Even then, he found himself squinting to make out most of the building’s layout. The place looked to be abandoned for quite some time.

Realistically, he knew that they’d have to hide their presence, keep it dark so they would have the element of surprise. But it didn’t help that the hallway was bare, the building long since deserted, giving no sign of life or clues to where they should go. The elements had slowly taken it over, the whole place reeking of dank moss, stagnant condensation and heavy rust.

Once the crackling static of Strange’s portal died away, a whining buzz bounced off the metal walls. It was simultaneous with the slump of Tony’s shoulders, the added weight of his armor pulling heavily on his body. He could barely see his hands through the darkness; the nanite technology of his suit had audibly shut down, his systems now offline.

Looking to the ground, Tony squinted. The thick swirls of fog obscured his dim, gray boots. ‘Figures. Can’t catch a break.’ It layered their feet like a second floor, thick and encompassing in its nature.

“I wonder where it’s coming from,” Clint mused, his tone hushed.

Tony scoffed, only to be interrupted with a deep cough. Musty and stale air invaded his lungs and throat like a plague, leaving a rancid taste on his tongue. Instinctively he went to put on his helmet, only to remember that there would be no functioning features to give him fresh oxygen. He gripped it tightly underneath his arm, suddenly feeling incredibly naked without his technology.

“It doesn’t matter. We stick to the plan,” Steve firmly stated. “This is the central point, right? We’ll regroup here.”

Tony frowned. For being the central point, there was no defining feature to go by. He stored away what information they had — a bare hallway, low ceilings and cheap light bulbs that threatened to give out at any second. Even when OsCorp had the place up and running, he imagined they hadn’t put a lot of their money into the place. It was as dull as one could get. Granted, Tony made it a point to put flares into anything that his name was attached to.

Shrugging off the thought, he was quick to split up into their assigned teams. It was a testament to the gravity of the situation that Clint stood so willingly by Tony’s side, normally adamant on staying post with Natasha. The two gave each other one concise, curt nod, and prepared to go about their own ways.

Tony was silently grateful for their unwavering dedication to the cause, and he hoped he would remember to at least try and express that gratitude when all was said and done.

Right now, he had much bigger things to focus on. He scrunched up his nose, working hard to ignore the toxic odor of mildew and corrosion, both emitting a gas that distinctly reminded him of sewage waste.

Stephen spared a glance to the others. “Try and stay with your teams. If I should need to, it’ll be easier for me to find you if you stay together.”
Steve nodded. Tony visibly rolled his eyes.

“Oh yes, we wouldn’t want to inconvenience the magical wizard.” The sarcasm was heavy on his tongue.

Tony raised his Iron Man helmet to his head, claspinbg the brackets tightly. Clint secured his pack of arrows, Natasha brought her gun out from her holster and Steve adjusted the buckle to his helmet. They were ready.

“Let’s move out,” Steve commanded.

Tony watched as Wanda lifted her hands and sparked red energy from her fingertips, the glowing light illuminating their surroundings. She led both Steve and Natasha down one long hallway, the three eventually disappearing into the shadows.

Watching them leave, crossing into a direction of the unknown, it made Tony’s mouth run dry. His jaw clenched tightly and his teeth scraped across one another, a rising anxiety brewing within him. The intermittent bursts of artificial yellow lights weren’t doing much to ease his nerves, either.

A quick glance over his shoulder and Tony realized they had their backs to a fork in the corridor. If his eternal compass was correct — which it always was — heading east would mean taking the left path. If all things turned out in their favor, it would loop into the south of the base and eventually bring them back here.

He hoped. He didn’t trust OsCorp enough to have much faith in their blueprints.

Tony looked at Strange with a sense of curiosity.

“You wouldn’t happen to have a Lite-Brite yourself, would you doc?” he asked.

All but expecting Stephen to retort with a frustrated quip, Tony was pleasantly surprised when his own hands lit up, an orange glow paving their path. While looking less than pleased, his eyes narrowed with a frown, Strange nodded his head in the direction of the corner behind them. He took off, the fog and darkness enshrouding him.

Tony hummed, smacking Clint on the shoulder with the back of his hand.

“See? It never hurts to ask.”

He had hoped the hallow humor would distract him from the dread that began to claw its way up his chest.

It didn’t.

The blueprints never told Steve how uncomfortably similar the base was to the Hydra facility in Siberia. It was a harsh reminder with each step they took, every sound they made echoing off the walls. There was a fierce lack of any distinguishing marks, nothing aside from gray, steel walls at every turn they took. The way pipes spilled leaking water onto the cement floods, splashing, sloshing – he swallowed hard. That wasn’t a memory for him to revisit right now.

It did have one distinct difference from Siberia. The facility was deceptively large. The ceilings
hung low and the hallways were narrow, but they seemed as if they could go on for miles. Even if they did, Steve knew that would be okay. He had the layout memorized.

It was a tactical move to know the exact footage of each section to the base and where every turn led to. So while Wanda had provided them light, he made sure he stayed in front of both women. The desire to lead was strong, ingrained into his DNA the moment he had been injected with the super soldier serum. If anyone were to attack them head-on, he wanted to ensure he’d be on the front line of their defense.

KkkkrrrrrrEEEAAAAKKK!

The walls groaned, aching under the pressure of the ocean’s depths. Wanda jolted in her spot, taken off guard by the eerie noise. Steve didn't allow himself to be phased. He refused to be distracted by any sounds that weren’t a threat, and he ignored the acrid odors that only intensified the further they proceed in their search. They needed to move quickly, his focus couldn't afford anything else aside from their designated perimeters and blind spots coming up their path.

It wasn’t long before they encountered a long, running line of windows, the glass fogged up with both the nanite mist and condensation of the building. Steve let himself bask in a flash of confidence. This meant they had reached the north side of the base. That was good, they were making progress.

The swarm of colorful fish had Wanda in a trance, and her eyes followed them as they swam past her. Steve noticed when she came to a halt; the wonder in her eyes both childish and dreadful, a combination he didn’t feel comfortable witnessing. The red glow from her hands lit up their presence and reflected onto her face, shining a turquoise glow to her features.

For a moment, it was almost calming. The tranquil ocean life greeted them with no tribulation, completely absent of war. Steve couldn’t blame her for being awestruck. He wasn’t even sure if the girl had ever seen the ocean like this before. He fought off a pained grimace; like most things in her life, it was a tainted experience to carry.

“Why would these madmen want to use a building under the sea like this?” she asked, the sight piquing her curiosity.


Steve audibly cleared his throat. Before he could tell them both to get a move on, Natasha gently tugged at Wanda’s scarlet coat. Luckily, she was patient in her understanding, knowing there wasn’t any time to waste.

Trudging down the base, Steve realized he had become accustomed to search and rescue missions taking place in much grander structures. The further they walked ahead, the more he believed it had worked to their benefit that half the team stayed behind. The hallways were small, cramped, and went on and on, no stairs offering them upper levels to explore.

The closest resemblance he could think of was the Lemurian Star, the SHIELD vessel that had been overtaken by Batroc. Yet even there the halls were further apart. It was a good thing none of them were claustrophobic.

While the chill stung harshly on his skin, it never once concerned him. Not when his mind needed to be focused elsewhere. Besides, the cold hadn’t been a problem for him since the serum, and especially not after the ice. Seventy years frozen took away his ability to be bothered by such a thing.
But he could tell it was already affecting his team. Through the corner of his eyes, he watched Wanda shiver harshly.

“It is very cold,” she suddenly spoke.

Natasha nodded. “Being thirteen-hundred-feet under the ocean will do that to you.”

“Hush.” Steve’s voice was stern, a direct command to them both. With it, his fist shot up directly in the air, military sign language for ‘freeze’. He knew they both would understand, and their prompt stillness renewed his confidence in their training.

He stayed on alert like he would any other mission. Every step he took, every step his team made, he consciously registered each sound. Having taken another corner, he noticed when something was different – something heavy was in the air. He could almost smell it between the thick layers of metallic steel and lingering salty atmosphere of the ocean.

“You hear something?” Natasha asked him.

It was quiet. Not even the walls made noise anymore, only his own ears ringing from his heartbeat.

“No,” Steve answered.

As the words left his lips, their surroundings went dark. They both spun fast on their heels; the red light leading their path hadn’t fizzled out, it completely vanished. And with it, Wanda.

Steve furrowed his brows, “Wanda?”

“Where the hell did she go?” Natasha breathed out.

Steve had no way of answering the question. He was just as confused as she was. With a sigh that came heavy in his chest, he reached up to his helmet and turned on the small flashlight that attached to his temple. It barely let him see the ground below him, but it was something. He counted his blessings that old fashion batteries still functioned around the nanite mist.

Natasha noticed it first. The light skimmed the ground and crossed the path of a square card, the bold, red heart peering through the fog.

“Look...” she squatted low to the floor, reaching to pick up the playing card.

Steve shot his hand out. “Don’t touch it.”

She looked up to him, her brows knitted tightly. “Why? There’s too much fog here obstructing any tech. What could it possibly —”

“I don’t know. And I don’t want to find out,” Steve insisted, his words clipped. There was too much going on between Dmitri and Mysterio for him to mess around with the unknown. Wanda was now on their list of missing team members along with Peter.

He wouldn’t risk losing someone else.

“Let’s move.”

Natasha gave one last look to the playing card before she stood up from the ground. Steve let his gaze sweep the room, briefly hoping with little faith that his team member would suddenly reappear. Unfortunately, luck wasn’t on his side.
“Wanda, if you can hear us...” he wasn’t sure what direction to speak to, but he spoke regardless. “We’ll be back for you. That’s a promise.”

Steve looked at Natasha, his jaw thrust forward, his expression telling her he was ready to move. With a bubbling tension to the unknown, they returned their search down the hallway.

Tony really had no idea how Rasputin and Disappear-O the Magnificent could spend half a year in such an inhospitable environment. They had been exploring the base for maybe thirty minutes, if he had to take a guess, and he was already past his point of having any patience left. That said a lot, considering he really didn’t have patience to begin with.

The place was beyond disgusting, the smell of sea life sickening. Tony was sure he’d never eat fish again after this. He had spent three months in a cave in Afghanistan and that was starting to seem like better conditions than this dump. Afghanistan was hot. The sand would burn his toes and the air was hard to breathe, but at least it was somewhat clean, as if in a twisted sense of irony the heat sterilized most things.

Nothing, nothing was clean down here. If he wasn’t so worried about finding Peter, he’d be concerned that just by being here he’d be infected with some ocean parasite.

The first series of doors they had come across sprung a naive hope in Tony. Maybe, just maybe, this mission would be quick, in and out, find Peter and end the nightmare before it could get any worse.

It wasn’t long after having that thought he realized life would never be so easy for him. The areas they searched were untouched and had been for quite some time, the negligence to the base showing from heaps of dust, spider webs and the overwhelming stench of mold. The further they went, the worst it got. Not even Stephen was immune to the malodorous aroma.

Most of the rooms they had come across so far were small, easily cleared out by one man. Stephen and Tony stood guard outside the doorway while Clint took a brief look inside, his bow held high, and his arm arched back ready to pull an arrow.

It had become a pattern. Go in, find nothing, come out. So Tony wasn’t surprised when Clint exited, a purposeful stride returning him to his team.

“Negative,” he walked past them both, ready to continue onward.

Pattern be damned, each room that didn’t have Peter sunk a heavy anchor in his gut. It was wishful thinking to believe they’d be in and out of here.

“Fifteen down. Not bad,” Tony’s voice strained, echoing with a metallic vibration through his helmet. “I mean, how many rooms can this place actually have?”


“Hold on,” Stephen stopped, his non-glowing hand holding Tony’s arm. “Are you telling me you never reviewed the blueprints of this base?”

Tony shrugged. “I skimmed them.”
“You skimmed them,” Stephen repeated with a huff of disbelief. He looked to Clint. “He skimmed them.”

“Sounds about right,” Clint muttered.

Tony knew that Clint was accustomed to his behavior. The deadpanned answer showed he wasn’t at all surprised at the revelation, though it had Strange shaking his head with incredulity.

“You are unbelievable, Stark.” Stephen quickly walked away from him.

Tony gritted his teeth, his mouth pursing, but he held back and kept his temper at bay. He really didn’t have the patience for this guy, and obviously, the feeling was mutual. Any other day he’d easily engage in an argument, burn and shut the bastard up, but right now he wanted to get the hell out of this place. He settled for dry, mirthless humor as Clint twisted the knob of the next door.

“I get that a lot. Usually in the bedroom. But hey —”

Years of training kicked their instincts into gear.

It only took a second for all three to quickly draw their defenses — Tony instinctively held his palm out and Strange conjured a shield. Clint swiftly released an arrow, the sharp metal point piercing through a purple cape and straight into the wall.

Their reflection stared right back at them from the glass helmet of the unsuspecting victim.

“Shit!” Mysterio cursed, green gloved hand shooting high up and smoke already engulfing him.

Stephen charged forward, “Oh no you don’t!” He stretched his arm out while he rapidly spun his two fingers in circles, creating a portal directly behind Mysterio.

Tony rushed after him, “Wait a minute! Strange, don’t! Hey, hey! Wait a damn second Strange!”

Tony stumbled into a stop before he smacked right into the wall, the meager rain of orange sparks and dying cracklings of magic the only remnant of the closed portal. Stephen and Mysterio were nowhere to be seen.

Tony threw up his hands in the air. “You’ve got to be kidding me!”

That fucking son of a bitch Strange had gone on ahead and pushed himself and Mysterio to fuck knows where and abandoned them here. Here. Here where he was needed, where he promised he’d help.

And everybody always wondered why Tony had trust issues. This, right here, was why he had fucking trust issues.

“So much for having our own magical component,” Clint quipped dryly, forcefully shoving an arrow back into its quiver.

Tony leaned heavily against the nearest wall, scoffing. “That’s great, that’s really great.”

The whole situation had him on edge. Across the building, Steve not only had a highly trained assassin at his side but also a witch, of all people, with enhanced abilities. What did he have? An archer. He was stuck with an archer.

He might as well have taken off by himself days ago. Sure, Strange got them into the underwater base located in the Bermuda Triangle in the seas of the North Atlantic ocean —
Tony groaned. The reality of it all began to sink in. His forehead rested against the wall, and he desperately tried not to bang his head against the steel. ‘He got you where you needed to be. What are you going to do now that you’re here?’

Composure came at a struggle. With clenched fists he pushed himself to the exit, banging into a table on the way. It was dark — they couldn’t even see each other, let alone where they were walking. Clint was the first to catch on, eyeing Tony curiously as he cleared his throat.

“So...” Clint drawled out, “in your words; it doesn’t hurt to ask. You hiding a flashlight of sorts between those Iron-magnets?”

Tony huffed an exasperated sigh. He reached up to his temple and with one click that bounced around the room, the eyes to his helmet glowed a bright white.

Clint hummed, mildly impressed. “You really do think of everything.”

Tony shuffled past him, letting his thoughts vocalize in forms of mumbled grunts. He had to think of everything. Like always, the solution to the problem was on his shoulders.

Steve and Natasha carefully walked down the hallways, still on the north end of the building surrounded by dusty and fogged up windows. The glass showcasing ocean life outside of the base was a bit nerve-wracking, a grounding reminder of Wanda’s disappearance and being undersea, telling them they needed to move — and fast.

KkkkrrrrrEEEAAAAKKK!

Steve paused. Natasha froze in her place next to him. He looked around, ensuring the sound didn’t come from anything – or anyone – that could cause them trouble. It wasn’t the first time they heard the noise, in fact it was becoming a constant nuisance.

“That’s not at all worrisome,” Natasha dryly said.

Steve shook his head, walking forward. “SHIELD’s reports stated that the facility was unstable at the time of shut down. Seeing as that was a little over eight months ago, I imagine the lack of maintenance isn’t exactly doing it any favors.”

“Let’s hope we can get out of here before any of these windows break under pressure.” Natasha kept her voice hushed. “I already see spider cracks.”

“You can swim, right Nat?” Steve gave a small smile.

Natasha glared. “That’s not funny —”

The air in Steve’s lungs rushed out in a pained gasp as a hard kick to the back knocked him down to the ground. A loud crash on his left accompanied a painful yelp, and he quickly looked to his side as Natasha crumbled next to him.

He turned on his back and hastily rolled away at the sight of the man plummeting down from the ceiling. The man’s feet landed in a heavy, solid thunk on where Steve’s stomach would have been. He narrowly dodged the attack by millimeters.
Natasha had already jumped up, releasing the safety to her gun with a click. Steve reached for his shield, swiftly whipping it around.

The man stood between them both, a white helmet encasing his head. Steve clenched the handle to his shield tightly, and Natasha aimed her gun directly at him; he didn’t flinch.

There was an unpleasant sound that came from his mouth when he looked at Natasha. It stirred something inside Steve, something combative — protective.

“Natalia Romanova.” He slowly gestured her arm towards her. “Davno ne videlis’.”

“Dmitri Smerdyakov. I wished it would have stayed that way.” She raised her gun higher. “Gde mal’chik?”

Her voice was low, heavy with a raging storm. Dmitri silently stared at her, the slits for eyes on the helmet giving way to his green pupils. He didn’t respond. As slowly as he had turned to her, he turned to Steve. The arm he held out for her redirected to the soldier.

“You bring friend,” he calmly stated.

Steve wasn’t sure if he had ever, in his entire life, growled before. Whatever rumbling snarl emitted from his throat, it was as close as he’d ever gotten to the sound.

“Dmitri,” Natasha fiercely repeated. “Gde mal’chik?”

Steve locked his eyes with Dmitri’s, the man refusing to turn away for a good minute. It was dark, and only his helmet provided any light, but he saw enough in the man to break. Everything about him, his posture, the vibe he gave off, it was all more than just foreboding. It was borderline evil. Steve hadn’t seen or felt such a thing since Johann Schmidt.

Dmitri finally turned away, letting out a low chuckle when he faced Natasha.

“Ty vsegda lyubish’ detey,” he mocked. “I assume that would stop when they fixed you.”

Natasha shouted, a sharp cry piercing through the air. She lunged forward.

Steve watched the fight begin right before his eyes in a daze, like he was displaced from the moment. Things moved so fast; each attack happened so quickly, he couldn’t find a place to interrupt. They fought like they had done it a thousand times before, like performing a long deadly set of well-practiced choreographed moves; their feet danced around each other, each assault one lobbed out was blocked by the other.

His eyes darted between both of them, realizing that they fought so seamlessly because they fought so similarly.

Natasha went to jump around his neck, Dmitri had dodged and grabbed her leg. When he swung her in the air, she used the momentum to grab his head. She repeated the move, swinging her body around him, latching onto his torso. He gripped her hair, and she fell from her grasp. As she faltered, she kicked his kneecaps.

Each move, each attack, if one failed, the other followed through with something new, as if it was their plan all along. There was no hesitation. It was dangerous, two highly trained assassins attacking each other. They’d likely kill each other before one walked away.

Steve took one deep breath and rushed in.
For a brief moment, he worked with Natasha on attacking Dmitri. She kicked him, he threw a punch. Dmitri would swing back, they’d dodge. She fired a bullet in the wrong direction so that he’d use his shield to reflect it the right way.

Yet somehow, in their breathless entanglement of assaults, Dmitri never faltered. He never let up, he never stopped.

With one smooth move, Dmitri chopped his open palm into the base of Natasha’s neck. Her cry was silent, vocal cords paralyzed with a strike to the throat. She lost the grip to her pistol, and he was quick to catch the Glock before it dropped to the floor. The trigger was between his fingers before either of the two realized it.

Dmitri grabbed Steve’s arm and yanked him around in a circle, straight into Natasha. Their skulls banged audibly together, the echoing noise like a bat hitting a baseball. Natasha clung tightly to her head, a grunt of pain muted in her mouth. Steve absorbed the trauma with determination, spinning back around to face Dmitri.

The man chuckled. He laughed as if it was a game to him, lighthearted and full of pleasure.

Steve squared his jaw. “Where are you keeping him?”

He didn’t need to specify who, the man falling silent confirming the fact. Dmitri stayed still, tying his hands behind his back. He stood so nonchalantly as if he didn’t care that his defenses were down, as if he knew that they both realized he’d easily outmatch them. His egregious cockiness fueled a fire Steve had been pushing away.

“Hey!” Steve shouted indignantly. “I said, where are you keeping him!?"

Natasha went to charge forward. Dmitri had the gun aimed at her head before she took another step. She froze at Steve’s side, quickly looking his way in hopes that he had a plan.

“He will be dead by time you find him,” Dmitri sneered.

When Steve didn’t move, Natasha did. She surged ahead, sliding underneath Dmitri, avoiding the fired bullet and grabbing his legs.

“Ty monstr!” Natasha yelled, her voice reaching a whole new octave as she pulled him to the ground.

He grabbed her arms as she spun around, yanking him down with her. With a tight grip on her hair, he pulled her straight to his face. The helmet covered his mouth, but his eyes bulged out from the slits, the frenzied madness boring an unforgettable image into her mind.

“Pryamo kak ty.” Dmitri hissed back.

When he kicked her off, she stumbled back at the force of the assault. Her head was low to the ground, watching where her feet moved when he flicked his hand forward. Between his fingers, a playing card flew towards her.

Steve barely had time to react.

“Natasha, watch —!”

It was too late. Natasha immediately went to stop the attack, grabbing the playing card between her two fingers. Just as quickly as she had caught it, she vanished. Steve hadn’t even blinked, and she
was gone. He gaped and jumped forward, a mixture of surprise and horror causing his jaw to unhinge. There wasn’t any evidence that she had even stood with him, nothing left behind in the wake of her disappearance.

“Proshchay, chernaya vdova suka.”

The harsh, biting accent pulled him from his stupor. Steve stomped forward, grabbing Dmitri’s shirt and pulling him up from the ground.

“What’d you do?” his voice thundered in its shout. “What did you do!?"

Steve dodged a sudden attack to his head. The quick action left him defenselessly to the harsh punch that his stomach took, the blow sending him doubled over and he stumbled back. He hadn’t noticed when Dmitri aimed for his neck, a brutal hit with his hand taking him by surprise. His one arm dropped down to his side as his other reached for his throat.

It was enough of a distraction for Dmitri to snatch and steal his shield. By the time Steve noticed, the red and blue metal was smacking him straight across his forehead.

He didn’t remember blacking out, but he certainly remembered seeing stars. He wasn’t sure if that was irony or simple physics. Having fallen to the floor, he lifted himself to his knees, his palms pressed heavily on the ground.

A look all around determined Dmitri was gone. His shield laid abandoned across the hall.

“Nat?” he hoarsely called out. “Natasha? Do you read?”

KkkkrRRRREEEAAAAKKK!

There was no other sound.

Steve sighed, rising to his feet and rubbing the tender spot on his forehead. He gave one quick look behind him, sure that Natasha was somehow there, trapped behind some magic he couldn’t explain, trapped like Wanda, both without their defenses. While he was sure of it, he had no way to fix the problem. Not right now.

Strange could handle it. He was sure of that.

“I’ll be back for you, too.”

Now that they were exposed, he had to get to Peter, and quickly. Dmitri hadn’t taken kindly to their presence. He reattached his shield to his back. His legs nearly tripped over each other, an unintentional lapse in his rigid composure as he took down the hall. Now alone, he had a bad feeling about what was to come.

They had made slow progress after Strange ditched them. Every room they searched was a bust, most dinky offices or small labs that would hold three, four men tops. It was dark, disconcertingly quiet, and notably dust filled the air in competition with the fog, thick and of the abundance.

Clint vocalized a theory that Tony wasn’t fond of — between the deserted rooms and the ominous flickering lights no longer in their path — their perimeters had gone untouched for months. Which
meant Peter wouldn’t be found anywhere here.

Luckily, they finally caught a break. The next room they had entered was huge, at least compared to the ones they had come across so far. It was obviously a laboratory of sorts, as was most, but this one held higher importance. The light from Tony’s helmet landed across computers, incubators, tanks – equipment that they hadn’t seen anywhere else in the base.

“Jesus Christ. It’s like a scientist’s playground,” Clint said.

Tony couldn’t disagree. They were getting closer to the interesting stuff, for sure. That was a good sign. Plus, no one had emerged from the shadows to attack them yet, which meant they still held the element of surprise. The muscles in his throat constricted at the thought. How long would they be blessed with that small feat?

Tony hurriedly jogged down the metal stairs leading to a lower floor, the metal creaking with each step he took. He spun around, rapidly taking in everything he saw. While the multitude of equipment had him nervous, he felt relief that most were covered by dirty white sheets or completely untouched altogether. It was just another area the freaks hadn’t utilized.

OsCorp had, obviously. That thought still made him grimace. But at least Dmitri and Klum hadn’t.

Making his way across the room, heavy chains from the ceiling caught his attention. He looked above; they swung slightly, back and forth on their own accord. Tony determined that at one point, more than likely, they held up the disturbingly large tanks surrounding them. All but the one that caught his attention, locked to the wall, reaching from floor to ceiling.

The substance inside gave enough light to see at least five feet around the room. It glowed that brightly. It was disgustingly green; a luminous, sickening chemical he didn’t want to mess with.

Clint approached him, standing at his side. “What do you think it is?”

Tony stiffly shook his head. “Not good.”

He really didn’t know. He really didn’t want to know. It was either a very good thing or very bad thing that OsCorp left it behind in their abandonment of the facility. He wasn’t sure which would make the most sense. Nothing this company was doing made sense to him anymore.

He hadn’t even realized that Clint had left his side, hadn’t even registered the sound of footsteps across the room until a voice broke through his thoughts.

“Tony,” Clint called out. “You need to come look at this.”

Tony immediately turned away, briskly walking to where Clint knelt on the ground. Before he had even gotten close, the LED’s to his helmet scanned over a pile of shining liquid.

“What the hell is it?”

Clint looked up at him, his expression grave.

“Blood,” he answered. “Fresh. You can still smell the iron.”

Blood. Tony lost sensation to his body. Blood.

His feet staggered back, the air halting in his lungs with painful force. The longer he stared at the liquid on the ground, the more he realized that it was a large puddle. Way larger than it should be
and way larger than any bodily fluid should be, let alone blood. He suddenly couldn’t feel the rhythm of his heart.

Clint immediately stood up, his fingers snapping together. “Hey — hold it together. We don’t know if it’s his or not.”

Tony resisted the urge to punch something. He’d save that for when he found the deranged assholes that took Peter. Right now, Clint was right. He needed to keep calm, stay collected, stay grounded — he tunneled his focus on the new information with as much concentration as he could muster up.

“Where’d it come from?” his voice was deceptively steady and short, calm even, but Tony knew Clint well enough that he’d detected the faint tremble hidden within it.

Clint shook his head, brushing against his shoulder as he walked away.

“I’m not concerned with where it came from, Tony.” Clint gestured ahead to the second exit opposite the one they came from. “I want to know where it goes.”

At his words, he pointed down to the floor. Tony looked below them, his range of lights showcasing a line of liquid that led in the other direction. It was a thick line, not drips or scattered drops but a thick, solid line, and he forced himself to push the nauseating thought aside.

He let the realization dawn on him. “There’s a trail.”

Clint didn’t miss a beat. He gave an excited, almost frantic and vigorous nod, quickly heading for the exit.

“Let’s follow it, see where it —”

The unexpected flash of light temporarily blinded Tony. It burned his retinas and left behind a cloud of smoke that had him coughing from the sudden onslaught of fumes. He had to shield his eyes, the back of his palm pressed heavily against the metal of his helmet.

When he removed his hand, Clint was nowhere to be seen.

“Barton?” Tony called out. “Barton? What the hell — Clint!”

Tony stormed up to the exit, looking at all sides and even outside the room as if Clint was pulling some poorly timed prank. No matter how many times he called for him, there was no response.

He swallowed down his frustration. Selfishly, he was more furious that he had now been abandoned by two partners – the entire team Rogers provided him — as opposed to concern for Clint’s sudden vanishing act. Something told him that there was a sort of magic behind it, though. Tony had a feeling that the disappearance, while concerning, wouldn’t prove to be much of a threat.

They were being targeted. Eliminated. The place was probably booby-trapped in anticipation of their arrival. It was a crazy guess — it was also an educated one. He wanted to assume nothing could get any worse, but the universe had a way of proving him wrong. With reluctance, he settled to push forward.

“Work as a team...what a joke,” he huffed, turning down the hallway, alone. “Can’t work as a team when everyone starts playing the vanishing act, can you, Fury?”
Something told him Nick Fury would have had an interesting response to that. He was beginning to miss those days.

The portal was a quick, on his feet, last-second action to detain Mysterio. Tumbling through was a much less elegant way that Stephen wanted to go with, but it got the job done. They rolled on the ground together, the magic entryway closing behind them. The purple caped man was quick to fight off Stephen’s grip, desperate to reach his escape before it disappeared. Unfortunately for him, and very fortunately for Stephen, he was one second too late.

He couldn’t help but watch with amusement. Stephen dusted off his tunic, lifting to his knees and off the ground, knowing that his plan wouldn’t take long.

“Where are we?” Mysterio looked all around, his glass dome reflecting the wasteland that surrounded them.

Stephen took a deep breath in. It reeked of festering nature life, the dark looming clouds over them casting a dreary atmosphere. Even the sun hid behind the moon, light barely of existence on the derelict planet.

“Svartalfheim, one of the nine realms.” He gestured around to the nothingness that surrounded them, only mountains far in the distance to be seen. “You see, Mysterio, you’ve made contact with a very powerful, very dangerous being. You’ve recklessly sought help from someone who you should not have ever known existed. It’s my job to ensure you don’t cause any more trouble because of what you’ve done.”

Mysterio’s head cocked to the side.

“Oh, so you have magic too, huh?” He reached behind his cape, pulling with him a small deck of cards. “Well, I have a few tricks up my sleeve as well!”

The moment was meant to be dramatic. Stephen was sure of it. The cards whizzed through the air with precise speed, never reaching their target but instead the shield he had conjured to block their path. The flames burst around him, orange magic crackling each time a card exploded.

When Mysterio had run out of weapons to throw, Stephen lowered his defenses.

“That’s cute,” he mocked. “Do you do children’s parties?”

Though he hid his features behind the glass helmet, Stephen could practically see the very moment Mysterio realized he fell in over his head. His shoulders slumped, and he spun around, frantically looking for an escape.

It gave him a bit of satisfaction. His magic stemmed from within, not some pathetic party tricks bought at the local Halloween store. He spent his time studying the mystic arts in an effort to perfect his magic, and now it was paying off. Klum was cocky; he had stepped into territory he wasn’t prepared to handle. Now, he stood panicked, no fake magic left to help him and without any weapons to his aid.

Stephen couldn’t help but smile. This was going to be fun.
“Let me go,” Mysterio demanded.

Stephen shook his head. “Not until you agree to my terms, Klum.”

“And what terms would that be, Mr…?”

“Doctor. It’s Doctor Strange,” Stephen corrected. “And you agree that you’ll reside here, on this realm, and cease to cause any more problems with your fake magic.”

“Fake magic?” Mysterio huffed, clearly offended. “I will not be insulted by some low-life nobody who thinks —”

Halfway into Mysterio’s rant, Stephen was already in the middle of performing a spell. The purple-caped man never even noticed his hands twirling together, too busy ranting and raving to care. Stephen played to the one element he knew would be Klum’s downfall — his ignorance.

His hands danced around each other until he pushed his arms forward, the magic sending an energy wave into the other man. He flew back, the wind so powerful that he had to dig his fingers into the ground to halt himself. Eventually, it proved to be too much, and he tumbled away, only coming to a painful stop when the magic let up. The force of the blow knocked off his helmet, the glass dome rolling to the side beside him.

Klum went to reach for the helmet. His arm pathetically dug into the dirt, crawling inch by inch to reach it. He stopped suddenly, a boot appearing in his sight and stepping on his glass. Stephen, already having appeared, kicked the offending helmet away.

“Stop while you’re ahead, Klum. This isn’t a battle you will win.”

Klum grumbled, looking up with a snarl. “I wouldn’t count on that, doctor.”

“I would,” Stephen answered, squatting low to meet his face. “Because I am so, so much better than you. You would never believe the things I can do, the magic I can conjure, all of it beyond what your tiny, imbecilic mind could ever fathom.”

Stephen went to touch him, the mere act causing Klum to scatter away, panicked at what may happen. It was borderline cartoonish how his fear now controlled his actions. Stephen smirked and stood up, straightening his tunic with a satisfied sigh.

“And...because I have a cloak.”

Klum stumbled to his feet, wiping the dirt off his costume, desperate to regain control of the situation. He whipped his purple cape around, gripping the fabric for dear life.

“Yeah...well...so do I!”

“No, you have a cape,” Stephen corrected. “I have a cloak.”

And with that, the thick, red cloak came flying off Stephen’s shoulders. It darted over to Klum, stopping mere inches short of his face. Klum watched with fear, eyes widening in shock. The cloak was alive. It moved on its own accord, beyond any technological magic he had ever witnessed before.

The corner of cloak waved. If Klum had time to think, he would have rightfully assumed it was mocking him. Before he could blink, it had wrapped itself around his body, bundling him together. His legs immediately gave out beneath him, and he fell right back down to the ground, wrapped up
like a cocoon.

Stephen wiped his hands clean and looked down to Klum with his arms folded over his chest.

“I know you placed bait around the facility. How do I deactivate the traps?”

“I—I don’t know much about them!” Klum insisted, fighting the strength of the cloak. “They’re products of OsCorp, powered by a special combination of nanobots that work to bounce off the frequency of the mist. It’s the only tech that will work in there. Most of them will shut down if they’re destroyed. That’s — that’s all I know, I swear!”

Stephen arched an eyebrow, watching him wiggle like a worm trying to escape from a bird’s claws. With a loud whistle through tight lips, calling his cloak like an owner calling its dog, the fabric unwrapped itself from Klum’s body. He was already walking away as it flew back to his shoulders, landing softly against his collarbones in reattachment.

“Have fun with the elves, Klum,” Stephen called out, not even bothering to face his direction. “You might want to use that cape as a jacket. It gets pretty cold here.

“Wait!” Mysterio called out.

Stephen didn’t turn around. He did, however, stop. He turned his head, just slightly to show Klum he was listening, entertaining the idea of his plea.

Mysterio staggered to his feet, holding his helmet to his chest. “Teach me. Teach me your magic, please!” he begged.

The way he clutched his helmet so close to him, reminiscent of a child and their blanket, had taken the smile away from Stephen. The man really had no clue what he had gotten himself into. Maybe had he just avoided using his skills for personal gain, things would have ended up different. But Dormammu wasn’t a creature to be messed with. He had seen firsthand what the entity could do.

His job was to protect reality. That was not an oath he planned to abandon any time soon.

“No,” Stephen bluntly answered.

He stepped through the portal, re-entering the underwater base and leaving Francis Klum for good.

Steve walked slowly the hallways, staying cautious with every movement he had. He had to rely on his own senses for protection. Being stripped of his team took away his extra eyes and ears, leaving him more vulnerable to an attack. His shield stayed directly in front of him, his fingers gripping the handle until the metal dented into his palms through his blown gloves.

Every sound that the building made felt ten times louder than it actually was, each creak piercing his ears, the groans from the walls increasing his heartbeat to a raging drum. Sweat dripped in beads down his forehead despite the chill around him. He took the next corner suddenly, practically jumping in preparation of the unknown, defensively blocking off any incoming threat. There was none.

Only being one man, he knew he couldn’t watch all of his surroundings, but he did the best he
could. He looked up, down, to his sides, and turned around when he heard a noise come from behind. Tension tried to weather away his confidence; Dmitri was still out there. He wouldn’t be caught off guard again.

At the same time, he checked every open door he came across. The tiny flashlight attached to the side of his helmet was just enough for him to determine if a space was occupied or not. Almost everything inside the building was empty and untouched. Room after room were filled with cobwebs and dust that tickled his nostrils, telling him no occupants had bothered to enter for a long time.

He kept searching. Everything could fail him, everyone could leave him, but he held onto his determination. No one could take that away.

He rounded the next corner, once again keeping his shield out in defense. The brief moment he stayed silent allowed him to survey his environment. Straight ahead, water dripped from the ceiling. It hit the floor, the nondescript noise echoing, resounding.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

His breathing followed the tune. Drip — breathe in. Drip — breathe out.

That’s when he heard it. Right in earshot, between the water, between his breaths, the fragile sound bounced off the walls. It was a faint, muffled, weak in pitch, but it was there. Unmistakably human.

He looked around, guarding himself with each step he took forward. Up, down, left and right, glance behind. He needed to clear his surroundings before he risked looking anywhere else. Finally, he turned to the room, standing at the entryway, trying to find the source.

As if on cue, the sound once again broke through the stillness. It led his eyes to the furthest wall, squinting at the dimness beneath his flashlight. When the picture finally registered, when he finally understood what he was seeing, his arms fell weak to his side. His shield hit his hip, no longer upright in defense. Horror stripped him of his strength and fight.

“Oh god.”

Halfway into following the trail of blood and Tony began to feel dizzy. The thick path of liquid was smeared against the floor, as if someone had dragged a dying animal to their grave. Clint was right, it was fresh and still glistened wet underneath his helmets LED’s. His pulse hammered, barely able to keep himself tethered to reality, terrified at what he would find at the end of the crimson bloodbath.

Tony was terrified. It was a thought he had to push away, a realization of emotion he refused to linger on because Tony Stark didn’t get scared, let alone terrified. And yet blood washed across the floor in quantities that didn’t seem humanly possible. He let a white noise scream across his consciousness because the alternative was logic, and he wasn’t ready for those answers yet.

He moved fast, his limbs only obedient from the surge of adrenaline that sparked fire inside him. The urgency was heavy, there wasn’t any margin for error, not when the blood was endless and teased at the very real concept of —
No. Tony refused to entertain the thought. He cantered on, the trail finally leading him to a door that he swung open with force. It was another hallway — it was always another damn hallway in this godforsaken place. He let out a strained sigh when he saw flickering lights attached to the wall. At least some luck seemed to finally weigh on his side. There were signs that life had passed by here, which told him he was getting warmer in his search.

He had to admit, he missed FRIDAY already. She would have easily told him where to look and save him precious time. It was hard not having an AI point out every detail to you.

Between the fog, dust and dim lights, Tony almost didn’t notice the open door on his right. He had initially jogged past it, focused straight ahead on the nauseating stream of scarlet. The faint shimmering glint that reflected in the corner of his eyes ultimately caught his attention. He backtracked his steps, first looking inside the room before immediately walking to the source, his heavy boots echoing in the vacant space.

‘What in the living hell...’ his breath lodged in his throat. ‘Chitauri heads?’

Before he had even finished the thought, he was picking up one of the devices. His eyes narrowed in confusion and disbelief. It felt as heavy in his hands as it did the day in Brooklyn. Turning it around, he noticed the dismembered alien head had large gaps on each side. Looking back down on the table he had retrieved it from, he saw mechanical wings scattered about.

“What the hell,” he cursed out loud, dropping the offensive thing back on the table. The heavy metal landed with a thud, a cloud of dust rising up to his face from the impact.

There were many of them, more than he wanted to count. Most were disassembled from how he originally saw them, the metal wings laying discarded and unused. Which meant the ones they fought a few days ago...

‘Un-fucking-believeable...they were behind it all. The lured us straight into their trap, and we fell for it.’

Peter’s encounter in Times Square, the stolen chameleon helmet, the attack on the Brooklyn bridge with the reassembled Chitauri heads — that was them. All of it. They had this plan in the works long before Spider-man went into that warehouse. That damn Russian had been scheming this for months, and what really had Tony’s blood boiling — Dmitri had been doing from inside his business, from inside Stark Industries and the New Avengers Facility.

Right under his nose.

For all he knew, that was how they got the alien tech. Assuming OsCorp hadn’t already been sitting on it. He could barely keep his hands from shaking, quivering, barely contain the mounting rage as he looked around for any more evidence. His helmet illuminated a large stack of documents, some having fallen on the floor, most cluttered about.

Tony reached for the top stack, straining to read the papers through the flickering lights.

OsCorp Industries:

Subject AA 1963
Artificial Intelligence

Conducted by: Dr. Julius REDACTED

Archives: Subject AA1963 created under the supervision and expertise of Dr. Julius REDACTED.

Objective: Create and obtain an artificial life-form. With the use of synthesis ape DNA and REDACTED molecules, Subject AA1963 was incorporated into an almost indestructible body with a microcomputer and a solar-power source on date REDACTED. Further enhancements successful, Subject AA1963 has shown to be able to absorb additional abilities such as musical traits and animalistic traits. Subject AA1963 has been exposed to mutated abilities and mimicked the powers almost precisely. Will emit close-range gale-force wind blasts from its mouth. Portrays signs of superhuman strength and durability. Little to know comprehensions of human life. A collection of nerve ganglia has been installed underneath Subject AA1963’s left underarm as a fail-safe, where weakness is indisputable in situations of unmanageable temperament.

If the document wasn’t enough proof for him, the pictures behind the pages did the trick. Tony pulled apart the paperclip that attached the numerous, glossy photos to the file folder.

He shook his head. While OsCorp had taken responsibility for Awesome Android’s attack on the Collar City Bridge, they never had the gumption to say he had been created here. In fact, they all but shrugged the incident away with a wad of cash to the city. Looking through the rest of the project file, Tony determined they must have taken the creature with them when the government shut down the base.

‘Which means OsCorp let the damn rock-monster loose, not Dmitri and Klum.’ Tony tossed the papers aside and hastily skimmed through the next stack with curiosity. ‘What kind of shady shit is Norman Osborn up to.’

His breathing became ragged, and his chest felt twice as constricted, both with the metal weighing him down and the heavy beat of his heart. Ignorance was bliss, after all. Who was he to change that?

Despite his hesitation, flipped through each paper, skimming the crucial words to catch the gist of the reports. Things like clone technology stood out to him, the details horrifying in how they achieved their results. However, weaponry like flying gliders that contained heat-seeking smart missiles, grenade’s under the code-name Pumpkin Bomb — they, unfortunately, didn’t catch his interest too much. Stark Industries had built their name off of much worse things.

He settled on the last bundle of reports.

OsCorp Industries:

Adamantium Metal

Chemical Element Genesis

Conducted by: Dr. Myron MacClain, Metallurgist
Materials Science and Engineering, Metallurgical Engineering

The department of Materials Science and Engineering and Metallurgical Engineering of OsCorp Industries has been striving for roughly five decades in creating a replica of Vibranium, a metal alloy found only in the North East Africa country Wakanda.

Note: All Wakandian’s have been uncooperative in aiding with this research, both under the rule of King Azzuri and King T'Chaka. At the instruction of Norman Osborn, we are to move forward without seeking the approval of King T'Challa.

Research first conducted in the attempts to recreate the vibration absorbing effect that Vibranium, further noted as Element Vb, had obtained. Lacking Element Vb to analysis, the genesis of Adamantium, further noted as Element Ad, was conducted without research correlation.

**Objective:** Create a stable molecular structure that is virtually impossible to destroy. Original attempts used the components REDACTED, REDACTED, REDACTED, REDACTED, REDACTED, REDACTED. Final and successful components originate from the metal derived from meteor debris obtained during failed flight trip to Planet Zero. It is hypothesized that the cosmic rays the meteor debris had been exposed to created unbindable ions and metallic polymers. Scientist and provider of the debris Reed Richards has refused to contribute any further to the experiment.

Successful completion of Adamantium, Element Ad: Research conducted on Test1838, ie: Final and successful test of Element Ad, proved to be prospering. In its solid form, Element Ad can be described as a dark, shiny gray like high-grade steel or titanium. It is almost impossible to destroy or fracture in this state, and when molded to a sharp edge, it can penetrate most lesser materials with minimal force. Against most objects and force, it has proven to be unbreakable. At current stage of testing, Element Ad has not been trialed against Element Vb. As such, it cannot be labeled as completely unbreakable. **Hypothesis:** Element Vb will still shatter the metal.

Tony didn’t like what he was seeing, unable to deny the bout of nerves that came fluttering up at the concept of a metal similar to Vibranium. He huffed, tossing the document aside for another one.

‘Adamantium...so, the word adamant. How original.’ There was no way OsCorp was creating a competitor to Vibranium and planning on using it for the good of mankind.

Pushing a couple of Chitauri heads aside, he obtained the last stack of files, brushing off the dust with his metal-gloved hand to better read the information.

**OsCorp Industries:**

**Experiment X Program**

**Genetic Research**

Conducted by: Professor Andre Thorton. Assisting, Dr. Abraham Cornelius, Dr. Carol Hines, and Dr. Dale Rice.

Subjects Participating: • Subject James Howlett. • Subject Victor Creed. • Subject Wade Wilson. •
Program under operation of Department K, location Ontario, Canada. Experiments conducted within REDACTED. Transfer of program to OsCorp Industries, Manhattan, NY: Denied. OsCorp Industries sought approval to assist in program with team of scientist onsite. Awaiting approval from Bio-med and Board of Directors.

Archives

**Adamantium-skeletal bonding:** Subject James Howlett, code name: Wolverine. Subject has shown signs of natural mutated physiology in regenerative abilities. Experiment in genetic enhancement of biological skeleton. Process of experiment involving liquidation of Adamantium metal and injection into bone marrow of subject. Methods used: REDACTED. Analysis: Adamantium metal has bonded to organic material. Result: Success. ATTN: Subject Wolverine MIA. Whereabouts: Unknown.

**Chemically created regenerative abilities:** Subject Wade Wilson. Mercenary and assassin, naturally fast reflexes, no known natural mutated physiology. Subject victim to terminal cancer of unknown origin. Experiment in genetic enhancement of regenerative abilities. Objective: Allow neutrophil cells and leukocytes cells to rapidly heal and/or disregard cancerous cells in attempt to achieve longer lifespan. Methods used: REDACTED. Result: In Process.

**Adamantium-skeletal bonding:** Subject Victor Creed, code name: Sabertooth. Subject has shown signs of natural mutated physiology in regenerative abilities, enhanced hearing and sight with primal instincts similar to wild animals. Physical attributes are beyond human levels. Experiment in genetic enhancement of biological skeleton. Process of experiment involving artificial improvements to subject’s physiology, liquidation of Adamantium metal and injection into bone marrow. Methods used: REDACTED. Analysis: Adamantium metal has bonded to organic material. Subject has shown increased strength and accelerated healing factor. Result: Success.

“What the fuck.”

Tony had seen enough, hastily dropping the documents. He knew for years now that OsCorp was into some shady shit, they had always been on his radar of competitors to keep an eye on. But this? Aggressive AI’s, generic Vibranium and inhumane experiments? It was light years far beyond his expectation, that comprehension didn’t even exist.

If the building wasn’t making his skin crawl before, it certainly was now. But he’d take the information and deal with it later. Right now, he needed to get Peter, his team and himself the hell out of here. Before anything worse happened.

Spinning on his heels, he turned to the door and —

“Christ!” Tony exclaimed, holding a hand to his chest.

In the shadows was Steve, standing still, his sudden and unspoken presence visibly startling him. It took a solid five seconds to regain his composure.

“Rogers. Thank god,” he ended up breathing a sigh of relief. “Listen, Strange ditched us, and I lost Barton to whatever tricks Houdini has up his sleeve.”

The moment the words left his mouth, Tony noticed Steve was standing alone. Neither women he
had been paired with stood next to him or behind him.

“Where’s Natasha and Maximoff?” His tone softened with fluttering hope. “Did they find Peter?”

Tony was half expecting to hear that they got caught in the traps Mysterio had laid around the base. Something in his gut told him otherwise, his intuition screaming that something was off. Steve wasn’t moving, not even a flinch. The flickering bulb from the hallway flashed rapidly, blinking like a strobe-like before finally giving out.

“You’ve risked a lot of lives here today Tony,” Steve said, his voice sounding foreign, too low in tone with a resounding animosity dripping from his tongue.

Tony gaped.

“What?” he barked. “What nonsense are you spewing now, Rogers? Where’re the others? Who’s looking for Peter?”

He rattled off demands before they registered, desperate for answers, desperate for control.

“They’re gone,” Steve bluntly answered, pointing behind him. “We need to leave before we’re next.”

Tony blinked, struggling to understand what he was hearing. First Strange, then Barton, now this? For a moment, he was at a complete loss for words. When he finally found his voice, it was strong.

“What the hell are you —”

Steve’s thumb pointed over his own shoulder, provoking Tony to notice the thick red gloves attached to his hands. The crimson color reflected off his helmet’s LED’s, the gloves riding all the way up to Steve’s forearms. The frustration washed away like a tidal wave had consumed him, quickly replaced with growing alarm.

Tony froze. His eyes squinted as he cataloged the information, his mind breaking at the seams with too many thoughts. There wasn’t a need for physical confirmation. With one startling realization, he came to a frightening conclusion.

Up until that moment, Tony was never aware of how many idiosyncrasies Steve had that he had come to memorize. Things like the way he stood, tall and with purpose, his back straight in a way only military experience provided. This wasn’t a man standing with the posture of a soldier. His back was arched straight with tension, with corruption.

But what really stood out, was that no matter what, even if Captain America was limping with his own injury, he questioned the status of his team members first. His team always came first.

Steve never called it quits, never abandoned a mission. He never abandoned his team.

This wasn’t Steve.

“Yeah. You’re right,” Tony finally choked out. “Let’s make our way to the central point.”

As if confirming his suspicions, when Tony went to leave the room, Steve hadn’t budged from the doorway. He stood rooted in his spot, hovering over him with a vibe that felt altogether not right. Tony resisted the urge to attack, his fingers twitching as he kept himself from forming a fist. Hot, white rage flowed through his veins, eating away at him, making it hard to see straight ahead.
With a hard swallow, he gestured to the open hallway.

“After you,” Tony insisted.

Almost robotically, Steve stepped to the side. Tony wouldn’t turn his back to him, he absolutely refused. His arm stayed gestured out, insisting that the man take the lead. He could have sworn he heard a scoff when they finally started walking; it was hard to say, the blood rushing in both ears had his hearing muffled.

Tony stayed directly behind him, his fingers digging into his palms, scratching the metal of his armor. They walked down the hallways in the opposite way Tony had come from, opposite of the trail he was following, which meant at their pace and direction, they’d be rounding the back of the building.

‘He’ll either lead you to Peter or kill you first. Which do you think it is, Stark?’

With every step, each footstep they made, his breathing came in harder, his lips tightly pursed. Tony had enough experience with crazy maniacs to know this wouldn’t work for his benefit. Dmitri wanted him dead. Peter was a ploy, bait – innocent goddamn bait.

He had reached his tipping point long before they had even entered the base. A devouring inferno of thoughts began to splinter him apart. He took Peter. He had Peter. He probably hurt Peter – innocent, loving, wanted-nothing-more-than-to-please-everyone Peter. This son of a bitch had broken into his company, tried to steal his money, took his kid –

His control broke, snapping like a weak twig. Self-restraint gone with the wind, willpower lost in the heat of the moment, Tony charged forward.

The man whipped around as Tony yanked at his arm. “Ah-ck! Tony, what the hell are you —!”

Tony grabbed him, slamming him violently into the nearest wall.

“Tony, what —!”

He grabbed the side of the impostor’s face and smashed his head against the wall, once, twice, and then a third time. The light from his helmet barely illuminated the blood that trickled down from the bastard’s forehead. When he finished, he had the man’s hair clenched between his fingers, ensuring he wouldn’t move.

“Cap hasn’t worn those gloves since the battle of New York in 2012.” Tony pressed his face harder against the wall, the man’s cheek smothered against the damp metal. “Where the hell is my kid, Dmitri!!?”

Tony couldn’t remember a time he spoke with such venom. His rage was a wicked tornado, building inside him ready to cause destruction in its path. The blond hair stayed gripped in his hand, and he found himself squeezing harder when the sick fuck began to laugh, a light, airy chuckle falling between them.

Tony whipped Dmitri’s head back and —

WHAM!

The crushing impact of skull to steel reverberated around them. The attack only made Dmitri’s laugh louder, the chuckle now a full-blown cackle. It was sinister, every bit wrong coming from Steve Rogers mouth. The twisted, demented Russian had violated Steve’s character, stealing the
image of a good man he wasn’t even remotely close to being.

Tony saw red, nothing but fury, rage igniting every fiber of his being. He went for another attack, ready to pull the man’s head back when —

“Who, me?”

The blond hair now brown curls, the blue eyes now brown, the face now —

Tony let go. It was pure instinct, dropping the grip like his hands had caught fire. The fresh-faced boy looked so innocent, the Bambi eyes staring back at him for the first time in days.

‘It’s not him,’ he had to remind himself.

But it was. Peter stared back at him; sympathetic, apologetic, desperate. Tony lost his breath, air never returning to his lungs. He knew what he was looking at. A fake. It was a fake, he was being played. He knew that, he was well aware of it. He wanted to rub his eyes clear of the image until his skin bled, until his eyelids were sore from friction, but he was robbed of the ability to move. He was frozen still.

‘It’s not him,’ he chanted in his head, a furious mantra on repeat. ‘It’s not him, Stark — it’s not him!’

Tony growled, his jaw clenched tight. “What did you do with him? Where is he?”

That wasn’t his Peter. The once startling and disturbing sight quickly became nauseating. Disgust curdled in his stomach, sick from seeing Peter’s identity sitting on the body of a man who had done God knows what with him, kept him somewhere far away from his family, hurt him or worse –

“Where is he!?”

Dmitri stumbled back, putting space between the two of them. He clutched at his chest, pulling faintly at his red and blue spider-suit, his hand specifically placed over his heart.

“You’re too late, Mr. Stark. I died, screaming your name. Begging for your help,” he cried with Peter’s voice, wet with unshed tears. “But you never came. This wouldn’t have happened had you just listened to me in the first place. Why didn’t you just listen?”

Tony roared. He charged forward, arm cocked back and first outward to punch, ready to assault. With wild abandon, he released it, and it arced forward, headed straight for his target. As quickly as he had attacked, he was blocked.

In shock, he stared at the hand that grabbed his fist, only to be caught off guard with a kick to his stomach.

The hit came a lot quicker than he’d expected. Tony doubled over and stumbled back from the force. Though he gripped his stomach, no pain penetrated through the bonded nanites attached to him. With an animalistic snarl that came through gritted teeth, he looked up.

Dmitri stood in front of him, no longer hiding behind the face of anyone, only his own mask. His eyes could be seen through the white helmet encased over his head. Those tiny slits revealing his eyes — deranged and psychotic green beads — were enough to send Tony over the edge. He lunged, tackling the man to the ground.

Days of pent-up, seething anger released itself in each blow, his metal covered knuckles smacking
against the white helmet – his helmet, his creation, the source of his problems and pain — each smack echoed with resounding effect. He let loose a string of assaults, punch after punch after punch —

And Dmitri laughed. He howled with laughter.

“What’d you do with him!?” Tony hollered between each hit. “Where’s my kid!?”

Tony hadn’t noticed when the change occurred. He couldn’t see straight. He barely saw each impact his hand made, each contact his knuckles made, sight blurry with anger, the fight making him lightheaded. The laughter changed. It became something — someone — different. It hit a sore spot, yielding emotions he had pushed deep down inside of him many years ago.

Howard Stark. Tony’s next punch stayed high in the air, his fist shaking with adrenaline-fueled tremors at the sight.

“You’re pathetic, Tony,” Howard sneered. “A failure. You always have been.”

It was enough to catch him off guard. Howard kicked him back with enough strength to have Tony toppling over, and just like that he had lost the upper hand. He had Tony straddled to the ground, his own attacks now coming in hard.

Any other day, Tony would have used his suit to save him. Fly away, repulsor beam him off, electrocute him. Hell, he would even blare AC/DC at a noise volume loud enough to damage the man’s ears. Taking each punch as they came, he was left weaponless without his technology. The hardened nanites protected his skin, a small feature he’d have to use to his advantage. It was all he had going for him. The punches hammered a strong force against his head, brass knuckles giving Dmitri an advantage, causing injury his own fists wouldn’t live up to. Each impact damaged his helmet, caving the metal in.

With each hit, he expected the next, anticipated them, and in the moments after they landed, he let his body relax. A blow smashed into his temple, rattling Tony’s head within his breaking helmet. He tried to escape, to wiggle out from under the man, his legs writhing desperately to get a grip on the floor.

Howard leaned back, panting breathlessly. “You resent your father for how he raised you, yet you couldn’t even protect a young boy from dangers you put him in. His death is on you, Stark.”

Tony took the moment and ran with it. With a grunt, he kneed the man between his legs, a painful cry showcasing his achievement. Tony gave one hefty smack across the side of his head and Dmitri toppled over, his appearance flickering on and off. He phased between multiple different people as the light-show filled the otherwise empty hallway.

Tony jumped up and dashed forward. He launched himself on top of Dmitri, planting him face-first onto the floor. His body-weight pinned him to the ground, his knees digging into his back to keep him still.

“You may be good at fighting, but you’re a damn horrible liar.” Tony smacked his head against the ground, holding it there. “Now I really don’t like asking things twice. Where. Is. He!?”

The helmet was shutting down. Tony could tell it had already been exposed to too much damage, the flickering lights bouncing off the billion nanites that ceased to function.

Dmitri’s eyes slid up to look at him. “I’ll tell you when you’re dead,” he sneered.
A stern blow to his head, one after the other. Tony didn’t let up, using strength only emotion could fuel, chips of his metal suit flying from his knuckles. He beat the man relentlessly, beat him even as he damaged his own suit — his own form of protection — he didn’t let up.

“Dead so you can take my money, right!?” Tony threw his arm back, punching again. “You did all this so you could take my money, you took my kid for my money — you fucking psychopath!”

He didn’t stop. He couldn’t stop. A blaze of rage shredded his restraint, a ballistic force unleashed and out of his control. It seemed like an hour, it seemed like a lifetime that he kept hitting and hitting and hitting and —

His knuckles were bleeding. The nanites spread around him like glitter, broken pieces of magnets shredded and discarded. Only when he physically lost his strength, his body tapping him out did Tony stop.

He panted and heaved. He spit the saliva that ran out of his mouth off to the side and closed his eyes in hopes his nausea would quell. He didn’t move, he stayed on top of Dmitri, his body weight still pinning him to the floor.

The man didn’t struggle underneath him, though. He couldn’t. The once pristine, white helmet had been shattered in his fit of rage. Sparks of nanite powered electricity burned into his fractured, damaged face.

With the portion of his head exposed, Dmitri looked up at Tony.

“Ty umresh’ zdes’ s mal’chikom.”

Tony punched him one more time. For good measure. Dmitri ceased to move after that, eyes closed and body still.

“Take your Russian and shove it where the sun don’t shine,” Tony muttered, rolling off the man’s body and climbing to his feet.

Tony panted, attempting to suck in breath after breath, air refusing to fill his lungs. His nerves were shaking, his muscles litterately trembling, coming down from the high of the fight almost as painful as the split skin on his knuckles.

He spared a glance at Dmitri, unconscious on the floor. The nanites now embedded within his skin still sparked, tricking blood down the chunks of white helmet that still remained. He wished the sight gave him satisfaction, he craved the vindication from his win. But he hadn’t won yet. He wouldn’t win until he found Peter. And even then...

Tony briefly considered what to do with him before ultimately determining he was better left for dead. Looking ahead, he scrambled off the floor, stumbling and gripping the walls for composure when his feet faltered.

He still needed to find Peter. With or without the team, he’d find Peter.

‘I’m coming, kid.’ Tony moved faster than he ever had before. ‘I’m coming for you, Peter.’
Russian Translations:

“Natalia Romanova,” he gestured her arm towards her. “Davno ne videlis’.” (“Long time, no see.”)

“Dmitri Smerdyakov. I wished it would have stayed that way.” she raised her gun. “Gde mal'chik?” (“Where is the boy?”)

“Ty vsegda lyubish' detey.” he mocked. (“You always cared for children.”) “I assume that would stop when they fixed you.”

“Ty monstr!” (“You’re a monster!”) Natasha yelled, her voice reaching a whole new octave as she pulled him to the ground.

“Pryamo kak ty.” (“Just like you.”) Dmitri hissed back.

(“Proshchay, chernaya vdova suka.”) (“Goodbye, Black Widow bitch.”)

(“Ty umresh' zdes' s mal'chikom.”) (“You will die here with the boy.”)

Alright, some fun nerd facts! GOSH this chapter was chalk full of them! So I stayed cannon to a lot of the Oscorp files here. Dr. Julius is the real creator of Awesome Android. His last name is unknown in the comics. I did have fun with the creation of Adamantium Metal, though, I will admit that. Dr. Richard Reeds was never actually involved, but planet zero is in reference to the planet where him and the other Fantastic's get their powers. And of course - dun dun dun - Experiment X! It's nothing that'll be enforced in the story, as much as I love all those characters. Just throwing some fun goodies in for the sake of being a nerd.

Shout to dragonnan, because that woman is my idol and has been since 2009. I almost, *almost* cut out the Doctor Strange/Mysterio scene in this chapter. I was panicked over the length that spun out of control (as per usual) and I became very worried that a lot of scenes would lose their value and intensity because I can't shut the F up. (Seriously, it's SO MUCH shorter when I imagine it in my head. Wtf) But the woman always makes a valid point - our beautiful Stephen doesn't get enough vindication in this fandom. That scene was for you, my whump goddess of the internet. Thank you for a little over a decade worth of Pysch/Shawn+other amazing whump.

Also, just a heads up. The next chapter is - legit - how the story was formed. It was *the* initial idea and plot bunny that no matter what, I couldn't just escape from. The entire story sort of came to be having revolved around what happens next chapter. It's not to say the rest of the story isn't effing fantastic, or what has happened before isn't just as good...I'm just saying. I've worked for 16 chapters to hit this point.

And I am
So

Friggin

Excited

Last thing, I promise. Mei_kun is my lifeline and this story would be shit without her. Thank you to her, as always, for improving the fic's quality!
Tony had gotten halfway across the base when the damage to his Iron Man helmet finally pushed him over the edge. He ripped it off with a frustrated growl.

“Goddamn piece of junk.” His fingers dug deep into the device, tearing apart the lining and tossing it aside. He didn’t care about being gentle, the jagged, metal edges cutting deep into his exposed knuckles. He was already wasting time, the distraction of the broken helmet doing him no favors.

Within the eye-sockets, he grabbed the wires that contained two tiny LED lights and yanked them out. At least now he could be free of the dented helmet. The metal had been so caved in from his fight that it was putting pressure on his skull. He smacked his palm against his chest, embedding the lights to his armor. The moment they attached, he resumed his search. There wasn’t any time to spare.

It didn’t take him long to find the trail of blood he had initially been following. He couldn’t tell which way he headed in the base — left, right, south, north — all he knew was that he planned to follow the crude pathway until it gave him answers. His energy was fed by anger so intense, so hot
that it starved away his undeniable anxiety.

When the smeared blood took a curve into an open room, Tony half expected to be led down another hallway. He instead came to a startling halt at the entrance. To his surprise, the room was a dead end. It was just that — a room.

What caught his attention was the reflection of Captain America’s shield, the red and blue standing out from the dreary darkness around them. It was directed right at him, attached to Steve’s back, telling him that the man was facing forward. Tony squinted, realizing that Steve’s attention was clearly focused on something — or someone — important.

He stood frozen in the doorway, listening intently to the sounds from within. The voice was so quiet he almost didn’t catch it. Almost.

“Stay with me, soldier,” Steve spoke softly, his tone more delicate than Tony had ever heard it before. “Easy now, I got you, son.”

Tony furrowed his brows. It was the only part of him that he could feel move, his nerves paralyzing the rest of his muscles. But he knew couldn’t have stood there long; Steve’s instincts kicked in quickly, his head turning over his shoulder when his presence was noticed.

He never said anything. It was probably for the best, Tony wasn’t sure if he would have heard him to begin with. Not over the pounding of his heartbeat, the blood rushing through his ears. Steve moved, just ever so slightly that both their flashlights gave sight to —

“Peter.” Tony’s breath lodged in his chest.

The kid was slumped forward, only held upright by the metal straps around his arms — Tony balked, they had him bolted against the wall. He was too far away to see if Peter’s eyes were open or not. It was too dark to see if he was even breathing, the intrusive thought making his stomach churn.

But he was there. No mind tricks, no sick psycho taking on his identity, it was him – his Peter. His kid.

Tony was already across the room before he realized he was moving. Vaguely, he heard Steve say something, the intensity in his tone telling him he should listen. He couldn’t. His focus didn’t steer away, his eyes locked ahead, soaking in the sight like he hadn’t seen Peter in two years, not the two days it had been.

His knees hit the floor with a resounding smack.

“Hey, hey…” Tony breathed out. A sense of endearment he didn’t know was possible laced his tone. He suddenly understood why Cap had sounded the way that he did.

With what he saw in front of him, it almost felt natural to speak in such a way. He didn’t fight it, he didn’t push it away, and he’d deal with that startling thought at a later time.

The kid looked so…fragile. It was impossible not to speak with such delicacy as if their voices could shatter him. His young age only intensified the sight of his broken frame.

Peter didn’t flinch, not at his words or Steve’s.

Unsure if he should touch him, Tony’s hands hovered over his body. “I got you. I gotcha,” he
chuckled, the laugh almost sounding hysterical. “We got you.”

“Tony…”

Between his flashlight and Steve’s — who needed to stop calling his name and wait a damn second — Peter’s appearance was more discernible. The first thing Tony noticed was his hair. The kid always kept it so well-groomed, a harsh contrast to the mess of dirt it currently was, plastered to his face and dripping with sweat.

Tony’s instinctively reached for his forehead, pushing back the sweat-drenched curls with the palm of his hand. He recoiled at contact. The skin was clammy, yet freezing like ice.

That’s when Peter leaned into his touch. His eyes fluttered open at a pace that didn’t seem right, the lids barely lifting past half-mast, sluggish and slow.

“…mr’…’ark…?” he slurred.

Tony swallowed hard, the lump in his throat increasing in size. He thought he’d never hear that voice again. He was so damn grateful to hear that voice again.

“In the flesh, kiddo.” With his other hand, Tony laid a gentle palm across the back of his neck, practically holding the kid’s head upright.

“…you...’ou came?” Peter’s lids opened a little wider, the whites of his eyes bloodshot red and glistening with tears.

“You bet your ass I came.” Tony gave him a forced smile. “As soon as I could, buddy.”

His voice wavered with a flood of relief. He cupped the base of Peter’s neck a little harder, telling himself that this was real, that they found him, that it would be alright. They did it. They got him, it was going to be okay.

And with a harsh, wet cry that got caught in his throat, Peter broke that flood of relief. His eyes clenched shut tightly. His chest hitched with each breath he pulled in, which seemed to be more and more by the second, almost a frenetic wheezing. Tony panicked, moving closer, gripping the back of his head with overwhelming concern.

Steve didn’t let up. “Tony —”

“..’m sorry...” Peter rasped, fighting a losing battle for air. “I...’m s’rry, I...”

“Hey, hey, no, no,” Tony interjected, smoothing back his hair. “Stop that.”

He didn’t need Peter apologizing. If anyone needed to be begging for forgiveness, it was him. He was the one who got the damn kid taken in the first place. It was his fault. He didn’t even want to know what those monsters had done to him in the past couple days. He needed to be here sooner – he should have come sooner.

Tony bit his tongue — why didn’t he just come sooner?

Peter’s head was shaking in his grip. In fact, his whole body had begun trembling, a fresh layer of sweat sticking to his face that Tony noticed looked way too ashen. Not even pale, the kid was taking on a ghastly gray tint, resembling a wax candle.

Something wasn’t right.
“I...I tr’ed...tr’ed to...”

Tony shook his head. “You did good, kid. You hung in there, don’t you apologize, you did good.”

“I...tr’ed...”

“Tony!” Steve shouted.

It startled them both. Tony snapped his neck over at record-breaking speed. If it weren’t for the unnatural expression of anxiety that Steve failed at hiding, he would have yelled back, and he wouldn’t have been pleasant about it.

But the falter in Steve’s resilient composure had him at a loss for words.

“Look down.” Steve’s voice was quieter the second time around, almost a hushed whisper.

When Tony looked to the floor, he understood why.

‘No.

No no no not him, not from him, it couldn’t be from...oh god, no.’

The metal covering his body had prevented him from feeling the wetness. Tony sat back on his thighs, the lights attached to his chest showing him clear as day what he had missed.

His knees were dipped in it, swimming in it. He was surrounded by blood. He was kneeling in blood, dark scarlet liquid, all pooling from Peter.

Tony looked back up at Steve in horror.

“He’s lost too much blood,” Steve stoically explained. “He’s in shock.”

A quick glance at Peter and Tony realized that Steve was dreadfully correct. There was too much blood on the ground, too much for any normal person to still be alive. ‘Peter isn’t normal’ he had to remind himself. ‘A normal person would be dead by now.’

For someone still alive though, his skin had lost all color, and his breathing was incredibly shallow and too fast. Way too fast. His eyes, normally bubbly and full of life, were glassy and rolled around lifelessly, landing on nothing in particular. He was deep in the stages of shock. Tony didn’t need a PhD to know that.

For once, Tony felt sincere appreciation at the soldier’s ability to remain neutral. Because he wasn’t a soldier. He wasn’t equipped to handle these types of situations. Suddenly the smell of blood was overwhelming, hitting his nostrils with fierce force, and the tremors from Peter’s body seemed too strong, too violent for his small frame.

Tony didn’t know what else to say besides, “Oh shit.”

His hand stayed firm on the cup of Peter’s neck, if not increasing in grip, while his other palm fell from the damp and cold forehead.

Peter’s breathing had turned into struggled wheezing. ‘I’m...‘m sorry...I –”

“Shut up,” Tony snapped.
The words came out much harsher than he had intended, but he wasn’t in control of his emotions anymore. Panic drove the wheel behind his actions, and a shooting pain suddenly ran up his left arm at the terrifying realization of the situation.

This wasn’t how it was supposed to happen. He was supposed to find Peter, safe. Take him home, safe. Tuck him away, safe.

Tony whipped back around, gripping the kid’s shoulders. He patted him down, urgently trying to find a hatch or switch or *something* that would release the restraints.

In his fit of desperation, his hands touching everything, fumbling everywhere, he managed to graze across Peter’s side.

Peter gasped and let out a jarring scream. It sent shock-waves through Tony, his hands flying back, his eyes wide with shock. He swallowed, unable to form a response, his apology forgotten in the slew of weak cries that followed.

Peter’s head smacked against the wall, steel echoing at the action. His legs writhed between Tony and Steve in what seemed to be a feeble attempt in curling up on himself. His eyes shut tightly, his bottom lip quivering along with the Adam’s apple in his throat.

Tony’s heart broke in a way that it never had before. There was something indisputably sickening about hearing the kid cry out like that, a sound he’d never, ever forget.

Steve moved closer, breaking his stunned silence.

“I can’t get these bands off him. I’ve been trying, they won’t come loose.” He tugged at the metal with a strained grunt. “I’m thinking it’s Vibranium. I might be able to tear it away with the wall, but I’m worried…”

The unspoken didn’t need to be said. Steve was clearly worried about doing more damage to the boy, and Tony couldn’t blame him. This was far from a situation they were qualified to handle.

Tony looked over to him, his expression hardened, pressing determination sinking into the lines of his face. ‘*Please, Rogers.*’ it said. ‘*I don’t have my tech here. I’m just a man in a can. I need help — he needs help.*’

Steve frowned, seemingly reading his thoughts. “Tony, it’s bad. Front and back, through and through. We need to get him out of here. Now. Where’s Strange?”

Tony closed his eyes, pushing off an anxiety attack by sheer force of will. Of course they would need to rely on the man that abandoned them. It was the story of his life.

“Gone,” he bluntly answered. “So is Barton.”

He heard Steve sigh, no doubt feeling similarly defeated. The one person who got them there and the only person who could get them out was now MIA — with a member of their team. He wouldn’t even mock Steve if he cursed, the situation clearly calling for a few choice words.

Having given up on breaking the metal, Steve dropped back down to his knees. “Nat and Wanda are here somewhere, they just —”

“It’s Adamantium,” Tony interrupted. “It’s — it’s an experimental metal. You won’t be able to break it.”
Steve furrowed his brows. “How do you —”

Peter shook hard enough that Tony had to physically hold him, his hands stilling his shoulders as a wave of tremors brought on fresh cries.

“...ple...ple-ase, h’lp...help me, pl —”

“I’m going to,” Tony said with a sharp intensity. “I’m right here, Pete. I’m not leaving you, I promise.”

As quickly as he spoke to Peter, he turned back to Steve. “I came across files OsCorp left behind. It’s a whole new element, the bastard child of Vibranium, like some generic version. Strong as hell.”

Steve only seemed more upset by the news. An exasperated sigh slumped his shoulders, and he stood from the ground, the flashlight on his helmet sweeping the small room they were in. His hands went to his hips as he searched for something, anything that could help them.

“There’s got to be a way to get it off,” he mumbled.

Watching him, Tony had never been more thankful for the star-spangled-man-with-a-plan. His own ability to focus was stripped the longer they sat idle, his concentration floating away like the pool of blood below him that rippled with each shuddering breath Peter managed.

Rogers would get them out of this holy mess of trouble they were in. He had to, God he had to because they had survived much bigger fights than this. They weren’t the Avengers if they couldn’t rescue one damn kid.

Steve wasn’t quiet as he rummaged through the few belongings in the room. Over the clattering of his search, Peter heaved in a shaky breath of air and released it in hard, laborious sob.

“Ple–pl–ease. I–d’nt...I don’t–want–...I d’n’t wanna–die...”

Christ. The kid was fifteen and begging for his life. Tony wasn’t going to pretend that he wouldn’t need a lifetime of therapy to deal with that.

With his hands gripping his shoulders, he dug his fingers deep into the material of Peter’s suit, forcing the kid to look his way. His eyes, usually so bright with laughter and innocent happiness, were wide and dull with terror.

“You’re not. You hear me?” Tony insisted. “We’re getting you the hell out of here — alive. You’re going to be fine, kiddo.” The hand on his shoulder moved down to the floor, interlocking his fingers with Peter’s. Even with broken armor sealed around his hand, he could feel the blood soak around his exposed knuckles and fingers.

‘Fuck...this is bad. This is bad this is bad –

How do I fix this?’

Tony’s jaw tightened, watching as Peter’s forehead creased, his eyes wide, screaming for help. The pain that spread across his face looked wrong — it didn’t belong on him. It was an expression reserved for people deserving of it. Peter deserved none of this.
Tony grimaced. He needed to find control. Even if it was fake, even if he put on a show, there needed to be some semblance of order in the chaos. Otherwise, they wouldn’t get out of this alive. For Peter’s sake, he needed to get his shit together.

“Look at me.” Tony used his free hand to grab Peter’s chin gently. “Hey, focus up. Eyes on me. You’re going to be fine.”

Peter stared back at him. The unyielding loyalty he had consumed his brown eyes, a childlike faith in not only the superhero but also the man behind the mask. Even through the bloodshot redness and tears dripping from his lashes, it was there. Even past the fear that surely crippled him, because it was close to crippling Tony and he wasn’t even the one gravely injured, the trust was there. He trusted Tony to get him out of here.

And damn it to all, Tony wouldn’t let him down.

“See that wall over there?” Steve spoke up, getting his attention. “Chunks are missing, same height as where Peter is right now. I think he had the same idea as me, ripped himself away from the wall. I’m just going to have —”

Tony could have smacked himself. “Jesus — your shield. Use your shield.”

Steve shook his head. “You said —”

“It hasn’t been tested against Vibranium,” Tony quickly explained, internally kicking himself for not remembering sooner. “Wakanda was never stupid enough to lend Oscorp the Vibranium for their testing. In theory, it should —”

Steve had already whipped his shield away from his back.

“Protect his head,” he instructed.

As Steve latched his shield onto his arm, Tony inched closer to Peter, gathering his head and smothering it to his chest.

“Come here, Pete.” He forced his voice to remain calm, pulling Peter’s head as far away from his left shoulder as he could. “Come ‘ere.”

Steve held his arm back. Shield high in the air, he hesitated for one brief second, and then went in for collision. The first hit against the metal straps was loud enough to startle even Tony. It reverberated off Steve’s shield with a force that could have made his eardrums burst open.

Peter gasped, his body shuddering at the impact and Tony winced as muscles contracted underneath his grasp. He ran his hand along the back of Peter’s head, fingers carding through his hair in hopes that it provided him even the tiniest bit of comfort.

“It’s working,” Steve curtly said, throwing his shield against the metal for the second time. The sound was less boisterous, and the third hit resulted in a CRACK that Tony had never been more relieved to hear.

The metal fell to the floor. Without restraints on the left side of his body, Peter’s weight fell into Tony’s chest. He had to maneuver carefully to the other side, adjusting positions without causing him any more pain. They worked seamlessly once he was in place, again smothering Peter’s head tightly to his chest.

This time, the first hit caused Peter to yelp, a shrill cry merging with the sound of breaking metal.
The ache in Tony’s chest deepened. “Shh, shh, you’re doing great, Spider-man. We’re almost there, you’re doing great.”

Once Steve had broken both metal straps, Peter fell completely forward into Tony. It was as if someone had cut all his strings. While ecstatic to have him free of the Adamantium, their fight wasn’t over yet. Hell, it was only beginning.

Tony hurriedly pressed Peter back against the wall. He allowed the kid to lean slightly into him as he rushed to remove the web-shooters from his own wrist, mildly impressed at his never dwindling multitasking skills.

“See? You’re a free man already.” Tony hoped that Peter’s blood loss induced shock would keep him from noticing how poorly his attempts at reassurance were. He gripped Peter’s wrist firmly, trying not to notice how limp they sat in his hands as he strapped on the mechanical web-shooters. “Bet you missed these, huh buddy.”

Steve was already on their other side, taking Peter’s arm when Tony was done with him.

“I’ve got his left. On my mark,” Steve instructed, carefully wrapping Peter’s arm around his shoulder and gripping it tightly. “One, two —”

A ragged, ear-splitting scream tore from Peter’s throat.

‘Three’ was never heard when both Tony and Steve lifted him off the ground, and Tony very nearly leapt out of his skin when his pained yell hit his ears. Peter cried out, gasped for air and cried again, his voice raw and hoarse.

Tony’s stomach soared into his throat, only to come crashing down when the anguished scream choked off into abrupt silence.

His knees buckled under the sudden weight. Peter crumbled like a rag doll, out cold.

“Shitshitshit,” Tony cursed. “You gotta carry him, Cap. We don’t have time for this.”

Steve grunted as Tony handed him off, squatting low to run his arm under Peter’s knees and lift him up. While on a normal occurrence it’d be faster and easier to fireman carry his teammates to safety, Peter’s condition wouldn’t allow for such a jarring move. Tony knew that Steve had experience in carrying heavier weight for longer distances. He trusted him with the kid.

That was another thought he’d deal with later.

With Peter in his arms, legs dangling over his forearm and head resting in the crock of his neck, they took off.

Tony stayed at his side, their pace a fast jog down the hallways. “Where are we going?”

“Central point,” Steve answered. “What happened to Doctor Strange and Clint?”

“Magic and more magic,” Tony responded. “Romanoff and Maximoff?”

“Same,” Steve mumbled. “If we can find Strange, you evacuate to the compound with Peter. I’ll fall back to retrieve the others.”

They quickly took a sharp corner, now in an area that Tony had never seen before. They hurried down parts of the base that clearly weren’t within his perimeter, halls that he had never seen before
throwing him for a loop.

They passed by large, ceiling to floor glass windows that showcased the ocean from outside. It was like freaking Seaworld, of all things. The sight both fascinated him and caused nauseating alarm to grow in his gut.

He realized now more then ever that if they didn’t find Strange, they were screwed. There was no way they were escaping this far down into the sea. Decompression sickness would kill them before they even got to the surface. Tony gave a fleeting glance to Peter, watching as blood trailed behind them. The kid’s blood.

They could sit around all day long and wait for Strange, but Peter didn’t have that time. And the damn Sorcerer wasn’t here to know that.

Tony had no problem admitting that this really, really wasn’t looking good for them.

Halfway down the aquarium-like hallway and Tony’s forehead creased with concentration. He noticed that between his heavy breathing and Peter’s occasional moans, there was a persistent beeping echoing off the steel walls.

He stopped, grabbing Steve’s arm so he would do the same.

“Do you hear that?”

Steve paused. A beat passed as he listened for the sound.

“I don’t –”


“That,” Tony pointed out. “You’re telling me you don’t hear that?”

Peter’s head lolled against Steve’s neck, a stream of groans murmuring from his chest as he came too. Tony reluctantly placed his palm against Peter’s mouth, the loose hold smothering his weak and small whines. Steve held his own breath to hear their surroundings better.


Tony rolled his eyes. “Do you need Barton’s hearing aids now or —”

*Beepbeepbeepbeepbeepbeepbeep* –


Tony’s eyes widened. He darted down the hallway, his legs not carrying him fast enough. Steve was hot on his tail, his boots smacking hard against the floor.

*BeepbeepbeepbeepBEEPBEEPBEEP* —

The explosion shattered their sense of vision, sending them tumbling forward. Tony hit the ground face-first. Steve knocked into the nearest wall and crashed to the floor, immediately laying his body over Peter’s to protect him for any further assaults.

There was no debris, no shrapnel and no fire to be concerned over. The bomb exploded with a shock wave, leaving them both rattled and confused. Steve looked over his shoulder, eyes darting wildly for the source.
Tony flipped onto his back and scrambled to his knees. “What the fu—”

“Shhh!” Steve hissed, still hovering over Peter’s still form.

Tony could hear it. The sound of glass splintered around them. It started small, beats apart, until each crack got closer, closer, closer — Kreak — KREak — KREEAK.

“Down the hall,” Steve gasped, struggling to pick Peter up. “Go, go — NOW!”

By the time they both took off, the sound was thunderous, booming all around them. Glass fractured from the blast, spider cracks broken, the integrity now unstable to the pressures of the ocean.

Steve held Peter tightly to his chest as he and Tony ran, all other thought disregarded, safety slipping through their fingers by the second. He knew that down the hallway, doors sealed off one section of the base to the other. If they didn’t close off this section, they were —

One loud, violent shatter and water came gusting through, knocking them both off their feet.

Tony was thrown into shock by the sheer coldness of the water. It was sharp, feeling as if it the icy temperature was cutting through his skin, into his bones. That was with his suit on. Which meant someone without that type of protection, someone openly exposed to the dangers of the sea water, someone like Peter –

It became his only thought. ‘Peter. PeterPeterPeter – get to Peter!’

“Pet –” He choked on oncoming water. “Peter!”

The gust from the broken glass hit them like a fire-hose, stripping them of their balance and sweeping them away. Tony kicked and clawed desperately to regain his footing. Water closed in around him, surging, roiling, a never-ending flow from the ocean entering from broken windows. It wouldn’t stop. The base would flood before it would stop, that was simple physics.

The first time he found space free of the erupting flood, he gasped for air. It was like inhaling razors, the cold freezing his lungs. Tony clung tightly to the corner, the steel wall the only thing keeping him from being swept away. A cascading stream hit him face first, and he unintentionally took in a lungful of frigid liquid.

Tony held his arm out in front of his face, blocking off the torrent of water that assaulted him. Sea-life, sulfur, bacteria – god it smelt horrible.

“Steve–!” He coughed and sputtered, gripping the corner tighter. “Rogers!”

He finally found a spot away from it all, allowing him room to breathe. The water pooled around him, quickly filling the hallway with contents of the ocean.

Steve seemed to be having better luck at fighting the onslaught of water. His head popped over, his body twisting in all directions with rising panic.

“Tony, I lost him!” he called out. “I – I, damn it, I can’t –”

Shit.

A fierce determination clawed at him. Tony took a deep breath and plunged forward. He went with the current, as chaotic as it was. His eyes burned underneath the salty water. It was too dark and
murky to see clearly. When he broke away, finding that pocket of air, the water had risen dramatically, inching closer to his elbows.

“Peter!” Tony shouted, hands cupped around his mouth. “Peter, answer me!”

Steve dragged his feet through the water, one leg at a time to reach him, cantering through the mess. Breathing deeply, raggedly, he grabbed Tony’s arm, frantic and furious at himself.

“Tony, we have to —!”

No. That wasn’t happening.

“Peter!” Desperation quaked in his voice. “C’mon kid, you need to answer me!”

They weren’t leaving without him. Not now, not that they found him, not that Tony had him back. He refused to leave now that they were so close to safety.

The only sound was the flooding water and his rapid heartbeat. He looked around, his own legs dragging through the water, ignoring how high it was getting, too high, high enough that they’d drown in minutes, possibly seconds if they didn’t —

*THWIP!*

Tony froze.

*THWIP!*

His head shot over to Steve, who was looking right back at him. An unspoken question of ‘*did you hear that too?’* echoed between them.

*THWIP! THWIP!THWIP!...THWIP!*

Just like that, the roaring water stopped. It bounced around them, rocking waves that threatened their balance and soaked them up to their hips. But the water level didn’t rise any further. They both spun to the broken window, no longer an open space pouring in the ocean.

Tony was shocked to see the hole now covered with white webbing.

“I’ll be damned.” He gaped. “I knew those web-shooters would come in handy.”

Ocean water dripped down from his hair, his body soaked to the core. The metal of magnetic nanites burned his skin, his body feeling as if it were surrounded in a suit of ice. He was pretty sure seaweed coated his arms and the smell, the *awful* acrid smell invaded his every sense.

So he didn’t notice the foreign liquid that dripped from above. Not until Steve pointed it out.
“Stark.” Steve’s voice was pinched and worried, his eyes reaching up to the ceiling.

Tony furrowed his brows and wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. Looking above, he forced himself to take a step back as drop after drop, blood dripped down below.

“Jesus Christ, kid.”

Peter clung to the ceiling, his one arm stretched out and shaking, hard, with two fingers pressed down on the center of his palm. His other arm and soles of both feet stuck to the steel ceiling. Tony swallowed away the terror that grew inside of him, watching as Peter dripped not only water but thick, red drops of blood. Each hit down below with a resounding ping.

Ping. Ping. Ping. The kid was trembling, shivering with enough exertion that only adrenaline could produce.

Tony gulped. “Good job, Pete, you just saved our asses. Now, get down here.”

The ceilings weren’t that high, but without his boosters, Tony wouldn’t be able to grab him. He reached up, desperate to get a hold of the kid, fingers stopping a few feet too short of his destination.

“I...I don’t...how’d I...” Peter’s words were slow and slurred. His eyes twitched, flickering up and down as he so obviously fought off unconsciousness. To Tony’s horror, they were slowly rolling to the back of his head, each flicker showing more whites than pupil.

‘Shit. He’s losing it.’ A quick glance to Steve told him they were thinking the same thing. An even quicker glance at the hole in the window told him they didn’t have much time. Even with the webbing reinforced, it wouldn’t have the strength to hold all the ocean’s waters. They needed to move — fast.

“Come on, kid.” Tony clapped his hands together. “It’s time to go!”

A mounting fear cut through him at the sound of webbing being ripped away, one strand at a time. It sounded like fabric being torn apart, until a leak sprung with such force that a harsh torrent of water came pouring in.

Peter looked around, the confusion on his face evident. “I...wha — Mr. Stark?”

He seemed to cling to the ceiling with more force, almost as if he was unaware of his current position. The remaining webbing behind them bubbled outward, ready to burst.

“Pete, I can’t reach any further and you can’t stay there!” Tony shouted, holding his arm out higher, standing on the very tips of his toes. “You have to let go, I’m going to catch you — I promise!”

Either the kid had complete faith in him, or he had lost the battle of staying conscious. Tony had a sickening feeling that it was the latter. He watched Peter lose his grip in slow motion, slipping away from the ceiling one limb at a time. First his feet, then the one palm, and then his entire body dropped down.

All one-hundred-fifty pounds of him landed in Tony’s arms at once.

His knees buckled under the pressure and for a moment Peter dipped into the water below them. Tony was quick to bring him back up, cradling him close to his chest, struggling to keep them both afloat. His head hung limply over his wrist and Tony pushed back the sopping wet hair away from
“Pete? You with me, kid?” No response. “Peter, hey, come on — open your eyes!”

Across the hallway, Steve grunted under the strain of opening the nearest door. He yanked and pulled, fighting against the strength of the water. As one arm managed to keep the door open and he brought his leg high to the wall, the rushing water soaring out beneath him. It only took seconds for the water level to spread out across one hallway to the other.

Unfortunately for Tony, that took away the buoyancy helping him carry Peter. The kid may have appeared scrawny, but he was all lean muscle that Tony just wasn’t spry enough anymore to handle, especially with a heavy suit of magnets already dragging him down.

He trudged through the ankle-deep water with a grunt. “Help me here, Cap.”

Steve was already at his side. “I got him, go—go—I got ‘em.”

He was quick to take Peter back, the boy blissfully unaware of the world around him. Steve took comfort in that; he unfortunately didn’t have the time to be gentle anymore, especially as he closed the door behind them. His back slammed it shut with force.

With the area blocked off, most flooding waters stayed on the other side of the base. Streams trickled through the cracks of the door, more reminiscent to a running shower-head than a powerful jet hose. Tony finally let himself take a breath, trying to comprehend what the hell just happened.

He couldn’t.

“What the living hell was that about!?” Tony exclaimed.

Steve huffed, “I gotta be honest, Stark, I don’t want to stick around to find out.”

Tony scoffed — that was the understatement of the year. He couldn’t afford sparing glances at Peter anymore. They were practically running full sprint down the halls now, bounding with each turn, moving fast because ‘damn it, we don’t have time.’

At this point, it was only a matter of minutes until the base sunk to the bottom of the ocean. They would have already been dead if it weren’t for the added strength he put into the spider webbing, and he savored that small feat.

They were running through halls that lead to doors Steve carelessly ripped open with his one free arm, charging through with haste. Tony didn’t realize they had gone this far into the base. Either that or the urgency to get Peter to safety was making every step seem like miles. His mind only had one thought — move, move, move!

The clank of metal stopped them both. Tony looked down. A ball rolled down the hallway and hit the tip of his boot. Both Steve’s flashlight and his own shinned down below on it.

Tony couldn’t stop himself from asking out loud, “Is that a goddamn pumpkin?”

It began to blink — orange, green, orange, green — and beep persistently — BeepbeepBEEPBEEPBEEP –

Steve’s eyes widened, and he backed away. “Tony...”

Tony swooped down and picked up the bomb. In a seamless motion, he tossed it in the air, grabbed
Cap’s shield off from his back and —

— SMACK, hit it across the hall like a baseball.

Another shock wave blew through them. Steve twisted, crouching low to take the brunt of the force while protecting Peter. Tony flew back and onto the ground, rolling relentlessly into a steel wall.

The blast left his ears ringing. Tony winced, distantly wishing he hadn’t decided to ditch his Iron Man helmet after all.

As he stumbled to his feet, he realized that in hindsight it would have been smarter to smother the bomb under Cap’s Vibranium shield. Not his best move – his adrenaline surged focus had just caused another explosion that compromised the stability of the base. The problem with Iron Man was that he always went with his gut instincts — instincts that usually involved explosions.

Tony was painfully aware that this was not a place for explosions.

As if on cue with his thoughts, the thundering sound of breaking glass surrounded them. Tony looked down the hall in panic, watching one long line spread down the entire window, splintering off into three, four, ten, twenty cracks, multiplying by the second.

He scrambled to his feet, rushing over to where Steve crouched hovering over Peter.

“We gotta move Cap, let’s go!” Tony shouted, tugging at his arm.

Even with Peter’s added weight, Steve managed to rise to his feet with quick precision. He led the way, taking two sharp left turns before they encountered an open door. The water that submerged their feet shinned off the flickering lights illuminating the corridor. It rushed around them at its own pace, surging in from the broken windows far behind them, from areas they had long since abandoned.

“Close it, quick!” Steve shouted, his feet wading through water.

Tony pushed both hands against the heavy door and slammed it shut. He spun around, ready to take off when —

Metal pressed heavily on his forehead, the nozzle of a pistol cold against his skin. He had to squint his eyes as hot, bright sparks of nanites fired from Dmitri’s face, flaring with the blood that ran in cascades down his forehead.

Tony froze, stunned, completely motionless. Dmitri’s heavy, labored breathing was nails on a chalkboard to his ears. Swallowing heavily, he glanced to his left, only moving his eyes, leaving his neck to stay very, very still. He watched as Steve slowly and carefully began setting Peter down, leaning him against the nearest wall.

‘Good,’ Tony thought. ‘Get ready for a fight.’

The gun pressed harder, and Dmitri unlatched the safety.

“Wow,” Tony panted for breath. “You just don’t die, do you?”

With Peter leaning against the wall, Steve stayed low to the ground. He inched closer, one step at a time until finally, he made a leap to charge forward.

Dmitri had the gun aimed in his direction before his foot had even lifted off the ground.
A bullet fired from his pistol.

Steve froze.

The smell of thick gunpowder burned in the air. Tony shot his head over in the direction, eyes wide at the hole that left a dent in the steel wall. The steel wall that Peter leaned against, only meters from his head, way too close to his kid for comfort.

“I would not move if I were you, Captain,” Dmitri threatened, gun held high. “It is not you I will shoot.”

Steve did the one thing that Tony didn’t expect to witness. He held his hands high, surrendering. He also backed up into the wall, purposefully blocking Dmitri’s aim of Peter’s unconscious body.

“Leave him out of this, Dmitri. He did nothing to you,” Steve retorted.

A turquoise glow from the glass windows combined with the flickering lights gave way to see the pure carnage done to Dmitri’s face. Skin dangled in chunks from open wounds, the white of bone to his jaw glistening underneath the poorly powered lights. Sparks of nanites lit up in random, chaotic bursts, showcasing one eye swollen shut, the other bulging with fury. There was still a wedge of metal lodged in his forehead from the broken chameleon helmet.

He sneered, blood coating his teeth. “Another word from you, I shoot him.”

The pistol was aimed directly at Peter. Tony had full confidence that Dmitri wouldn’t hesitate to fire. It stripped him of his ability to fight, the concept of Peter’s head shot open, brains splattered against the wall — the son of a bitch wanted him to break, and he knew what would do the trick.

Tony furrowed his brows, realizing that if they didn’t intervene, the man might very well get his way.

Steve stood tall in front of Peter, arms spread wide as if it would help his defense. Silently, Tony had never been more appreciative in his entire life.

The three men stood at a deadlock, Tony and Dmitri straight across from each other, Steve off to the side and near the corridor’s wall. All the while water soared in from the open spaces of the doorway, pooling from the bottom at an alarming rate.

Tony’s lips pressed into a thin line. “It’s over, Dmitri! There’s no version of this where you come out on top.”

Dmitri jerked his head over to Tony, his eyes wide, radiating a fiery, hungry insanity.

“Oh right about that you are, Stark,” he said, stopping to spit a mouthful of blood and what looked to be a loose tooth into the water below. “You see, unlike you — unlike pathetic weak team you have, I embrace change. I will not be on top, no. That is change I accept. But I will take you to bottom with me.”

Tony heard the beeping before he saw the device. The sound had become so ingrained in his head that he was sure it would haunt his nightmares for the remainder of his life. Right along with Peter’s screams.

Dmitri whipped the pumpkin bomb from behind his back, pressing onto the top and activating it.

Steve lunged forward. “Dmitri, no —!”
He tossed it across the hallway, the metal ball landing in the water with a *plop*.

Within seconds a shock wave tore through them all. Even feet away, it was strong enough to send all men tumbling back.

Tony hit the ground and skidded backward, clawing through ankle deep water to come to a stop. Glass cracked, splintered, and miraculously stopped.

The moment his body stopped rolling, he shot his head over to Peter. The kid sagged onto his side, his head dangerously close to going underwater. Steve laid across from him, dazed, holding his temple as blood trickled down from a newly acquired head wound.

The sight was enough to get his legs underneath him.

“You throw another bomb at me,” Tony threatened, “and I’m going to lose it.”

His grit his teeth together, his jaw aching under the pressure and yet not doing nearly enough to distract him from his bloodcurdling rage. Dmitri slowly rose from the floor, one leg at a time. He spit again, a disgusting stream of thick, crimson liquid trailing down his chin.

Tony clenched his fists tighter; Dmitri growled.

This was ending.

Now.

Tony attacked him with a shriek of straining metal. He charged forward, one soaring punch landing directly in his jaw. It started a slew of rushed, rapid hits. His strikes came at every angle, throwing his fists and swinging his legs to hit anything, any contact he could get.

Face, knee, jaw, stomach — Tony punched, his elbows jabbed, his legs kicked — each assault sending Dmitri stumbling back. The man was clearly weakened, far from the skilled assassin he had encountered earlier. A surge of confidence energized him, every *thud* from his punches telling him he was stronger, every *crack* from his kicks igniting his determination.

He hadn’t realized he was pushing Dmitri straight towards Peter. The thought never occurred to him, not until the man promptly swung his arm over that direction, the gun aimed directly at the floor, straight at Peter’s head.

Tony froze. His next hit never landed. His fist stayed high in the air, trembling.

“Ah-ah-ah...” Dmitri taunted, his finger wrapped around the trigger, tapping it, teasing it.

Tony wished he could have dismissed the gun as quickly as Iron Man always had. It wasn’t possible here. Not without his tech. Not with Peter so openly vulnerable.

He wouldn’t bring home a corpse. He absolutely refused.

Dmitri swung the pistol back in his direction, the metal pressing firmly against his temple once
more. Tony barely had time to process the quick action. This time, tension seemed to drain from his body, his shoulders slumping in defeat.

He opened his mouth to speak, only for the words to fall flat on his lips. He wasn’t sure what he was going to say. He wasn’t sure why he wasn’t moving. Steve stood across from him, rooted in his position and swaying slightly, looking at Tony as if to say ‘you need to do something, Stark!’

But he couldn’t. Steve didn’t dare to throw his shield or charge with an attack, and Tony kept his hands curled into tight fists at his side. One stupid action from either of them meant death. His only focus was Peter, the boy unable to protect himself. And they both were failing at protecting him.

“Move and I lodge bullet in your brain.” Dmitri casually turned the gun around, eyeing it conspicuously. “I have enough ammo left to shoot you, Captain, and mal’chik.”

Tony closed his eyes. If it were up to him, he’d take the gun and shoot all the bullets at himself. He’d trade his life in a heartbeat for Peter’s. Something told him Dmitri knew that. He knew Dmitri would shoot all the remaining bullets at Peter before even considering letting him go. It was a torture worse than death.

With resignation, Tony looked over his shoulder and at the wall. The water was rising fast, and Peter was so slumped, so slack that it wouldn’t take much for him to go under. He had enough experience with drowning to know that it wasn’t the peaceful end everyone made it out to be.

Yet their options weren’t looking the greatest.

He closed his eyes, briefly wondering if it would be best to just...let it happen. The kid already had a gaping hole in his body. Bile tickled the back of his throat at the reminder of how much blood Peter had been sitting in, how much blood was smeared across the floor, how their chances at survival dipped drastically before the rescue even began.

The thought made him dizzy. After all this, maybe drowning was the most merciful way he could go.

Dmitri’s rank breath spread across his face. “The invincible Iron Man...nothing but mask to hide egotistical, weak Tony Stark.”

Tony’s jaw unhinged. His defeat was immediately overturned by a scorching fuel of anger.

“Really!” Tony exclaimed. “You’re going to give me shit about wearing a mask?!”

Dmitri pressed the muzzle of the gun harder into his temple. “Tell me, do you understand why I will win here?”

Tony never had a chance to respond. Dmitri dipped low, his free hand latching around Peter’s neck. With one clean sweep, he pulled him high up and straight out of the water, dangling him like a limp rag doll in the air.

Steve and Tony both dove forward to stop him. The gun that once aimed at Tony switched to Peter, the nozzle hidden around tufts of soaking wet brown hair.

It was Steve who had to stop Tony from moving any further, yanking his arm back, the soldier knowing the gun was cocked and ready to go.

Tony swore he’d be sick watching Dmitri squeeze his grip around Peter’s throat, flailing, livid and frightened all at the same time.
Peter’s feet kicked uselessly in the water, splashing around in a panic, his eyes now wide open and staring down at Dmitri in terror. He instinctively fought to unlatch the grip. His fingers dug into Dmitri’s hand, nails scratching, fist pounding at his arms, fighting in any way that he could to free himself.

“Let him go,” Tony demanded, his words simmering with venom, his arm twitching in Steve’s hold.

Dmitri sneered. “You are sad man, Stark. Everyone before me, everyone you faced up til now, they do not come close to power I have over you,” he spat, his knuckles visibly straining as he clenched Peter’s throat. “You have never truly faced your enemies. You throw punches at them, using battle suit you hide in — it does dirty work for you. If you have not killed them, you have them thrown away in prison cell where they can not bother you anymore. You have never conquered your enemy, you have **run** from them.”

Dmitri lifted Peter higher with each word spoken, but to Tony’s horror, Peter didn’t scream. He couldn’t, a guttural choking, gasping noise the only thing he could manage. His fingers clawed at the grip around his neck, his once colorless and ashen face now darkening under the swell of red and purple that pooled to his cheeks.

A growl rumbled deep in Tony’s chest.

“This…this is real face of your enemy,” Dmitri said, shaking Peter in the air. “Guilt. Fear. Regret. Emotion. **Love**. Heart that beats inside of you will be your greatest downfall, and you will not be able to do anything about it. You can not outrun this, Stark! You can not — **DER’MO!**”

A foot collided in Dmitri’s midsection. Peter kicked him — hard — between the legs. They both dropped to the floor, Peter much less graceful once free of the stranglehold.

“Oh!” Tony exclaimed.

He couldn’t help himself. Watching Dmitri stumble back, doubled over cursing in Russian — it was like watching Pepper attack Killian all over again. He watched in pure astonishment as Peter, weak and injured, lunged at Dmitri.

“Will you...” Peter heaved and panted, “shut up!”

His gasps for air were agonized, labored and hoarse but Tony watched in disbelief as he staggered forward. With all the strength Peter could possibly have, he threw a punch that took them all by surprise.

Dmitri held his face in pain, sluggishly looking up only to be attacked again. The way he failed to dodge any of Peter’s blows had Tony believing the man was overwhelming stunned at the kid’s sudden surge of adrenaline. God knows he was. The shock had shattered his focus, his jaw to the floor.

Peter was weaker than his preternaturally strong self. It was evident in each punch he threw, each hit slow, inept and flimsy, his dodges sloppy and his kicks barely hitting past knee level. But something was fuming off of him, a fury Tony had never seen from him before.

“Gah-ah!” Peter cried, slamming a clenched fist against Dmitri’s forehead.

At that moment, Tony had never felt so much pride swell up in his heart, very nearly overtaking the ruthless stress of the situation. If Peter was going out, he was going out with a fight.
That was the kid he recruited for Berlin. That was his Spiderling.

Peter had the upper hand. Dmitri was weakened, both Tony and Steve noticed that his moves weren’t as sharp, weren’t as cut-fast as before. Tony had taken him down a couple pegs, possibly evening out the playing field. But Peter was still injured. And with each punch he threw, he was losing strength.

Dmitri struggled. But Peter struggled just as hard. They both were exerting themselves, and it was just a matter of time until one of them broke.

Steve jumped in. He rushed forward, his arms throwing multiple punches, moving quick, smooth, gliding like a dancer — deadly and fast. And powerful.

He ripped his shield off his back, tossing it like a Frisbee in the air, satisfied when it collided with Dmitri’s hip. Dmitri stumbled forward into Peter, who pushed him off with a weak punch to his jaw.

Tony saw an opportunity and latched onto it. Dmitri held his head, dazed, and Tony grabbed his arm with force. In his grip, he kneed him in the stomach — once, twice, three times — pushing them both back up against a wall. Even then, he didn’t let up. He grabbed Dmitri’s head, pulling it low and kneeing him in the chin, over and over and over again.

Dmitri yanked the person closest to his side — Peter — and swung him around. Tony instinctively let go to catch him, his feet tripping over themselves, nearly tumbling to the floor. As he did, Dmitri’s steel-toed combat boots gave one solid kick to Peter’s leg.

POP.

A sickening, horrifying crack erupted that Tony was close enough to practically feel. Dmitri’s foot collided with Peter’s lower leg, the sound of bone breaking echoing the hallway. Even Steve came to a startling halt.

Peter screamed.

He cried out, the agonizing shout eating away at Tony’s nerves. His leg completely gave out under him, and Tony struggled to hold him up, his body weight threatening to make them both fall to the floor. Peter’s fingers were digging into his shoulders, pushing the magnetic nanites into his skin, one long cry rolling off the steel walls.

Tony’s only focus was to cradle Peter closely. Ultimately it was the distraction that cost him. Dmitri kicked, punched and pushed Tony aside, grabbing Peter and forcing him into his grasp.

Tony stumbled back near Steve, who caught him and stilled his balance. Dmitri held both Peter’s arms outward. As Steve and Tony went to attack, his fingers pressed down on the web-shooters that were attached to the kid’s wrists.

Peter’s right hand released a strand of webbing that stuck to Steve and his left to Tony.

The webbing struck his body with surprising force, the impact momentarily stealing his breath away. Tony looked down in shock. His entire torso was latched to the wall, covered in the sticky, white fluid. A quick, horrified glance to his right showed him that Steve’s arm was encased the same way.

His hands grazed over his stomach, but he didn’t pull or pry. Steve, on the other hand, was already trying to yank himself free of the webbing that restrained him. The same reinforced tensile strength
webbing he had been grateful for not even five minutes ago.

Tony spewed out a million different colorful words.

Gripping both Peter’s hands, Dmitri squeezed, clenching down onto the limbs as if they were stress balls. A bone-cracking CRUNCH accompanied the sound of metal breaking, his web-shooters broken along with his wrists.

“Stop!” Tony shouted, frantically beginning to dig and peel away at the webbing. “Goddammit, STOP!”

Peter had lost all strength to cry out. He sagged to the ground, his mouth open wide, his jaw unhinged with no sound escaping his blistering sore throat. As he fell, Dmitri let go of his hands and placed one heavy boot on his chest, forcefully pinning him to the ground. Peter’s head made a splash as it hit the water.

Tony couldn’t move. He couldn’t help, he couldn’t – goddammit, pulling at the webbing fluid was like pulling dried cement and Steve grunted and roared, his super soldier strength failing to rip it away.

This wasn’t happening. This wasn’t happening, he couldn’t let this happen, he needed to do something!

Dmitri chuckled, the laugh coarse like sandpaper, cold-blooded and sadistic.

“How does it feel, Stark? To have everything you worked so hard for ripped away, right from under you?” Dmitri pressed down harder as Peter squirmed and thrashed beneath him. “I will kill boy and then I will kill you, and world won’t even know what happened here.”

Tony released a desperate cry of frustration.

“Dmitri, you maniac — let him go!” he roared.

Tony and Steve watched, unable to help as Peter gripped Dmitri’s leg, clawing at his pants, the foot pressing down harder against his chest. Peter struggled to keep his head out of the water, spurting and spitting mouthfuls of the salty sea contents, the current from broken windows pouring through closed doors.

The harder the foot pressed on his chest, the more his air supply was cut off, his breathing once more resorting to gasps and wheezes.

“Dmitri’s not my name,” Dmitri snarled. “You call me...you call me Chameleon.”

Tony’s eyes darted frantically between Peter and Steve. Dmitri was so intensely caught up in restraining Peter that he failed to notice Steve reaching out for his shield. It laid untouched in the water to his left side, close enough that it could be seen, close enough that it could be used. The water glistened over top of it, the large silver star standing out like a coin in a fountain.

Steve had his legs spread wide, his left arm — his free arm — reaching desperately for the shield. His fingers were so close.

Tony bit his lip. ‘Come on Rogers, so fucking close.’

Peter inhaled a constrained, shaking breath. “So...you did...go for...the name...” he choked out.
Tony snapped his head back in front of him, his brows rising high. The damn kid was a fighter if he had ever seen one before.

Dmitri’s eyes burned with spite. “You are at death’s doors, boy. Look around you…nothing about this makes you hero. Stop playing one.”

The very tips of Steve’s fingers were dipping into the ocean water below. Tony could see under the fast blinking lights as his face strained, his jaw clenched, and his eyes shut tight, forcing his body to move in a way it wasn’t naturally meant to move.

Looking back over, on the ground and practically immersed in water, Tony could see Peter shake his head. The water rippled with the action. It soaked over his ears and to his forehead.

“Being...a hero...means helping others...” Peter gasped for air, his voice weak and thin. “...when you have...have the power to...to help them. Even when you...can’t...help yourself. It’s...it’s my...responsibility.”

The last word he spoke came out so choked, so cracked that Tony was sure his lungs had been crushed under his own rib cage.

Dmitri shook his head. “No, mal’chik. It is what will be your death.”

Tony had stopped pulling on the webbing that clung to his torso, horror and fear intermingling into an unspeakable force. He could only watch, helplessly, as Dmitri went in for a final blow.

The leg that stood on Peter’s chest rose high in the air, and just when Tony realized that this was it, that he’d have to watch his failure unravel in front of him, that he’d have to watch Peter die —

“Queens!” Steve shouted. “Catch!”

With a strained yell, Steve tossed his infamous Captain America shield over at Peter’s direction, the polished metal landing in the water directly where it needed to be.

Peter grabbed the shield faster than Dmitri could react.

“Gah-AHHH!” With an anguished cry, he swung up, Vibranium metal hitting the man’s head.

Dmitri failed to recover from the hit. He stumbled back, grumbled, pained animalistic noises replacing the Russian he once cursed. As quickly as he could possibly manage, Peter grabbed onto Dmitri’s shirt, using it to lift himself off from the ground and —

WHAM!

— slammed the shield against Dmitri’s head one last time.

Dmitri fell back and into the water. His body landed with a splash, never to get back up. Seconds went by, soon turning into a solid minute. Peter’s labored breathing and the rushing water around them became the only sound that filled the base.

Peter languidly dropped the shield, his arm hanging loosely and weakly at his side. His body physically moved with each struggled breath he took in.
“I think you got him, kid,” Tony said, finally finding his voice.

Dmitri didn’t move. The water soared in from the cracks of the door, reaching over his face, submerging his unconscious form. No one moved to save him. He was a goner before he had even hit the water.

“Yeah?” Peter muttered, his body leaning forward, his knees going weak. “That’s…that’s about all…I had.”

The ripping of webbing briefly overtook the sound of gushing water. Steve tore away the sticky entrapment with a shout, discarding it into the liquid below and immediately going over to Tony to do the same.

Tony never paid attention as Steve clawed rather painfully into the webbing around his torso. His eyes were locked straight ahead, watching Peter stagger on his feet, wobbling forward. He had his one arm wrapped feebly around his stomach, the other reaching out as if something were near him to steady his balance.

“I...I don’t...” Peter murmured.

“Cap...” Tony warned.

Steve huffed, tearing away at the webbing. “I’m working on it.”

Tony shook his head. “Rogers...”

“I know, I’m getting there!”

“Steve!”

The stress was raw in Tony’s voice, loud and demanding. Steve snapped his head up at record speed, his eyes locking with Tony’s, telling him everything he needed to know. In one fluid motion, he spun around, lurching forward just in time to catch Peter from nose-diving to the ground.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!”

He laid Peter down gently, one knee bent on the floor and the other high up for Peter’s back to rest against. Any lower and he’d be submerged. Steve looked back at Tony, his face stoic and yet still somehow expressing a deep panic and fear.

The fierce exchanged was met with splintering, shattering glass. The windows around them began to crack, rumbling like thunder, already damaged by the bomb’s explosion. Time seemed to slow down with each fracture that rang along, splitting it apart, one crack turning into three that turned into – too many. Too many for Tony to count.

There was one layer of webbing left, hard and cemented against his Iron Man suit that he somehow managed to tear away with a strength he was sure he’d never have again. Two giant steps and he was at Steve’s side, taking Peter’s limp form from him.

“Get that door open,” Tony told him. “Go, now!”

Steve didn’t need to be told twice. He stood up, attached his shield to his arm and waded through the waist-deep water, struggling to meet the other end of the hallway.

“Hey, hey, easy now,” Tony said, his free hand cupping Peter’s cheek. “I got you. Easy, easy...”
Tony kept Peter’s head high and where he could breathe, holding it close to his body. A quick glance behind him showed him that the water level was rising much faster, too fast, and thundering booms and cracks roared around them. The walls screamed in agony, windows from areas they were cut off from giving way to the pressures of the sea. The poorly lit light fixtures dimmed to practically nothing.

It was the light from his chest plate that showed Peter’s eyes, brown pupils sliding in and out of focus.

“Mr...Mr. Stark?” Peter mumbled, his words thick and slurred.


Across the way, Steve grunted and roared as he fought to open the door. The pressures of the water snapped it shut every time he managed, struggling to squeeze his shield between the cracks. He didn’t stop, trying and trying again.

In Tony’s arms, Peter wheezed out a crackly, heartbreaking whine from the back of his throat.

“mr’...’ark...I...I don’t...I dn’t feel so good.”

Tony’s heat plummeted in his chest. He cupped his cheek harder. “You’re okay, you’re alright.”

It was his worse attempt at reassurance yet, mostly for himself, mostly to tell himself that things would be okay. Not even he believed it.

Peter gulped, hard, his throat quivering as a tremor seized his body. Tony felt when his muscles locked with rigid contractions, strong underneath his hands. By the time his body relaxed, his eyes were barely open, distant, far away.

“You stay with us, you got that solider?” Steve yelled over his shoulder. “That’s Captain’s order’s!”

Peter didn’t respond. His chest barely rose, barely lifted, his lungs barely breathing. Steve let out a shout that echoed off the steel walls, pulling at the door with all the strength he had.

The cracking and shattering of glass thundered loudly before a wave of water slashed through, a torrent blasting against them. Tony hugged Peter tightly to his chest, taking the brunt hit of the water as it poured, surged and rushed around them.

“You hear that, Pete?” Tony yelled over the gushing water. “Don’t want to let Cap down — come on Rogers, hurry it up!”

Tony fought hard to drag them both closer to their escape, fighting the chaotic stream of the sea water, a task that ripped at his muscles. By the time he reached the end of the hallway, Steve had managed to keep the door open just wide enough for them to get through, using his shield as leverage between the open space.

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“You hear that, Pete?” Tony yelled over the gushing water. “Don’t want to let Cap down — come on Rogers, hurry it up!”
Tony collapsed with Peter, breathing heavily, fighting to keep them above water level. His back was pressed against the wall, and he had Peter’s back resting against his chest, shielding his face every time water sloshed near them.

“Kid? Come on, Pete. Answer me!” Tony slapped Peter’s cheeks, gentle at first, frantically fast and forceful as time went on. His features were slack, almost relaxed. “Stay with me, buddy. Don’t leave me.”

Steve went to pull the opposite door open, only to be met with raging water. The other side of the base had flooded, and he let the door slam shut ungracefully. He snapped his head back in the direction they had come from, water surging in, already past his calf’s.

They were between flood zones, sandwiched in with no escape. If the rumbling sounds of the building were any sign to go by, the walls were going to give in within minutes. They had run out of options.

His hands reached behind his head, yanking off his helmet only so he could grip his blond hair with frustration.

“We’re trapped,” Steve said.

In front of him, Tony adjusted himself on the floor, shaking Peter’s shoulders, doing anything to wake him up.

“Come on, Peter. Come on, kid!” Tony pressed two fingers firmly against Peter’s neck, searching in multiple spots, his own hands trembling as he did. “His pulse is barely there.”

He didn’t know who he was speaking to and honestly, he really didn’t care. All he knew was that he couldn’t stand to feel the faint, weak thrumming anymore. His hands wrapped tightly around Peter’s chest, gripping him, his own body shaking so hard his teeth chattered. Tony wasn’t sure if it was from the bitterly cold water or the undeniable fear that ate away at his control.

Steve sighed, realization dawning on him. “Tony...”

Tony didn’t respond. He couldn’t. He pulled Peter closer to him, desperate to give the kid what little warmth he had, desperate to give him everything he needed, give him the whole world and the life he deserved.

Desperate for a second chance.

He latched onto Peter tightly, his grip so firm as if someone threatened to take him away. He distantly realized that the threat was very real. ‘This is it.’ he choked back the cry in his throat. ‘This is real, I’m going to lose him.’

He looked up at Steve, who looked back down at him. The solid, remorseful despair in his eyes spoke it all. Tony looked down the hallway at the gushing water, understanding what Steve hadn’t spoken. Something in him seemed to finally snap. It wasn’t an acceptance, no, rather an understanding. That he couldn’t stop what was happening. That they couldn’t stop it.

They weren’t escaping.

They weren’t going home.

Tony smacked his head against the steel wall, his chest shuddering in each breath.
“I’m sorry,” he ruefully said.

He felt it, like a knife in his spine, twisting and sharp.

Time. He had run out of second chances, having abused them time after time like he could buy more at a whim. Even after Afghanistan, even after he tried to right all the wrongs he had caused in his life, there was no undoing the damage. He knew that one day he would have to repent for his sins. He had cheated death too many times, flown a nuke into the sky and still he always walked away, always bought more time until…

Until now.

He had run out of second chances. And like everyone in his life, they suffered for it.

“I’m sorry, Rogers,” Tony said, eyes locked straight at him.

The cold was razor deep, the frigid water stripping him of the nerves that allowed him to feel Peter’s presence. His fingers had gone numb, the stiffness traveled up to his palms, and he clung to the red and blue fabric on Peter’s chest but he couldn’t feel it, he could barely feel it.

So he lowered his head, resting his chin and nose in the tuft of Peter’s hair, clawing at what he still had before it was taken away from him.

Steve adamantly shook his head. “Don’t. We’re getting out of here.”

His promise was empty, bare of any reassurance. The pain in Tony’s chest was so intense he could have sworn his heart was slamming against his rib-cage with every frantic beat that pulsated, yet he could barely feel the kid’s own heart underneath his grasp. His arms wrapped tightly around Peter’s body, desperately clinging to him. He refused to let go.

Tony fought to breathe, the air in the building quickly being replaced by water. “I got you into this mess —”

Steve wasn’t about to give up. “Stark, I’m getting you both home, even if I have to —”

“Will you for once in your life listen to me!?” Tony snapped.

Steve’s expression was as cold as the water that soaked them.

“I did,” he bluntly answered. “In Siberia.”

If Tony had the energy, he would have laughed. He would have scoffed, fought back, prove himself right as always. He didn’t care about having the upper hand anymore. He didn’t care about anything anymore, not now that he…

His throat closed up, his strength all but gone, no longer able to tamp out the emotional fire that set him ablaze. He squeezed Peter harder, mentally chanting pleas to a God he didn’t believe in, anything that would give the boy a second chance.

Steve stood tall, not backing down. “We took Bucky in. We got him help, we moved forward. I listened to you about the Accords, you listened to me, we fought them — together. I listened to you, Tony. If we can make it through that, you better be damn sure we’ll make it through this.”

It was one hell of a speech. Unfortunately for Tony, it meant nothing. He cradled Peter, his nose deep in his wet, brown hair, savoring what was left of the kid’s life, basking in it. Hot liquid leaked
down from his eyes, warm against the freezing cold of his cheeks, tears streaking down one by one.

“You moved on, Rogers. I didn’t,” Tony said, shaking his head. “I couldn’t. I tried. I gave you what you wanted to hear, I gave the team what they wanted to hear, but I never...I never — *christ*. Deep down, I never forgave you.”

His admittance was met only with the sound of gushing water. Tony ached for a reprieve, for an emotional purge that wasn’t coming, the fear, shock, and horror hanging on. An emotional tremor tore through his body, too potent to be contained.

“How could I?” he asked. “You chose to protect Barnes. Time after time you chose to protect him and I didn’t understand how. How could you so relentlessly sacrifice *everything* to protect someone like that?”

Steve was speechless. His blue eyes shined brightly from the light on Tony’s chest plate, his wet hair plastered against his forehead and his face exposed without his helmet. For what seemed to be the first time in their entire friendship, in the whole time they had known each other, Tony looked up at him with raw, un concealed emotion.

“I never understood how...until now,” Tony choked out. “Until Peter.”

The acknowledgment in Steve was almost painful to see, so different, so real that Tony couldn’t look at the sight. For a man raised in a generation of staying tough as nails, never to show emotion, never to show weakness, Steve visibly broke. As if finally, after years of being at each other’s throat he found both relief and remorse in their shared troubles.

Tony knew this day would come. His arms wrapped around Peter’s front and he fought hard to ignore the weak, labored breathing from the kid. He had lost his direction too many times, done too many bad things that he could never fix. He just hated that the consequences affected Peter. If they were lucky — if Peter were lucky, he’d stop breathing before the water got too high.

If Tony had to be honest with himself, he never expected that this was the way he’d go out. In a watery grave.

“I’m sorry,” Tony repeated, his voice cracking, his eyes articulating his anguish. “For failing you both.”

Tears clouded his vision along with the dense fog, and he barely saw anything around him but darkness, rich darkness and rising water sloshing into his torso. He almost didn’t notice when Steve crouched down to his level, his knees hitting the floor with a splash.

He felt the grounding hand on his shoulder, Steve’s touch not enough, not nearly enough to counter the hot tears that slid down his face. Tony was past caring about heroic appearances and apparently so was the soldier.

“You didn’t fail us, Tony,” Steve said, moving his other hand to Peter’s shoulder, a firm grip on both men in front of him.

Tony breathed out a heaving lungful of air, not quite a sigh but not close to the succor of comfort. He was unable to deny that his approaching death felt better with the company of others, teetering on the edge of acceptance. Steve squeezed his shoulder, and he wondered if he felt the same way.

They weren’t crashing a plane into the arctic, they weren’t flying a nuke into space. Looking up at Steve, the light from his chest-plate illuminated between them, Tony decided that if he had to go
out, he was at least glad that he wasn’t alone.

The tiny LED’s begin to flicker, batteries struggling to withstand damage from the water. They dimmed softly, fading out slowly until nothing but blackness enveloped them.

Water sloshed. Splashed. Their breathing was thick, heavy, shuddering in the cold.

And just when Tony closed his eyes, a golden light basked over them. It wasn’t warm, it wasn’t relaxing but wow was it radiant. For a split second, he wondered if another plane of existence really did exist, if this was the light to the end of the tunnel he had finally reached.

“Gentlemen,” Strange said, “this is not the central point.”

Tony’s eyes snapped open. The bright, vivid orange glow of magic sparkled in his pupils.

Steve closed his eyes, his shoulders dropping with released tension, both his hands falling from Tony and Peter.

“Shit.”

The swear word was so foreign coming from Steve’s mouth that with hysterical relief, Tony laughed. The breath of air he hadn’t realized he was holding escaped and he clung to Peter and laughed, the bark an indescribable catatonic joy flooding through him faster than the waters below.

Stephen cocked an eyebrow. “You kiss your mother with that mouth, Captain?”

A sob hitched in Tony’s chest, repressed by the intense need to escape. He pushed past the breakdown and pulled himself up, fumbling hands fighting to wrap themselves tightly underneath Peter’s arms. He dragged them through the water, towards the crackling orange portal — towards their home.

“Get us the hell out of here, Strange,” Tony said.

“Gladly.” Stephen motioned behind him, the light from the compound bright as ever. “Now come on, the rest of your team is waiting for you.”

Stephen stepped aside to let both men pass by. Steve jumped into the portal first while Tony insisted on carrying Peter himself, arms latched underneath his arms as he dragged them through.

The crackling died away, and sparks fizzled in the waters below, sizzling like extinguished firecrackers. With two fingers, Stephen gracefully closed the portal.

The water never stopped rising, but no occupants remained to care.

Chapter End Notes

Well...that was fun.

:-D

The biggest thanks in this entire god-damn world to speakerunfolding for creating this master piece depicting some whump!Peter in the chapter.
AND IT JUST KEEPS GETTING BETTER! Go give gigglewaterart99 all your love, devotion, and spam them endlessly with commissions because this beauty of a 2 page comic panel is BREATHTAKING!
WHAT THE *!@#$@!! ABSO
HELL A**HOLE RUSSIAN F* MANIAC D**K HEAD
KRK
KR-POP
CRACK
KR-CRACK

STOP!
GODDAMN STOP!

HOW DOES IT FEEL, STARK?

TO HAVE EVERYTHING YOU WORKED SO HARD FOR RIPPED AWAY, RIGHT FROM UNDER YOU?
Along with some movie lines, I borrowed more lines from the comics. I told you guys that the Ultimate Spider-man: Death of Spider-man is my favorite comic and boy, do I mean it. “Will you shut up”, “I think you got him,” “Yeah? That’s about all I had.” are all straight from Peter’s final fight with the Goblin in that issue.

Also, I’m not even sorry for using the “I don’t feel so good” line. Not sorry in the least bit.

So that concludes Segment 3. Your response, feedback, and love for this fic has me in AWE and I cannot even begin to thank every single one of you. Your comments keep this going. For real. I am kind of shocked that I made it over 100k words in and am still churning out chapters. If I have even come close to a moment where I get slightly burnt out, your love and comments immediately renew that passion I had from the start. So thank you thank you thank you thank you!

Some things for you to look forward and stay tuned to:

In hindsight, Tony should have had Bruce do his poking and prodding sooner.
Dr. Cho is not a woman to be messed with.
Steve doesn’t approve of lying, but for Tony’s sake, he decides not to tell SHIELD the full story.
Peter’s sweet sixteen isn’t so sweet after all.
And this author puts the comfort in hurt/comfort.

You’re amazing, fam. See you all there.
Guys...I am utterly blown away by the response of the last chapter. From the very bottom of my heart, I thank each and every one of you who had read, followed and best of all provided feedback for this story. I say without any hesitation that we wouldn’t be here today, at chapter 18, phase 4 of 5 segments into a 125k+ word story without every single comment and kudos given.

You ALL are amazing and I cannot express that enough.

Thank you so so so very much to silentsaebyeok for the translation of Helen's “this is some kind of joke, right!??” to “ji-geum nong-dam-ha-neun geo-ji?!”

There’s a hefty A/N at the end of this chapter. Until then, I won’t keep anyone waiting. And if ya’ll end up mad, just remember: I never said I was going to make things better when Peter was rescued. Seriously, I’ve had this plot roaring to go since chapter 8.

C’mon now.

Tony stumbled into the compound, his legs tripping over one after the other as he dragged Peter in by his armpits. They barely made it four steps before he collapsed flat onto his back. Water flowed around him, trickling across the marble floors. Some leaked in from the portal that Strange had promptly closed. Most came from his own dripping wet body.

‘We made it.’ He rolled his head to the side, spitting out a mouthful of salty ocean water. ‘We made it — holy hell that was close.’

Tony heaved enormous breaths of beautiful clean, fresh air. One after another, not enough, never enough. It was crisp in his lungs, albeit artificial, and each inhale cleaned away the dewy sea moisture from his chest cavity. He stared up at the ceiling, the sudden onslaught of bright lights stabbing his eyes like knives, the hanging fluorescent fixtures burning into his skull.

“We have to get him...” Steve panted breathlessly. “He needs help...”

Combat boots pounded against the floor next to him, and Tony cringed when water splashed onto his face as the man ran by.

“Where are your medics?”

Strange’s voice caught his attention, steady and firm. A strong breeze passed over him when his cloak whisked in the air, renewing the cold that coursed over Tony’s skin.

The hammering of Steve’s boots began to dwindle in the distance. “We’re on the east wing, they’re not far away — the intercom system, it’s in the common room, I’ll...”
The conversation whittled away into white noise without warning. Tony would have called them back but the brief unthinking, foolish relief choked him in the throat as crushing fall of reality shoved it back hard down in his gut.

The weight of Peter’s body on his legs suddenly became very a real and grounding thing. Tony’s heart rate spiked violently, and he felt the burning bitter taste of bile at the back of his throat. He forced himself to turn to his side. His muscles burned from exertion, his knees throbbed as he tottered to kneel on the floor.

“Pe—” He hissed, ignoring his body’s protests to lay still. “Peter — shit.”

There was no time for him to take in the sight below him. A blue, luminous glow of technology surged along the Spider-man suit, rising from the toes of its feet all the way up to its chest.

The shrill alarm that followed had Tony doubling over, the palms of his hands smothering his ears.


FRIDAY’S voice came from the small chest plate attached to his suit — ‘When the hell did the nanites come back online!?‘ —and holographic images shot out from the device that served to encase his armor.

Tony’s eyes darted frantically between the multitude of screens. A 3D image of Spider-man stood center of it all, the normally light blue diagram of his suit overtaken with red, showing him where every injury was. Caution signals for vitals flashed rapidly — heartbeat, respiratory rate, temperature — and their own location in the compound hovered near that.

He swatted it all away in the verge of hysteria.

“FRIDAY, disable — disable alarm!” It was so loud, a repetitive siren that blared into the hallway. “Dammit, deactivate!”

He could barely see Peter beneath the array of graphics. He swiped and swiped, his hands waving desperately to rid it, clear it, just ‘make it go away!’

“Request denied. Per protocol, vitals are too unstable for deactivation. Emergency notification system remains engaged.”

Tony couldn’t think straight. He needed it to be quiet, he needed to shut it down, ‘shut it up!’. He couldn’t see the past the screens when he needed to see Peter and yet more shit kept popping up, telling him things he didn’t have the time to process.

“Suit structure is highly compromised. Immediate medical attention is required.”

By instinct, he kept swiping at the graphics, none moving, none disappearing. When he realized that wouldn’t work, he clawed at his own armor, wildly trying to rip off the small, triangle box that produced the images and sounds. His wet fingers slipped maddeningly away with each attempt.

“Goddammit!”

“Boss, I am picking up signs of fatal bradycardia, pulse rate currently forty-five and dropping,” FRIDAY said. “The suit is sending indications of three fractured bones and two
partially fractured ribs. There are two open wounds in similar diameter of one and a half inches right below the intercostal space of the twelfth rib. If medical attention is not immediately sought out—”

Tony lunged forward, moving for one final and desperate attempt. He slammed an open palm on the center of Peter’s suit, making direct contact with the black spider emblem.

The fabric immediately sagged around him. His shoulders dropped in short-lived relief as FRIDAY was disconnected from the systems. The holograms flickered away and most importantly, the alarm shut off.

With the distractions gone, Tony was left to witness the damage.

In full light, the sight of Peter was more gruesome than he feared. His hand stayed on the boy’s chest, trembling, unable to move away.

‘Fuck he’s pale.’

Peter’s lips had tinted blue, the ugly purple bruising around his throat standing out from the blanching gray of his skin. And the blood – it was already pooling around them, making the sleek marble floors even darker.

Blood. Right. Blood loss. Tony hesitated but moved his free hand to staunch the bleeding, pushing away thoughts of ‘what’s the point?’ and ‘you’re being too gentle’. He had to do something, he had to — he removed his other hand from Peter’s chest and stacked them over top of each other, fingers locking together to push down with firm pressure.

Peter wasn’t moving. His face was slack, his chest barely lifted, blood seeped between Tony’s fingers —

“Help,” Tony croaked, breaking his stare and looking down the hallway. “Somebody help!”

Coincidence or not, his plea was met with the sound of squealing wheels, a gurney and — ‘Thank fucking God’ — a dozen medical personnel following suit. They ran down the corridor like a saving-grace crusade.

Steve led the way.

“He’s here, c’mon, hurry!”

Steve slid down on his knees, leaving a trail of slippery water behind him. Tony watched with wide, panicked eyes as he quickly scooped Peter into his arms. He was back on his feet in seconds with the kid cradled to his chest.

Tony couldn’t help but notice that Steve appeared frighteningly pale himself. Dark red blood trickled down his forehead, a deep cut running from his scalp and into his drenched, blond hair. If his injuries were even remotely serious, he wasn’t letting it show. He helped the team strap Peter onto the gurney, pulling and buckling straps faster than all of them combined.

Strange was hot on their tail, leaping onto the moving bed the moment he reached it. He swung over the gurney as if it were a horse, straddling Peter’s still form and ripping the spider-suit down his body the best he could with the straps around him. Tony stumbled to his feet, mildly impressed at the swift action.

“Get him to your operating room, he needs prepped for surgery,” Strange instructed, a professional
steadiness lining his tone.

Tony followed closely. There was no hesitation when he pushed away staff, not letting anyone tell
him he needed to step aside. While Steve was much more cooperative, allowing nurses and doctors
to take him into another room, Tony remained stubborn. His own health was the least of his
concerns, not right now, not with Peter so close to —

No. He didn’t save the kid just so he could die. That wasn’t happening.

They quickly reached the medical wing, the compound’s version of their own dedicated hospital. It
took less than a handful of minutes to get there, yet everything seemed to move in a demented
version of both slow motion and high-speed.

Tony felt frozen in place, consumed by the chaos.

“Mr. Stark, you need to —”

“No, you do not touch me!” Tony shoved the nurse away with more strength than intended. He couldn’t
muster up the will to care. His eyes reflected a venom that said it all — ‘Do not mess with me.’

The noise was overwhelming, everyone seemingly speaking at once. He couldn’t pin anyone’s
voice to the mouth it belonged to, not even if he had tried. Time seemed to slow down for him to
hear the things that mattered, the things that stood out to him the most.

“Blood pressure seventy over fifty-five.”

“Pulse OX sixty three — what the hell? That can’t be right! Check it again!”

Tubes, catheters, bags, and needles were passed around in the handful. Fast. The nurses and techs
in scrubs moved at lightning speed. They started bringing in numerous equipment, attaching wires
to Peter, each machine blocking his view, each switch they turned on creating more noise. He
fought to keep a line of sight.

“No time, he’s hemorrhaging. Pack those wounds, get imaging and hematology in here STAT.”

In the middle of the room and still straddled on the gurney, Strange helped a nurse pull Peter’s
limp arms out of the spider-man suit.

“Call them all to your OR,” Strange repeated, this time with slight annoyance. “If these wounds
aren’t flushed out he’ll develop secondary peritonitis and then you’ll have a septic patient on your
hands.”

“Dr. Cho will make that call,” a woman in scrubs coldly stated.

Strange narrowed his eyes. “Dr. Cho needs to call your anesthesiologist and get this kid into
surgery.”

Tony fought to get by. He felt claustrophobic, nauseated, white coats and scrubs knocking him
aside in a hurry. Every time he saw a glimpse of Peter, someone stepped in his way. He’d see
brown hair, a hand, a red clad foot but never all at once. He felt as if he was dancing on his toes,
struggling to stay afloat among the mass of professionals surrounding him.

A doctor in a lab coat spun around to face the gurney. “Who the hell are you!?”

Strange snapped his head over to the man, both hands pressing hard down on Peter’s stomach.
“Doctor Stephen Strange,” he bluntly answered, “and I think I know what I’m talking about when I say —”

“I don’t give a damn what you think! You can’t come in here and —”

“Listen to him,” Tony croaked. “Goddammit it, listen to him — just do something!”

The sudden and distressed plea caught the attention of both men. The doctor huffed, his exasperated sigh barely heard over the shouting staff and blaring machines. Both Tony and Strange watched as he quickly spun on his heels, deciding instead to help prep an IV line.

Strange took it as a win, returning his focus to Peter, holding the boy’s arm steady as a nurse drew a vial of blood.

“Butcher shop doctors,” he muttered under his breath. “You’re all unbelievably eager to gain a second opinion when the first is so aptly competent.”

“You really know how to flatter the room,” the nurse didn’t even look at him, handing off the tube to the nearest tech. “Page the blood bank, get this processed for Rh type and cross, run O negative wide open until the lab gets results. That is, unless, you know his blood type, Doctor Strange.”

Strange shook his head. “I don’t even know the kid.”

The nurse hummed in response, not daring to respond in any other way.

The tech rushed by Tony, the tube of blood carefully in his hands. Tony didn’t even notice as he bumped into his shoulder. His mind was preoccupied, teetering on hysterics. An anxiety attack he had been struggling to push away began to surface, no longer within his control, threatening to swallow him whole.

The staff clearly noticed. Two male nurses pushed him aside, hands against his chest that gently though forcibly walked him to the door.

“Mr. Stark, you need to leave.”

“Please, let the others treat you. You’re shaking, you could have hypothermia.”

They held his arms and walked him back, but his eyes never moved from the scene straight in front of him, his feet tripping over themselves with lack of attention to his surroundings. They reached the entrance just as a petite Asian woman came running through, her small figure taking the room by storm.

“Don’t bother settling him here — what did I just say!?” Helen’s voice shouted above everyone and everything. “Don’t lock those wheels, get him to the OR. Now, let’s go!”

They were quick to listen to her demands, pushing the gurney and taking off. Strange, still settled on top, spared a glance behind him at the infuriated male doctor.

“I told you so,” he sniped.

They were millimeters away from smashing through two automatic doors, moving faster than the technology could keep up with. Doctors, nurses, and techs poured through, squeezing in, some pushing each other aside as they rushed alongside the gurney.

Tony went to follow. His jaw clenched with a searing need to be involved, to be as close as he
possibly could, to never lose sight of his kid ever, ever again. Just as the doors were closing a man stepped in front of him, latex gloves pressing heavily against his chest.

“Mr. Stark,” he started, “you can’t go in there.”

Tony shook his head, eyes staring past him and into the other room. “I have to — he’s my —”

“You can’t,” he firmly repeated.

The noise across from them seemed to increase, words mixing with obnoxious beeping and alarms that made his ears hurt.

Tony swallowed hard. “I need to —”

“You’re not sterile. You’re not even clean,” the man explained. “I need to ask that you leave.”

“No, I... I—”

“Mr. Stark.” His hand pushed harder, his voice strict. “Back down.”

Tony didn’t have the time to argue. The man retreated, rushing away. His mind screamed to follow but his feet stayed glued to the ground, and he wasn’t sure what made him stay. Tony wasn’t the type of person to take orders, but this wasn’t about being submissive. This was about knowing where his place was, what help he could and couldn’t provide.

He had done his part. He got Peter home, they completed their mission, now he needed to let his staff do the job he paid them for. He wasn’t any use in there.

It was out of his hands now.

Awareness began to smother him, each breath he took turning into a hissing wheeze, his lungs painfully constricting. They felt smaller. Tighter. Fighting for air. His chest suddenly felt too small and he couldn’t breathe, he couldn’t…he couldn’t…

Tony smashed a fist against his sternum, activating the triangle arch reactor that sat on top of his armor.

“Deactivate, FRIDAY,” he demanded. “Get this — get this off of me, now.”

The AI was quick to comply. The nanites cleared away from his skin, his tech shedding the protecting armor and assembling it back into the housing unit.

The shirt he wore underneath did nothing to stop the strong, violent shudder that coursed through him. He wasn’t cold, not anymore, not with the bitter icy metal retracting from his body. He actually felt hot, his dry skin flushed and sweat rising from his pores.

Look at that, you walked away fine. You always do.

Open palms rubbed furiously at his eyes, scrubbing them until he saw stars.

Rogers is likely injured, probably has hypothermia while you’re dry as a desert. Way to go, Stark, great job using that tech on yourself. You always come out fine.

Tony clung to the wall to steady himself. His breaths came in quicker, faster, too fast to control. The air was stuffy, dense, and there wasn’t enough of it. He knocked his forehead against the wall and clenched both his fists near his ears, desperate for a handle, a grip. For some goddamn control.
Peter’s hurt.

That’s your fault.

Dmitri was your fault.

Everything will always be your fault. This is on you, Stark.

It’s always on you.

A monster he couldn’t see echoed in his ears. It threatened to take him elsewhere, far from where he needed to be. Each word it spoke began to eat him alive, chew and gnaw away until he was nothing but a remnant of himself, an empty, violated shell.

‘God, not now.’ Tony thought. ‘Not now, please not now.’

He tried telling himself it was okay. They were alive, he was alive, Rogers was alive, Peter was...god, was he dying just one room over from him?

Yes.

He is.

Tony shook his head, his jaw locked tight, teeth biting into his tongue and the copper taste that followed causing nausea to boil in his stomach. It reminded him of the smell, the awful smell of blood and how much was pouring freely from Peter and — God, did the kid’s healing factor keep him alive just so he could die?

‘Stop it, Stark. You’re in control. You’re in control. You’re —’

“— unbelievable!”

Tony whipped around, wide eyes startled at the sound.

Helen stormed in from the other room. “You’re unbelievable! What in the living hell did you bring me!?"

Tony pushed himself away from the wall, eyebrows furrowed with confusion. “Wha — what? What?”

Helen’s anger was so intense he could practically feel it radiate off her, her eyes hot with rage.

“That!” she hissed, finger pointing behind her. “That...child! I’ve blown through five hundred milligrams of Propofol, ten milligrams Ketamine, a whole milligram of Fentanyl — nothing works. We’ve given him enough anesthetic to kill an elephant ten times over and he won’t go under!”

She was shaking, her finger swinging back in his direction, pointing at his chest. Her body shook, trembling fiercely. He realized he had never seen the woman so unnerved, so incredibly unraveled, not even after everything with Ultron.
And she had every right to be.

He cataloged the information, his mind running through the problem to find a solution, utterly baffled as to why they had used so many painkillers, narcotics, anesthetics and yet none—

Tony blenched.

‘Reinforced analgesic.’

“What’s-what’s that? Reinforced analgesic…” Peter seemed both confused and interested.

The memory was fresh, clear in his mind, colorfully retrained. His own voice rang in his ears.

“You hear that?” He looked at Peter, smirking. “Bruce wants you for a day so he can poke and prod at you.”

That was...that was, what, a week ago? That couldn’t be right. He wouldn’t let that happen — no, he wouldn’t have let this happen.

Tony couldn’t blink. His eyes burned, moisture gathering at the edges to relieve the irritation. His throat closed up, words he wanted to say lost in the panic. His head bowed and his eyes locked below, staring at her finger, her nail digging through the fabric of his shirt.

Bruce leaned back. “Steve and Natasha have had him all week for training, but once I get a chance I’d like to get him into the laboratories, run some test —”

“Poke and prod, got it.” He pointed to the scrap piece of paper on the table in front of them. “Let’s poke and prod this first though, shall we?”

Pins and needles ran up his spine and his vision blurred.

They didn’t have working medication for the kid.

‘Christ,’ he realized. ‘How the hell did we not...how did I...’

“Tony!”

Helen’s voice broke through the haze. His neck snapped up, wide eyes boring into hers. She seemed less mad and more alarmed, and Tony wasn’t sure which he preferred.

“What is he?” she asked. “Is he like Rogers?”

Tony shook his head. “No, he’s — he’s —”

“Is he different!?” Helen snapped, her impatience thick.

“Yes — no — he’s...” Tony stammered, “he’s enhanced.”

“How? Like Wanda?” Helen snapped her fingers. “Give me something here, Stark!”

He was having trouble staying present. Her voice was floating away in the cluster of thoughts and memories that disrupted his focus. Anxiety was stripping him of his dignity, no longer able to form a complete sentence, his words coming out as garbled sounds.

“No, no, he’s...”
Helen stared him down, waiting for the explanation. “Where are his studies?”

“What —” Tony frowned. “What studies?”

“His studies,” Helen answered. “What studies have been done on him? What information can I use?”

Tony ran both his hands down the length of his face. “He’s never had...none. He’s never —”

“Ji-geum nong-dam-ha-neun geo-ji⁈” The Korean rolled off her tongue. Her shock was expressive, having momentarily slipped her native language. Tony didn’t have the energy to process the fact.

“His DNA was altered,” he tried to say. “He’s enhanced, he’s...—”

“— in need of an operation that I refuse to do while he’s not sedated,” Helen interrupted. “I absolutely will not have any of this staff cut into a conscious —”

Panic disintegrated into a poorly structured epiphany.

“Rogers supply.”

Helen gawked, her forehead creased with confusion.

Tony went on to explain, “His reinforced analgesic, the one you created for him. He’s got a supply, right? Use that. It’s – it’s something, it might —”

“Find it. Bring it to me,” Helen demanded, not waiting for a response. “Go!”

He watched as she quickly turned away, her lab coat flapping in the air when she jogged back to the other room. The two double doors briefly parted, letting in the sharp screech of alarms and demanding shouts.

Tony was out of the room before they had even closed.

He ran down the hallway, sliding on the trail of water that they had created, floors wet and slippery from their arrival. Rather than returning to where Strange had initially brought them, he took a sharp left in the opposite direction. It led him exactly where he needed to be.

Tony gripped the door frame tightly, coming to an abrupt halt. “Where is it?”

A team of doctors swarmed around Steve, the man sitting on the edge of a bed. Wrapped up in a foil shock blanket, he looked at Tony with growing confusion, his eyebrows furrowed.

“Where’s what?” he asked.

“Your supply!” Tony shouted, his voice cracking. “Where do they keep it?”

“My what?” Steve shook his head. “Tony, what are —”

“Your painkillers, Rogers! The ones Cho created, the ones we use to knock your super soldier ass flat on the ground. Where are they?”

The horror seemed to sweep over Steve’s face all at once, his already pale skin somehow going even whiter.
“Pharmaceutical,” he quickly answered, “They keep it in the pharmaceutical wing.”

“Which part, that’s two levels of medical R&D. Is it near bio-med or —”

Steve grabbed his Captain America helmet and hopped down from the bed. He quickly rid himself of the silver blanket, letting it fall to the floor below, now only dressed in a white tank top and his blue combat pants.

“I know where it is, I’ll get it!”

His speed nearly knocked Tony off his feet. He dashed out of the room, not only running but leaping with each spread of his legs. It was amazing that Tony managed to keep him in his line of sights, let alone stay a few feet behind him.

Steve quickly passed by the elevators, going instead for the stairs. Trying to keep up with him made Tony dizzy, the halls of the compound blurring together in a rush of adrenaline. While Steve hopped over railings, jumping on banisters and landing down stories below at a time, Tony ran behind him as fast as he could.

Now he really couldn’t breathe, a fire engulfing his lungs, his vision darkening at the edges from the stress of it all. He didn’t stop moving. His feet hammered against the steps, his hips twisting hard at the turns of the staircase.

The pharmaceutical wing was exactly two floors below them. Steve made it there first, hastily punching in his access codes to the room, a green light hovering above when the door clicked open.

By the time he had reached the medicine coolers, Tony had caught up. Steve patted all around the glass, looking for a door handle that didn’t exist.

“They’re locked, Stark.” Steve let one hand rest on his hip and the other dangle at his side, gripping his helmet.

Tony panted, stumbling when he approached the ceiling to floor cabinets. “FRIDAY, get me access to these things.”

The large refrigerators were encased with glass, no handles on doors that were built to retract within themselves. It was a sleek design that unfortunately remained incredibly impractical for their current predicament.

“Access denied.”

Tony flailed. “Access den — what!? I own the damn building, FRI!”

Steve bowed and shook his head, his own chest heaving for air.

“Additional permission is required from an authorized physician, chemist or geneticist to gain access to the contents of this room. It appears Dr. Helen Cho is currently in the medical bay, and as she is an authorized staff member I could call —”

“Yes, I know where she is!” Tony snapped. “She’s very busy, and I need what’s in these cabinets — now. Override from Tony E. Stark, code SITStark5291970.”

“I’m...sorry, boss. Override code denied,” FRIDAY said. “The pharmaceutical department contains highly dangerous and addictive substances, and as such, a protocol was created to
designate another authorized user to gain access. It was a fail safe you designed, sir.”

Tony let out a shout of frustration, a strained mix of both a growl and roar. He had never been more angered with his past self than in that very moment.

The vials they needed sat right in front of them, labeled boldly with Steve Rogers name, taunting them. The vials that Peter needed. Tony clenched his jaw, ignoring the creature that swelled up inside of him, provoking him.

*Peter’s suffering because of you.*

Tony barely paid attention when Steve stripped off his white tank top, his bare chest still dripping with sea water. He began wrapping it around his hand like a boxer’s glove while Tony dug his fingers deep into his sweat-matted hair, pulling harshly.

There was no concentrating through the jumbled thoughts of ‘*hurry hurry goddamnihurry, the kid can’t keep waiting!*’

“Okay, okay..shit, okay — call Helen,” Tony demanded, his voice laced with pure, unadulterated panic. “Get her down here, tell her —”

**CRASH!**

Glass shattered, raining down on the ground in a thousand tiny pieces.

The sound was haunting. Tony’s muscles immediately locked up in anticipation, waiting for the water, so much water, drowning in the ocean —

Alarms blared around him. A red strobe light brought him back to reality, blinking in rapid succession, forcing him back into the present. One long, piercing siren wailed from the ceilings and he snapped his head over in Steve’s direction.

“The computer was moving a little slow for me,” Steve stated, deadpan.

He had his shirt wrapped around his fist, half of his forearm inside the large, cold refrigerator where shards of glass dropped down below. His eyes locked with Tony’s, and he shook the excessive glass away from his hand.

**“Boss, there appears to be a breach within the pharmaceutical department,”** FRIDAY paused, going on to ask, **“You wouldn’t happen to have anything to do with that, would you, sir?”**

Tony gaped as Steve hauled away handfuls of tiny vials, ridding the entire supply of medication, filling the inside of his blue helmet to the brim.

“Yeah,” Tony distantly answered. “Deactivate the alarm.”

Within seconds Steve had gathered everything they needed, immediately shoving the helmet against Tony’s chest. The glass vials inside shook and rattled against one another.

Tony forgot what he needed to do. The alarms shut off, the lights returned to normal, and he stared at the helmet, oddly detached from the pressing matter.

The monster clawed at his chest again. It reminded him that he wasn’t safe, he wasn’t in control. He could only prolong the inevitable appearance that it would soon make, feeling as it crept up on him, taunting in his ear.
“Go.” Steve pressed the helmet harder against his chest. “I’m going to have to explain this one to security.”

Tony looked back up at him, grabbing onto the helmet. “I’ll send Happy over, he’ll vouch for you.”

Steve didn’t seem fazed, the stern look of determination lining his features.

“Go, Stark,” he urged. “Now.”

With those three words, Tony snapped like a broken cable car.

He ran, adrenaline coursing through his veins. He stumbled to the elevator, cursing himself for taking it because his knees were buckling and his chest was burning and his entire body was sore, muscles screaming for him to stop.

Pride be damned, collapsing in the stairway was the last thing he wanted to do right now.

He never once broke sight of the contents inside Captain America’s helmet, not once during the entire ride back up to the med bay. The little jars clattered against each other, bouncing around as his hands trembled fiercely.

If this didn’t work...if this…

A soft chime dinged and the elevator doors began to split apart. Tony squeezed through before they had fully opened, his collarbones screaming at the pressure, his thighs bruising against the metal that wasn’t ready for him to pass by yet.

The sound of pandemonium was his compass. Each step brought him closer, the walls blurring together, his line of sight a clouded mess until finally, he made it through the automatic doors of the emergency room.

Alarms blared — different alarms, the kind that made his blood curdle, the medical equipment screeching warning sounds that a life was in danger.

“Temperature drop to eighty-five degrees.”

“Pupils delayed but responding.”

“Get — g-get off me!”

“Positive Babinski reflex test.”

“Large bore IV’s set in the left and right AC. Fluids wide open.”

“Please — ple-ase st-stop!”

Tony walked straight into a war zone.

His eyes went everywhere, looking all across the room, trying to find anything that would stand out among the white coats and scrubs. He didn’t even realize that his hands were still trembling, the rattling of glass vials lost in the cyclone of chaotic undercurrent.

“Pulse OX forty-three. Respiratory, if you can’t intubate then you need to get started on non-
invasive oxygen.”

“Easier said than done when we can’t get two feet near the boy!”

Seeing faces that he recognized was like finding a needle in a haystack. He vaguely noticed Bruce standing across the room, his concerned and stressed expression more noticeable among the array of calmer medical staff. He was side by side with Helen, both reviewing multiple x-ray scans on a large monitor.

Across from them and on the opposite side, Strange came striding over, gowned in green scrubs and slapping on latex gloves. Tony briefly wondered when he had the time to change out of his ridiculous Monk getup, only to shrug the answer off to magic. He was immediately hidden behind other staff once he approached the gurney.

“Peter? Peter, you need to calm down.” Strange practically shouted to be heard. “These people are trying to help you, they’re —”

A tray of instruments crashed to the floor, followed by the sound of a woman yelling out in surprise.

“Whoa, whoa!”

“Get the restraints, he’s combative!”

“No – no, pl-ease, g-get off!”

“Hold on, hold on!” Strange yelled over them all.

The bodies cleared away, most attending to the nurse that was knocked onto the floor. They parted all at once. Tony fought to brace himself against the familiar heat of anxiety, his fingers tingling the harder he gripped Steve’s helmet.

“Somebody take this!” he finally shouted, storming forward and shoving the helmet to the nearest tech. The bottles shook inside, a few almost falling to the floor had it not been for the woman’s quick reflexes.

Tony didn’t care. Everything else ceased to matter, his only focus, his only concern — he had to get to Peter. He couldn’t reach the kid fast enough, his heart racing, pounding.

“Pl-ea-ea-se, pl-ease, g-get away! S-stop!” Peter sobbed, his cries wet, hoarse, exhausted and yet purely agonized.

“Hey, hey, Peter — it’s okay.” Tony reached the gurney, standing at the top near Peter’s head, hands firm on his shoulders to lessen his thrashing movements. “Hey, Underoo’s. Same side, okay? Same side.”

Glassy, blood-shot eyes looked all around the room, frantically darting at the mayhem that surrounded him. They locked in place the moment he saw Tony.


Tony pressed a firm palm against his forehead. “They’re here to help you, kid. I promise. We’re only trying to help.”
“Administering first dose. Fifty milligrams.”

A doctor injected the contents of a full syringe directly into the IV settled in the crook of Peter’s arm. Tony watched from the corner of his eyes as colorless liquid traveled up the clear tubing. Almost immediately the kid was jerking away, three other nurses plus himself struggling to hold him down.

“Ah-ah-gah!” Peter howled, his back arching from the gurney. “It burns! I-it — it burns, pl-please stop!”

His cries were so loud that his voice began to break, weak and wrecked from screaming, the strain tearing his throat raw. Standing at the top of the gurney, Tony cupped his palms around Peter’s cheeks. His fingers gripped his chin, hands closing in around his ears in hopes that it would dim the sound of hell that encircled them.

“You’re alright.” Tony held his face tighter, repeating the words like a mantra. “You’re alright.”

Nurses pulled away at his spider-suit, his body jostling and buckling with every movement they made, yanking it down and leaving it to grip at his hips. Peter tried to look below. He lifted his head the best he could, wide eyes terrified, his forehead creased with what Tony was sure could only be unbearable agony.

Looking down with him, Tony proved himself to be right. His stomach lurched and he quickly swallowed a mouthful of vomit. It was like watching a goddamn horror movie, blood mixing together with dark scarlet and vivid red, old and fresh and too much of it.

He eyed one doctor in particular, watching as the man shoved the tip of an irrigating syringe inside the gaping wound on Peter’s side. With each push he flushed out dirt, clumps of seaweed and blood that poured onto the floor below them, repeating the process over and over. The saline never came out clear, always a twisted mixture of light pink. It spilled onto the white linoleum floors and around Tony’s shoes.

Peter convulsed with sobs, his clenched eyes dripping tears down Tony’s knuckles. The wet warmth on his hands caught his attention. Tony tried to wipe the tears away, his thumbs cupped around Peter’s cheekbones but they came too fast, too quickly.

“Pl-please, plea-se.” Peter choked on a gasp. “Pl-please —”

“Administering second dose. Another fifty milligrams.”

“Mr. Stark, you need to leave —”

“D-don’t go,” Peter begged, the back of his head hitting the bed. “Pl-please. D-don’t lea-leave me.”

“I’m here, Peter. I’m not leaving.” Tony kept his voice steady, squeezing his grip. “I’m not leaving.”

Tony kept his eyes locked on Peter, refusing to look as doctors manhandled him, shoving in tubes and creating more holes, treating broken bones, injecting medicine — he kept his eyes focused on Peter’s face and only that, saving the kid what dignity he had left.

His erratic struggles were slowing, just slightly, just enough that Tony noticed. Thrashing turned more into weak buckling, and his screams died off into pained, nasally grunts.
Peter’s eyes flickered back up to him. “Mr-Mr. St’k, help. It-it hurts. It hurts.”

“Creatinine levels rising, he’s on the verge of nephrotoxicity.”

“Give it one last chance. Push one hundred.” Helen’s voice cut through. “OR is prepped, Doctor Wu is waiting. We can’t keep stalling.”

The room tilted briefly and Tony dropped one hand from Peter’s cheek, clinging onto the mattress of the gurney to steady himself. He could hear as a doctor stated, “Administering last dose. One hundred milligrams.”

‘Jesus Christ.’ Tony closed his eyes, tendrils of panic choking him. It took one of these things to knock Cap flat on his ass. Peter was up to four. If this didn’t work...God, if this didn’t work…


He was desperate to end this god-awful nightmare. He wasn’t even sure if he was still talking to Peter. He wasn’t sure if Peter could even hear him, not over the sound of doctors, beeping and screeching machines, not over the sound of his own cries.

Tony smoothed back his wet hair, pushing the curls away, carding his fingers through the tangled mess.

“It’s okay, Pete. You can let go,” he whispered, his voice soft under his breath. “You’re safe now. It’s okay to let go.”

Frantic jerking morphed into mild spasms. They were still strong underneath his grasp, shoulders harshly lifting off the padded gurney, but Tony noticed the difference.

Peter seemed to swallow his next groan, the sound smothered in his throat. The one after that came out as a whine, dying off before it even escaped his lips.

It was both the most beautiful and horrific thing he had ever seen when Peter’s eyes rolled back, half-lidded, whites staring back up at him. He let out one final moan, a soft whimper, and his body fell slack.

“I’m rolling with it.” A doctor pushed Tony aside with force he wasn’t expecting. Almost immediately he had Peter’s head tilted back, opening the kid’s mouth wide with a metal laryngoscope and sliding a tube down his throat —

Tony couldn’t watch. He had to turn away, eyes closed as his gag reflex made itself known. His skin became hot, flushed, and sweat stuck to the back of his neck. The gurney rushed by him, staff pushing the bed out of the room, creating a cool breeze that brought up the smell of antiseptic and blood.

A hand laid gently on his shoulder, startling him.

“Tony.” Bruce squeezed his grip. “You need to leave. They have this handled.”

Across the room, the bedlam hadn’t stopped. Tony looked over, watching as they rushed away, continuing to shout orders at each other while multitasking — techs held up IV and blood bags, a nurse pressed thick clumps of gauze against Peter’s bare stomach, a doctor squeezed air from anambu bag that attached to the tubing in Peter’s throat — they functioned like a well oiled machine, fast and steady.
He could hear as they kept talking. Helen and Strange were lost in the abundance of others, but their voices stood out among the disarray.

Helen was firm and professional. “Doctor Strange, will you be assisting us?”

“Assisting? I don’t think so.” Tony vaguely saw as Strange brought up one, shaking hand before immediately hiding it away. “But I will help in any way I can.”

“Then you might be more useful to Doctor Banner.”

The voices moved further away, more distant as they mixed in with blaring machines. Bruce must have taken that as his cue to leave. He had let go of his grip on Tony, quickly walking backward to the chaos that was departing.

“Tony — go. We got this,” he insisted.

Go.

Go away.

Tony stood idly as everyone left, departing into an area beyond where his eyes could see. He was alone, standing amidst the mess left behind. The lights were bright against the pale blue walls and white floors, showcasing every bit of wreckage — supplies, trash, blood — destruction surrounded him.

Fitting.

The merchant of death.

You destroy everything.

Far from where he could see, he heard doors open with a bang, wheels of a gurney squealing under pressure. The noise echoed in the empty space of the emergency room, loud, making him visibly cringe.

It masked the sound of the strained cry that escaped his throat.

‘Not here. Christ, not here. Don’t—not here, not here.’

Tony left in a hurry. His legs faltered as he clung to walls to steady himself, having no real direction of where to go, no destination outside of escaping — leaving — finding solace anywhere from here.
He managed to make it to the nearest room outside of the med bay, a one-stall restroom down the hall. The door slammed shut and he spun around, immediately emptying the contents of his stomach into the sink.

Tony gasped, trying to breathe through each expel of vomit that splashed down below, pungent liquid getting caught in his lungs and burning in his nostrils. He gripped the white ceramic sink, the edges of the sleek, square design digging into the palms of his hands.

His back hunched as he retched, desperately trying to purge the last forty-eight hours. Only bile came up, bitter and acidic in his throat.

“Pl-please. D-don’t lea-leave me.”

He lost it.

“Mr-Mr. Str’k, help.”

Between the gagging, between the hiccups and dry heaving, he lost it. Pathetic and strained cries tore him apart. The throbbing feeling in his chest sharpened as he sunk further away, the claws of failure digging in deeper, sobs full-throated and loud — as loud as his lungs would let him howl.

The monster had won.

Everyone close to you suffers.

He trembled with a pain he didn’t know existed, a paralyzing ache he didn’t know was possible ripping him to shreds. He was alone, no one at his side to calm him down, no one there to steer him out of the panic attack that washed him away.

Tony crumbled to the floor, swallowing heavily, again and again, unable to choke down the raw emotion that drowned him. He slumped against the bathroom wall, collapsing in on himself with his head between his knees, and he lost it.

“Don’t waste your life, Stark.”

He shouldn’t be alive. Time after time again he was given second chances when he didn’t deserve them.

He failed Peter. He failed his team. Why was he walking away from this?

“Why didn’t you do more?”

Chapter End Notes

Look at this! Look at this BEAUTY!! Go give dragonnan a billion kudos for for creating this master piece of whump!
Alright, heft A/N time. So I kind of annoyed myself with this chapter. Let me explain. It’s medically inaccurate.

Not the medical jargon — that’s real. The large bore IV’s, babinski reflex test, pulse OX, ect — that’s all accurate. However, there’s a reason TV shows and media of the like tend to stray from the realism of the medical world. It’s boring. It’s so, so boring. There’s a process for everything, every damn thing you touch and say and it’s just...it gets to be boring. Not to mention, there’s departments/doctors/nurses/techs for everything. The same tech drawing your blood isn’t going to be the same tech putting in your IV. The same nurse inserting your catheter isn’t the same nurse who will run your EKG. In fact, those are two different professions altogether — phlebotomy and EKG tech respectively.

So TL;DR — I lumped a lot of those peeps together. Just like the media does. GASP — Shame on me. For shame!

No, but really, my biggest pet peeve here was involving Doctor Strange. Not because I involved him — oh hell no, I wanted that man involved like whoa. But that meant branching him outside of his profession, which makes me...well, itch a bit. I’m only relieved of this itch when I re-watch the movie and remind myself how insanely inaccurate even cannon was to the medical world (STRANGE – you’re doing BRAIN SURGERY. PUT ON A DAMN MASK.)

A neurosurgeon would never be involved in internal or emergency medicine like this. He just wouldn’t. It would be like telling the waitress at a restaurant to go do the chef’s job. They may be doctors, but they have huge, wide ranges of what they know.
It’s why they call them specialties. And there’s no way, realistically, Strange would be able to tend to any of Peter’s ailments here.

But fanfiction FOR THE WIN. Gosh darn it if I can spew comic book science I can spew a bit of unreality in the daily grind of medicine. If you’re reading this, and you’re like me — possibly even work in medicine like me – just know that I’m painfully aware of this. I don’t want anyone coming forward and going “Well achtually...” I know. I know what I did. I’ll atone for my sins at another time.

And Peter? The kids a mutant. I exploited that until there was nothing left to exploit. I rang that rag dry until there was nothing left. Comic book science be my shield, the kid is conscious and screaming because...well, because fanfiction!

Honestly, I’ve always, always always wanted to play with the “fast/different metabolism and can’t process medicine” trope and I went for it here. Like I mentioned, I had this plotted, planned and roaring to go back in chapter 8. The science behind it surely isn’t real, since there aren’t any studies to provide real explanation since...you know, mutants don’t exist. But the next chapter works hard to keep the realism thriving.

A few other notes I wanted to mention: I know Helen Cho comes off as an uber bitch in this chapter. Please take it with a grain of salt. She gets a lot softer going forward, after all her character is sweet abd delicate and I really look forward to bringing in that personality. Right now though, she’s a stern SOB who ain’t taking any crap. You gotta think of it from her perspective. These types of emergencies are very, very stressful and take a toll on medical professionals. I deal with doctors and surgeons (oy. Surgeons) all day long who snap, yell, shout – they get nasty. You shrug it off because it’s the grind of life or death.

Also, Tony Stark did just bring her a dying teenager without the ability to take in normal painkillers. So...she kinda has the right to be piffed.

Also also, ugh — I know she’s not an M.D doctor. She’s a chemist for crying out loud. But I really wanted to use her rather than a Mary Sue for this role. So...fudging cannon a bit on that one. I also mentioned Doctor Wu from Iron Man 3, and hell he's a cardiologist but again, really wanted to use cannon names as opposed to Mary Sue's.

LAST NOTES. My biggest gratitude goes out to my editor Mei_kun who never fails to find and correct errors that I am too inadequate to notice, even after reading my own work 25+ times. She's amazing at what she does and I'd be lost without her.

Okay, I think that about wraps it up. Stay tuned for the next chapter where I continue to shatter Tony’s heart into a million pieces :)

“Why are you doing this?”

_The kid turned to face him, the springs of the mattress he sat on squeaking at the movement._

_Tony settled his hands on his lap and leaned back into the plastic chair, curiosity quickly becoming inadequate to describe the growing interest he had on Peter the longer he watched him._

_“I gotta know, what’s your M.O, what gets you out of that twin bed in the morning?”_ 

_Peter fidgeted, unable to stay still, his hands tapping against each other. “Because…”_

_Tony patiently waited and watched, unable to ignore how with each passing second the kid seemed to look younger, way younger than anticipated. That wasn’t something he was comfortable dealing with right now. He needed assets. He didn’t need a child to babysit._

_“Because I’ve been me my whole life.” Peter stared down at his palms. “And I’ve had these powers for six months. I read books, I build computers. And-and yeah I would love to play football, but I-I couldn’t then so I shouldn’t now.”_

_Tony nodded. “Sure, ‘cause you’re different.”_

_“Exactly,” Peter agreed. “But I can’t tell anybody that so I’m not.”_

_Tony frowned. He had to admit, that wasn’t an answer he was expecting. A few months into being
Iron Man and he had told the entire world. This kid was keeping every aspect of his alter ego a secret — no desire for fame, no need for the glory. He just wanted to help people.

Intrigued, he leaned forward. Something reflected off the brown eyes staring back at him, wisdom far beyond what a young, fourteen-year-old boy should have. The type of wisdom that came from experience, from pain.

“When you can do the things that I can, but you don’t...and then the bad things happen...they happen because of you.”

Peter held his gaze, steady and unbreaking. It wasn’t star-struck, it wasn’t a fanboy glee. It was somber. Tony looked away, finding it easier to stare off to the side. He had to remind himself that this was a kid. A teenager. Someone who should be out enjoying life, goofing off with his friends.

Was it right for him to come in and take that all away?

Would it make any difference if he didn’t?

It boggled his mind to know that this was the world they had created. The old days of right and wrong had somehow turned into heroes and villains, the attack on New York changing things beyond what Tony ever thought was possible. He never imagined that eight years ago, walking out of a cave in Afghanistan, this would be the world he’d create for the next generation.

“So you want to look out for the little guy, you want to do your part, make the world a better place, all that, right?”

Peter nodded. “Yeah, yeah, yeah just looking out for the little guy. That’s—that’s what it is.”

________________________________________

Tony hadn’t moved in hours.

Moving took energy, something he was severely lacking.

He simply sat, catatonic. Motionless.

Time passed, first by the minutes and then by hours, but he didn’t bother checking a clock or asking FRIDAY. He didn’t care. He needed nothing but solitude, to be alone. At this point, it was a must. Once he found it he clung to it, letting the strange silence echo each pounding beat of his migraine.

Exhaustion coursed through his every muscle, weighing him down. His eyelids were heavy, and he held his face in his hands, hunched over in the chair he sat in.

The crash from adrenaline was powerful, a vicious anchor that nearly took him under. Had it not been for the fear, he would have surrendered. Fear kept him going, fear of the unknown, fear of the uncertain outcome. It was like poison, infecting him, festering in his mind.

Tony didn’t know when he got in touch with Happy or how long it had been after they arrived back at the compound. All he knew was that the phone call was short, sweet and to the point.

Get the kid’s aunt. Bring her here. Quickly.
That was the last time he spoke. It was the last thing he did, possibly hours passing as he sat and waited. And waited. For what, he wasn’t too sure.

It was nothing short of a miracle that he staved away another panic attack. The very thought of that woman saying goodbye to her nephew made his chest constrict under the crushing pressure of an ocean he had escaped from. But it was a possibility, a real one, and it was one he couldn’t bear to entertain.

If anyone deserved a proper goodbye, it was her. He owed her a goodbye. He owed her a lot of things, none money could buy for him but this...this at least was within his control.

Right now, he needed to do what was in his control.

It was quiet, for the most part. He was spent, emotionally and physically drained, unable to do anything but sit still in a chair outside of the facility’s medical wing.

The area was interesting, if he had to choose a word to describe it. It was more a waiting room than anything else; TV’s hanging on the wall that he hadn’t turned on, magazines shelved in a short rack at the corner beside a potted plant. It was an area of the compound they almost never utilized. They had no reason to. If a team member were ever injured, they typically gathered in the main common room of the building. It was their spot, their go-to for them and only them.

This was created more for formalities, for other staff, other departments. Not for Tony Stark.

For a long time, it was quiet. No one dared to bother him, not the team, not security, not Rogers. So when he heard what seemed to be an argument taking place down the hallway, it quickly caught his attention.

“Mrs. Parker, please wait —”

“I’ve waited two hours in that damn car. I’m not—”

“It was an hour and a half. I broke speed limits getting us here. If you just hold on, I need to get you a badge and —”

Tony stumbled out of the chair, heavily leaning against the armrest to straighten his back, his muscles throbbing at the sudden movement. He looked down the hallway just as May came storming through, her purse swinging violently by her hip. Happy followed closely behind.

“Mrs. Parker —”

“Happy.” She spun around to face him, a stern finger pointing in his face. “Cram it.”

Tony tensed. What little energy he had left began to boil into anxiety, his breath hitching while watching the two approach him. Vivid memories of Miriam Sharpe flashed before his eyes, a reminder of a mother who lost her son, a child who lost their life — all because of him.

It was history repeating itself.

May was going to lose it, and she had every right to. She could slap him, punch him, kick him, spend all her loathing on dragging him down until he was nothing. Because that’s what he was — nothing. He let this happen to her nephew, to Peter. He deserved whatever came his way.

Happy sprinted to keep up with her, already slightly out of breath. “Tony, I tried getting her to —”
Tony held his hand up, stopping him from saying anything else.

“May, I...” his voice broke from disuse, his throat red hot and tender. “Listen, I —”

She narrowed her eyes, and her feet stomped up to him. “Where is he?”

“He’s here,” Tony reassured. “He’s in surgery. They’ve — he’s — he’s been in surgery. May, I’m — ofph!”

Tony let out a nearly inaudible gasp, the sound gruff and husky. May leapt forward, grabbing him tightly in an embrace that stole his breath.

“Thank you.” Her voice was soft, shaking with a strength he was envious of. Yet any sense of composure she tried to retain was washed away in the blink of an eye as she splintered under the force of her tears. “Thank you, thank you, oh god, thank you.”

Her cries were heavy, wails that were smothered in his chest. Tony stood still, his arms dangling at his side, unable to comprehend the moment. May repeated the same words, the same gratitude until she couldn’t anymore. Her words became messy, incoherent sobs.

He looked up at Happy, who only shrugged and gave the saddest, smallest smile he had ever seen. Tony decided to ignore the tears were glossing in the man’s eyes, reflecting from the overhead lights. If he acknowledged that, he’d crumble himself.

“He’s all I have. He’s all I have left,” May cried, heavy and ugly sobs leaking onto his shirt. “Thank you...thank you, thank you...you brought him back, you brought him home, you saved him— thank you.”

His arm twitched. For a moment he considered wrapping it around her, only deciding against it when he felt the tremble that shook against his hip. He wasn’t suited with this type of interaction, what brand of care he could give never adequate, never appropriate. He could never dare force that on May, so he wouldn’t.

He owed her even that much.

When May pulled away, both her hands gripped his face, forcing him to look directly at her as she asked, “Are you okay?”

The question made Tony’s head stutter still.

“Tony, are you okay?” she impossibly repeated.

The question validated his distaste for such a move. He tried to look away, look anywhere that wasn’t at May, but her grip was strong and he felt uncomfortable that his bloodshot, puffy eyes were so openly exposed to her. Not even in his rawest moments did he let Pepper see him so broken, so demoralized.

“I...”

The words died on his tongue. He was confident he had heard her wrong. She wasn’t asking how he was — she couldn’t be asking that. He was the cause behind this. He was the one who put her under the impression that she’d have to bury her boy with no closure to grieve with. Why would she care about him?

And yet here she was, pulling his face back to her, soft brown eyes locking with his.
“God, I can’t even imagine. Everything you’ve done — Happy told me you’ve been at this for days. This must have been hell for you.” May crinkled her nose, patting his cheek softly. “You should shower, you smell like rotten fish.”

Tony blinked, looking over at Happy and back at May, unsure if he had finally gone mad and began hallucinating.

“I’m...I’m sorry, what’s going on here?” The words tumbled out of his mouth. “Why are you not yelling at me?”

It was the least eloquent question he could ask, so blunt that any other day Tony would berate himself for failing at the basics of being more articulate.

May didn’t seem to mind. Her expression softened and she let go of his face. One hand reached under her glasses to dry her cheeks while the other moved to grip his shoulder tightly.

“I’ve done my fair share of yelling at you, more than I’m proud of. But anger won’t help either one of us right now. You’ve dealt with a lot —”

“You don’t know that,” Tony interrupted, cut and cold.

She stared him down with incredulity, like there was no way he could actually believe himself for saying such a thing. In his defense, his star-stunning poise had made an abrupt exit days ago.

May’s frown lingered. “I might not be your biggest fan, Tony. But I’m also not your enemy here. And if you freak out, then I’m going to freak out, and that’s...that’s the last thing any of us need right now.”

Tony found it hard to look at her. He stared over her shoulder at the pale blue walls, occasional sparing a glance at Happy, too tired to argue and too tired to reflect. She was hanging on by a thread and quite frankly, so was he.

But if he was made of iron, May Parker was made of steel. Easily, hands down, there was no doubting it. It had become very obvious to him where Peter got a lot of his strength from.

He flicked his thumb over his nose, sniffing hard. “Happy will get you where you need to be.”

Tony was beyond his comfort zone of vulnerability in front of her and luckily for him, she was eager to leave. May looked over her shoulder and at Happy, who nodded while pointing straight ahead. There was no hesitation to follow the direction she was told to go.

Tony took the opportunity to turn away, bowing his head and rubbing at his temples. The migraine pounded fiercely behind his eyes and around his neck, a constant throb that wouldn’t go away. It made every footstep of hers louder than intended, shoes hammering against the tiled floors until they were barely heard.

He only looked up when he felt a different presence at his side, this time Happy standing near him with arms crossed over his chest.

“How’s the kid?” the man asked.

He didn’t even turn to face Happy as he answered, “Get her to him.”
Tony watched as he fell.

The kid was so distracted giving a thumbs up that he failed to notice the colossal hand swinging in his direction. It knocked him sixty-five feet from the air, straight to the ground, crashing right into a pile of wooden crates.

What made Tony panic was that he didn’t get back up. Ant-Man reverted back to his normal size and Spider-man laid on the ground, motionless.

The sight was enough to stop his heart, and he couldn’t land fast enough. He was running forward before his repulsors shut off, even before his feet hit the tarmac, face-plate lifting because he needed to make sure what he was seeing was real.

Peter was on his side, mask half up and legs sprawled about. His stomach plummeted and his blood turned to ice.

“Kid, you alright?”

He didn’t answer. Tony immediately knelt down, reaching a hand out when —

“Hey! Hey — get off, hey!”

Tony grabbed a hand that flung out to hit him, then the other one right after that. “Whoa, whoa!”

Peter fought in his grip, arms flailing wildly. “Get off — hey!”

“Same side. Guess who.” Tony leaned in close to him. “Hi. It's me.”

Peter seemed to finally recognize him. He visibly relaxed, eyes closed with a deep and heavy sigh.

“Oh.” He gave a small smile. “Hey, man.”

Tony nodded, barely hiding his concern. “Yeah.”

“That was scary.” Peter tried to laugh, a chuckle that died in his throat when the back of his head tapped against the tarmac.

Tony frowned. There was no way the kid could have handled that fall without hitting his head, he had to have. The way Peter laid on the ground, eyes opening wide only to clench shut — should he be worried about a concussion? Worse? Head trauma?

Shit. It wasn’t supposed to be this way.


Peter tried to get up. “What?”

“You did a good job. Stay down.”

“No, I'm good,” Peter insisted, struggling on the ground. “I'm fine.”

Though his voice cracked at the edges, Tony believed him. There wasn’t any real reason not to. His pupils seemed even, he appeared responsive and all over physically alright. If Peter really needed to, he could fight.
But at that moment, Tony decided he wasn’t taking any more chances with the kid getting hurt. It was too dangerous out here, he didn’t know what he was thinking. He was already beginning to regret all of this, there wasn’t any reason to regret anything more.

“Stay down!” Tony repeated, his tone strict and firm.

Peter shook his head. “No, it's good, I gotta get him back!”

Like hell.

Tony gripped his wrists tighter. “You’re going home, or I'll call Aunt May! You're done!”

He didn’t wait around to continue the argument. He stood tall and started up his repulsors, faint chants of “Wait, Mr. Stark, wait — I’m not done!” fading in the distance as he flew off.

Right now, he needed to get to Rogers before the man did anything dumber than he had already done. He’d deal with Parker later. Happy would take him back to the hotel, get him home — it would be okay. He’d make up for this mess later, give the kid some training, maybe some good mentorship…

God, what was he thinking? This was a kid he brought out here. If something happened, if he got hurt or died — Christ, there was no way he could handle that on his conscience.

Tony was starting to wish he could believe the lie that he told Rhodey. Perhaps not knowing the kid’s age would make all this a lot easier.

The doors leading further into the medical bay had remained closed for so long that Tony was sure it was a cruel mirage when they finally opened.

He looked up with bleary eyes. It took a moment to distinguish the figure walking towards him, green scrubs and black hair a blurry mess until his eyes focused and his sight became clear.

Stephen approached him, fingers lowering the surgical mask that was strapped around his face, letting it hang loosely around his neck.

Tony couldn’t have stood up faster. His knees cracked and popped and his back screamed with a burning fire, but he was on his feet within seconds.

Stephen waved a dismissing hand. “Stay seated.”

Tony shook his head. “I’d rather stand.”

“Yeah?” Stephen was already collapsing into the nearest chair with an exhausted grunt. “Well I’d rather sit, and you’re going to need to. So, sit.”

Tony stared at the empty chair Stephen gestured to, his hand shaking and trembling. With reluctance, he gave in and sat down, though he didn’t relax. Not with the thick silence that lingered between them. It couldn’t have lasted for more than a few seconds, but for Tony it felt like a lifetime.

“He’s alive,” Stephen told him.
Tony hadn’t realized how badly he needed to hear those words, not until they were finally said. He visibly collapsed, head in his hands and knees resting on his elbows, exhaling a large breath of air that heaved his entire back.

“He’s in critical condition,” Stephen added.

Tony looked over at him, frowning. “But stable?”

He anticipated the words, always hearing ‘critical but stable’ in every situation like this. Yet a beat passed with Strange hesitating to answer.

“Stable means no further deterioration,” he said. “That’s not a prognosis to be declared right now.”

Tony’s head spun. He bit his tongue, using what willpower he had left not to snap at the man, wishing he would spit it out, ‘hurry up and get on with it already!’

Stephen sensed his impatience. He took a deep breath and ran his hand over his mouth and chin.

“There was a lot of internal damage your doctors had to repair. They’ll be able to better explain it to you. My specialty was in neurosurgery, I can’t speak on what all they saw,” he explained. “But I have seen similar wounds to the head, the type that typically occur from a rebar, possibly an industrial pipe of sorts. The diameter of the wound on Peter’s abdomen leads your staff to believe it was the latter.”

Tony let his head fall back into his hands, his open palms pressed heavily into his eyes.

“Christ.”

He could hear as Stephen adjusted himself in the chair next to him. “I know it’s not the most encouraging thing to hear right now, but the healing factor is still present. It’s kept him alive this long.”

It kept him alive this — Tony snapped his head up, eyes hot with rage.

“Where the hell were you?”

Stephen narrowed his eyes. “Saving your team.”

Tony sniffed and scoffed. “Your magical ass couldn’t be a little more timely, huh?”

If he had a response, Stephen decided to keep it to himself. It was for the best. Tony shook his head, straightening his back as his lips pressed into a thin line.

“We had one task. We were there to save him, you knew that.”

“And you did,” Stephen reminded him. “Don’t forget that so quickly because of what’s happening now.”

The lump hardened in his throat and Tony closed his eyes in resignation. That was a joke. He knew that Peter saved himself as much as they saved him. He chewed on his lower lip, unsure if it was out of frustration or to keep it from quivering.

“He was fighting back there. Tooth and nail, the kid wasn’t going down without a fight.”

Tony wished that for just one moment, one measly second he could hear the silence that fell between the two of them. But his ears wouldn’t stop ringing, screams of agony playing mercilessly
on repeat. His hands wanted to curl into fists, and he had to cling onto the armrest of the chair to stop himself.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t get there sooner,” Stephen murmured.

There must have been something dark reflecting in his expression, something hunting for him to hear Strange, of all things, apologizing.

Tony grit his teeth, not daring to look his way. “You at least complete your job?”

The question tasted bitter coming from his mouth. This wasn’t a job, this wasn’t a mission — this was a kid, a kid he felt responsible for. “They made it personal for you.” Strange had told him. Tony huffed. Maybe his magical spirits were onto something after all.

“Yes,” Stephen answered. “Francis Klum has been dealt with.”

Dmitri was gone, Klum was gone— they had eliminated two enemies, two major threats and yet there was no celebrating. There was no win. Of all the battles they had fought, Tony felt the biggest loss from this one.

“Good,” he snapped. “Knock out the competition and all that, right?”

Stephen sighed. He leaned forward, trying to meet Tony’s face. “I know we don’t see eye to eye Stark, but I hope you understand this was never about that.”

“What I understand is you came here to help save him and this...” Tony waved a hand around, “this is what we get.”

A mess. A disaster. Damage he was sure could never be repaired. Tony’s face fell back into his hands, his back aching from hunching over.

Stephen hadn’t looked away. “You did save him. I know that’s hard to see right now —”

“Does he die?” Tony’s head shot up, angrily looking towards him. “You were here to make sure he doesn’t die. His death plays a role in my future, right, that’s what you said? So tell me — does he die?”

Tony hated that Stephen didn’t respond. He hated that his eyes locked with his, trying to tell him an answer he refused to accept.

Tony slammed an open palm on the armrest. “Come on Strange, use that glowing stone of yours for something!”

His shout bounced off the walls, loud and surly. Stephen didn’t engage it. He didn’t stop Tony from being angry, rather he stood up, putting distance between them.

“I have faith the child will pull through. I don’t need the Vishanti to tell me that.” He lowered his chin, staring Tony down. “Neither do you.”

Tony opened his mouth, words ready to leave his lips when the rustling of wind caught his attention. By the time he looked up, Stephen had already wrapped his cloak around his shoulders, the scarlet fabric resting against his collar bones.

“I do have to go for now,” he stated, having returned to the familiar blue tunic that he once wore before. The green scrubs were gone in the blink of an eye. “There’s another matter that calls for my
attention.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “Yeah, of course, no reason to stick around here anymore. I get it.”

“Tony.”

He looked up, momentarily surprised at the sincerity in Strange’s voice. It sounded foreign, something else he was sure his mind was imagining. Strange cocked his head to the side, seeming truly and honestly concerned.

Tony decided he liked it better when the man was a smart-ass.

“I will return. To see Peter, to check up on your team,” he promised, an unfamiliar softness coating his tone.

Tony held back a bitter laugh. He distantly wondered how even when unconscious and dying the kid still managed to win everyone over.

Stephen stood up straighter, chin held high. “But right now, I’ve been alerted to a dangerous situation here in New York. There’s an ancient organization called The Hand who have been using powerful occult magic and a team of vigilantes plans to go up against them. I would stay if I could, but unfortunately, that’s not something I can ignore.”

Tony stared down at his hands. He wasn’t in any position to argue, not that he wanted to, not that he had the energy to. He stayed quiet as Strange walked away and it was only when he briefly stopped that Tony looked back up.

“Oh,” Stephen turned around, finger pointing down the hall. “And I also don’t want to deal with her.”

Tony heard as two double doors slammed open, just as Strange departed, leaving a rain of fizzling orange sparks where he once stood.

When the dying cracklings of magic fully dissipated, it cleared the way to see Helen Cho storming into the room. Tony shot to his feet, the exchange with Strange already forgotten, his eyes wide as he watched her quickly approach.

“What the hell was that about, Stark!?” Helen was shouting, and he didn’t have the courage to tell her to stop. “As if its bad enough you bring a child into medical —”

He held both his hands up, both open palmed. “I know, I’m —”

“I’ve got this entire staff up my ass because Tony Stark decided to risk the life —”

“I know, I’m sorry, I know!”

Helen didn’t waste a moments breath. “I will never, ever do that again. Do you hear me? Is that clear?”

“I know—I know!” Tony had no intention of matching the volume of her voice but he was slowly losing control over his temper, and his words were starting to waver with frustration.

Helen roughly poked a finger to his chest.

“No!” she snapped, sounding eerily dangerous. “You don’t get to know. You weren’t in there saving the life of a child. A child, Stark! We did not sign up for this, not in the least bit.”
Tony swallowed back his pride, awkwardly trying to hide the tremble that coursed through him from an uncontrollable bout of nerves. He settled on crossing his arms, stuffing his hands deep into his armpits.

“How bad?” he asked. “How bad is it?”

He barely had time to react as she shoved an electronic tablet straight against his chest.

“You tell me,” Helen coldly said.

Any other time and he’d have laughed at her audacity. They had known each other long enough for her to be aware that he hated, absolutely despised being handed things. And yet here he was, his hands fumbling to catch the device she had shoved against him.

Tony looked down at the pad, letting his eyes pick out words that meant the most to him. *Blunt abdominal trauma, hypovolemia, comminuted tibial fracture, malnourished, severe dehydration* — this was about as bad as it came.

“Is he going to be okay?” Tony asked, his voice shaking.

Helen crossed her arms, her lab jacket bunching around her chest as she did. Her expression seemed to soften, if just slightly, though her lips stayed pressed in a grim line. Tony couldn’t tell if she had taken pity on his crumbling self-composure or if she had gotten rid of most of her anger. He was too preoccupied to really care.

“He’s on life support,” she answered.

Tony immediately tossed the tablet onto an empty seat.

“*Christ*, he —” His hands dug deep into his hair, tugging harshly.

“He’s lost an enormous amount of blood that we can’t transfuse back into him.” Helen put a hand up, quickly stopping Tony from asking any questions. “You can go to Bruce for those details. Right now, you need to know that he’s critical. Our goal is to get him through today. Then the next twenty-four hours after that. This is not...this is not *okay* though, Tony.”

Her words were still short, still clipped with a heavy weariness attached to them. Tony knew she wasn’t just talking about Peter’s condition anymore. He knew he had royally messed up this time and he didn’t blame her for pointing it out.

Keeping Peter secret from everyone turned out to be a terrible idea. The kid was enhanced and he was the one who knew that. They should have taken more action when the cat was finally out of the bag, they should have had studies done on him, Bruce should have looked at him sooner — they should have prepared for this.

He shouldn’t have had an entire medical staff running around like chickens with their heads cut off because they were clueless to Peter’s physiology. That wasn’t fair to anyone involved.

“What do we...what do we do?” Tony locked his eyes with hers, not just asking but practically begging for an answer. “How do we fix this?”

Helen shook her head. She quickly leaned down to snatch the tablet back, shooting hot daggers at Tony the entire time.

“You do nothing. This is *my* area of expertise.” She spun fast on her heels. “You’ve done enough.”
Tony had felt a lot of shame in the past couple of days, enough to make him physically ill. But nothing compared to the moment Helen stormed away from him. He ran a shaking hand over his mouth, letting the coarse feel of his facial hair prick against his fingertips.

The power dynamics were completely reversed and there was no ground for him to stand on. If Helen wanted to be angry with him, he wouldn’t fight it. If May wanted to knock him flat on his ass, she deserved the right to do so.

He had messed up. Big time.

His chest was starting to feel heavy again. He wasn’t sure what there was left for him to do, having become so used to being pulled in a thousand different directions that the moment of quiescence left him bemused.

There was nothing left, his tank was on fumes. His knees buckled before he knew it and he sat back down in the chair, losing complete control of his body.

For the first time in what felt like all week, he let out a breath of air that contained everything within him and everything that held him together.

—

“Is everyone okay?”

Tony was seeing red, and it wasn’t just from the multi-million dollar suit in front of him.

“No thanks to you,” he retorted, his words sounding sharper from the echo of his Iron Man helmet.

The kid snapped his head over a lightning fast speed.

“No thanks to me?” Peter jumped down, grabbing his mask from the ledge. “Those weapons were out there and I tried to tell you about it…but you didn’t listen. None of this would’ve happened if you had just listened to me!”

God, his voice was breaking. There might have been room for a puberty joke if Tony wasn’t so utterly pissed. Peter was waving his finger around with an authority he didn’t have, anger he didn’t get to feel because this was more than him, more than —

“If you even cared, you’d actually be here.”

Tony was out of the suit within a second.

Peter had taken two steps back in the same time frame.

And for a moment, they stared at each other. It took everything, goddamn everything within him not to lose control then and there. Tony had patience, he had a great deal of patience, but he was definitely lacking a large amount of tolerance to this kind of ignorance.

He sniffed, hard. “I did listen, kid. Who do you think called the FBI, huh? Do you know I was the only one who believed in you? Everyone else said I was crazy to recruit a fourteen-year-old kid —”
Tony clenched his jaw, getting hotter with each “yes sir”, angrier with every “I’m sorry, I understand” that came flying out of the kid’s mouth.

Because he didn’t. He didn’t understand.

He was a kid. A fourteen — fifteen — he was a teenager for Christ’s sake! Barely at the legal voting age and spending his time trying to hold together two parts of a three thousand ton ferry that should have ripped him in two.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry.” Peter was a broken record, repeating the same thing.

Tony shook his head. “Sorry doesn’t cut it.”

God, this wasn’t his job. This wasn’t something he should be doing — he wasn’t meant for this, he wasn’t cut out for this. Someone else needed to protect the kid, someone more capable.

Someone who wouldn’t get so attached.

Peter frowned. “I just wanted to be like you.”

Tony looked out to the island, desperately wishing he hadn’t heard those words. He held back every response that he wanted to say — ‘no kid, you don’t want to be like me. I’m a mess. I’m a failure, a screw-up, people have lost their lives because of me. You don’t want to be like me.’

He sighed. “And I wanted you to be better.”

Almost seven hours had passed before they heard any news. Steve was aware of each minute that painfully went by, the night moving at such a sluggishly slow pace that he couldn’t keep his eyes off the clock. The team regrouped in the common area long before he had joined them and stayed there with no intention of leaving.

Once security had been handled, and once he was cleared from medical himself, there was nothing left to distract himself from the wait. He shed the thermal blanket the nurses had provided him and passed it onto Wanda, the girl visibly shaken once having been told of the condition Peter was brought it.

In lieu of sitting like the others, he paced. While he wouldn’t let it show, not knowing anything had begun to peel away at the composure he had the responsibility to maintain. He hadn’t felt so unraveled since leaving Bucky in Wakanda.

By the time the sun started to leak through the skylight ceilings, their concern began to heighten. Luckily it was around that same time that Bruce walked in, Helen close at his side.

Both looked positively dead on their feet. No one commented when they quietly settled on the couches. Bruce listlessly dropped his head into his hands and Helen handed out an electronic tablet.
to Steve, who slowly sat down on the sofa across from them.

“He’s alive,” Bruce mumbled through his fingers, scrubbing harshly at his face. “That’s about the extent of good news there is.”

Steve frowned as he read through the data on the medical chart. Bruce wasn’t exaggerating. While he was by no means a doctor, the details on Peter’s file were far from promising. As expected; he wish it wasn't.

“It’s beyond anything I’ve ever seen before. If this were to have happened to anyone else, even you Captain,” Helen said, somberly looking at Steve, “it would have been fatal.”

They stayed mostly silent throughout the explanation that was provided, passing the tablet around for everyone to read. Only Wanda refused to take hold of it, preferring instead to just listen to Helen as she spoke.

“Infection? Muscle damage?” Sam handed the device over to Clint. “You said they think he was shoved into a pipe — he going to see any permanent damage from that?”

Helen shook her head.

“Scans came back clean, though Doctor Wu did have to remove some small intestines. The object perforated the jejunum of his abdomen but missed the descending colon by roughly an inch.” She held a hand in the air before anyone could react. “That is a good thing. It’s not an ideal situation, but it shows things could have been worse. I truly don’t believe even he would have survived such a septic reaction.”

“So no organ damage then?” Rhodey asked.

“No, thankfully,” Helen answered. “He seems to be reacting a lot better to the...well, the insane cocktail of antibiotics we’re pumping into him. I think we’ll have a handle on the peritonitis before it starts to progress. There’s a very dedicated wound care team monitoring him to ensure that doesn’t happen.”

Steve could tell that she was trying to remain optimistic, purposefully finding a way to end each statement with something positive. The problem was, she couldn’t take away the exhaustion from her voice, the devastation, the desperation. It made reading between the lines all the more easier.

Clint’s finger scrolled through the pad, his eyebrows furrowed. “Why’d you cut open his leg?”

Helen sighed. “Cut open is extreme, Mr. Barton. For starters, we took every measure possible to make small incisions. He suffered a comminuted tibial fracture — that’s pieces of bone which needed repaired. Trust me, it wasn’t a procedure any of us wanted to do, not in his current condition. But we couldn’t plaster cast it and risk the bones improperly healing. Typically, with that type of fracture the patient would undergo surgical treatment for an internal fixation device — metal plates implanted directly onto the bone.”

Clint was the last person to receive the tablet, and as such, he tossed it carelessly onto the glass table in front of them. The hard case enclosing it caused it to bounce up with a clang.

“You screwed a rod on the outside of the kid’s leg,” he retorted.

“It’s temporary,” she explained. “An external fixation device was the best route to take. In the circumstance of a patient with a healing factor, you don’t want to provide unnecessary medical treatment when their body will repair itself. There was no reason to do such an extensive, internal
procedure if we could avoid it. There’s a small rod connecting on the lateral side of his knee to his ankle, it’s there to keep the bones in place while it heals. This way once it does, the process of removing it will be less of a toll on him.”

Steve spared a quick glance to Clint, who leaned back into the sofa with an exasperated sigh. He knew the man was more upset at the situation than he was at Helen, they all were. Though it was a twisted thought, he was glad they didn’t have to be there when this happened to Peter.

Fists hitting skin, bones breaking, gasping and choking on water — he already found himself constantly fighting the sounds out of his head. He couldn’t take more.

“He’s wrists?” Steve quietly asked. “They...Tony and I saw...”

“They’ll be okay. Hairline fractures,” Helen told him. “The orthopedic department here has been making vast enhancements in 3D printed technology to utilize for limb immobility situations such as this. Unfortunately, they haven’t advanced to the point where it would benefit his leg, but it’s working well on his hands. Barely noticeable, doesn’t even wrap around his forearm, simply a band around the wrists.”

She demonstrated with the smallest smile her mouth could manage, a visible strain that Steve didn’t have the energy to match. He curtly nodded, acknowledging her response.

Sitting next to him, Natasha had locked her gaze on Bruce, never taking her eyes off him throughout the discussion. If she hadn’t been looking directly at him, she would have sworn that she heard the man talk.

‘Amazing, isn’t it?’ rang in her ears, words that he never actually spoke, a personality normally so predictable faded under the stress of the situation.

It disturbed her how quiet Bruce had been. It disturbed them all. He was usually one to pitch in with giddy enthusiasm about how this type of technology functioned, proceeding to bore the team with details that they never asked for and could never understand.

Instead, he sat quietly, chin in the palm of his hands and elbows on his knees. Natasha’s brows pulled together, concerned. “Bruce?”

His head snapped up, as if he now suddenly remembered where he was. Bruce looked at her, the deep lines across his face echoing her exhaustion. Almost immediately he bowed his head again, taking his glasses off and pinching the bridge of his nose tightly.

“I’m sorry, it’s just...” he sighed heavily, “this is bad.”

Wanda leaned forward, wrapping the blanket tighter around herself. “How bad?”

“His blood is...well, it’s mutated,” Bruce said. “Beyond what’s compatible with any other cross-match. On the surface he still has a normal B positive blood type, but beneath that it...it’s more. The antigens and protein markers have been so abnormally altered by that spider bite that he’s...he’s essentially developed an ABO incompatibility.”

Sam was the first to catch on. “He can’t receive blood.”

Bruce nodded. Clint audibly cursed under his breath, and Rhodey scoffed, shaking his head in disbelief.
“It’s...incredibly unfortunate in the current situation, but yes. We had to stop transfusing the universal O negative to prevent a hemolytic reaction,” Bruce explained.

Natasha stayed calm. “So what now?”

Steve sat up a little straighter. “Doesn’t he have accelerated healing?”

“Yes,” Helen simply answered. “And that healing factor has certainly kept him alive this long.”

“Where’s the but?” Clint asked, arms crossed and all but rolling his eyes.

Bruce didn’t seem to have the willpower to answer the question. The tension grew twice as thick between them, and Steve was silently appreciative when Helen finally took over.

“He can only regenerate so fast. With his injuries, with the hypovolemia...he spent days dehydrated, malnourished — his body needs twice as much intake as that of a normal individual, and consequently he loses it twice as fast,” she explained. “It’s not as if he’s been stripped of his healing factor. It’s that his body is simply too weak and injured to utilize it.”

Rhodey leaned into the side of the couch, his temple resting between two fingers that rubbed at his forehead. He appeared to be able to keep up with the medical details up until now. It was typically the case for him though, superpowers always had a tendency to complicate things.

“So what does all that mean?” he asked.

Bruce put his glasses back on. “Think of it like a muscle. It takes energy to use. The hematology department has a theory — one I’m inclined to agree with — he used a lot of strength in just trying to stay alive. It’s not a...pleasant thing to think about, but his body more than likely went into hypovolemic shock multiple times. A normal person loses a certain amount of blood, they go into shock and if not treated, their heart gives out. Peter's body lost a certain amount of blood, fell into shock and began to regenerate the blood that was lost, until it couldn’t anymore. And then the process repeated.”

His hands spun and twisted around each other, mimicking a moving wheel.

Natasha frowned. “Until now.”

Steve didn’t need to see Bruce nodding to know the answer. He felt the cushions of the sofa lighten as Natasha stood up, her only response being that she walked away from the group. By the time he looked up, she was standing across the room and over the stairway banister. They all knew her well enough to leave her be.

“I would like to reiterate what I said before,” Helen cut in. “By all accounts, he should be dead. He’s hanging on by the skin of his teeth but...he’s hanging on.”

Steve really didn’t know what to say to that. Of course the kid was hanging on. He was a hell of a fighter, a soldier beyond what they could have ever expected.

He was also just a kid.

“We’re not soldiers,” Tony had once told him, the words resonating in his ears. He was starting to agree with that sentiment.

“So what’s being done?” Steve asked.
Bruce shifted on the couch. “We’ve kept him intubated, to take the stress of breathing off his body. He’s being given plenty of fluids to try to get his electrolytes back in balance. We’re feeding him through a nasogastric tube with a powerful formula of vitamins, minerals, protein, carbohydrates — something that really provides a kick start to get his healing factor back up and running. I think...I think we all agree that the next twenty-four hours will be the most critical. We’ll be able to tell more after that.”

Steve briefly looked over his shoulder and out the large bay window behind them. The sun was starting to rise, purple and pink blending together and leaking in from the skylights above them. This was just the start of things, and on top of everything else going on, he realized that they were in for a hell of a day.

“The painkillers worked, then?” Steve asked, his voice hushed.

Bruce shrugged. “For now.”

“I really don’t like how that sounds,” Clint fired back.

Bruce sighed and rubbed at the back of his neck. He shrugged again to empathize his frustration and Helen calmly placed a hand on his thigh when he seemed to become further agitated.

“They could keep working. They could not. There’s no way to tell at this point, we know so little about his physiology and currently, we’re not in a position to play the guessing game,” shes said. “Bruce and I will be spending our time working to synthesize a formula specifically to target his genetic make-up.”

“May I?” Sam raised his hand, leaning forward. “Kid needs strong painkillers, right? Just give him everything you got. Double, triple, quadruple the doses.”

“It doesn’t work like that,” muttered by Bruce and “We’ve already tried.” was quickly over-spoken by Helen.

Sam raised an eyebrow at them both.

“Why do you think Steve has his own special dope to begin with?” Clint asked.

Steve shook his head. “Sam wasn’t here for that.”

“Individuals like Steve, like Peter...they have faster metabolisms than we do.” Bruce rubbed at his eyes beneath his glasses. “It’s-it’s complicated, it involves a lot of pharmacology and chemistry but...basically, when we created Steve’s reinforced analgesic, it was all about finding that sweet spot. It’s not about the dosage given, it’s about the concentration. Essentially. Among many other aspects that —”

Helen interrupted, “Doubling the dosage would kill him. If I were to, for example, give Peter one hundred milligrams of morphine — when the normal dosage is anywhere from ten to twenty — his liver won’t safely absorb that amount of medication. He’ll overdose before he even begins to feel the effects.”

Sam didn’t hide his confusion. “It doesn’t affect him but it affects him? I don’t get it.”

“He has an enhanced metabolism. So his body is going to burn through the medication at a much faster rate than we do. Burning through something means it needs to process through the liver. The liver can’t handle that amount of toxicity, it’ll shut down, all within seconds.” Helen’s hands waved about wildly as she talked. “His healing factor doesn’t work that fast, his heart will give out,
or his lungs, or both — it’ll happen very quickly. Which is why we need to synthesize a formula —"

“I get it,” Sam interrupted. “Go already.”

Helen hesitantly leaned forward to grab hold of the discarded tablet. She looked around at the group to ensure they were satisfied with the explanations provided and Steve nodded his head, wordlessly encouraging her to leave.

He knew they wouldn’t be seeing either of the two for a while, not with the work that they had cut out for them. Distractions weren’t something they could afford, and this was their last chance to reach out with any questions.

The room stayed quiet. They left, and Steve found himself breathing out a large sigh. His lungs still ached at the warm air that passed through, his chest tight and sore from the coldness of the Oscorp base.

Natasha hadn’t moved from across the room, leaning heavily over the stairway banister. The rest of them sat around the sofas, too busy caught up in their own thoughts to make discussion. Not that they had been discussing much to begin with. The early hours of the morning had been spent in a stressful silence, too busy waiting for any news about Peter to debrief or discuss the aftermath of the mission.

Now the sun was rising and a day new was beginning. With the medical staff no longer fully preoccupied, they’d have to notify SHIELD, who would certainly hound Steve with repercussions before the afternoon even came.

He sighed, remembering that he had a promise to uphold. There was no reason for them all to get into trouble, not if it could be avoided. Still, he imagined there wouldn’t be much time to squeeze in a nap today.

Steve looked up, eyes wandering across the room. “Has anyone seen Tony?”

Tony stuffed his hands deep into his pockets walking down the foyer of the compound. Watching Happy and the kid pull up gave him a renewed energy. He may even say that he was borderline excited. Why shouldn’t he be? For the first time in months, things seemed to finally go in the right direction.

Plus, he loved any press conferences where he got to flaunt and show off.

Tony gave one playful punch to Peter before deciding to go all in and wrap his arm around the kid’s shoulder. After all, he did just save his ass — all their asses, actually. He was rather proud of the young Spiderling.

“Sorry I took your suit,” Tony began. “I mean, you had it coming. Actually, it turns out it was the perfect sort of tough love moment that you needed, right? To urge you on, right? Wouldn't you think? Don't you think?”

Peter seemed to hesitate. “I-I...”
“Let’s just say it was.”

Tony sighed. It was shitty move, certainly not one of his finer moments. He distantly wondered if Peter felt the same way, if there was any harboring resentment towards the situation.

Oh well. This would make up for it. Hell, this was going to blow it out of the park.

“Mr. Stark, I’m...”

“You screwed the pooch hard. Big time.” Tony clasped his shoulder tighter, guiding him down the hallway. “But then you did the right thing, you took the dog to the free clinic, you raised the hybrid puppies... alright, not my best analogy. I was wrong about you. I think with a little more mentoring, you could be a real asset to the team.”

Peter stumbled up the two steps that led to the silver showcase, so fixated on Tony that he barely noticed where he was walking.

“To the — to the...to the team?”

“Yeah.” He pointed ahead. “Anyway, there’s about fifty reporters behind that door — real ones, not bloggers.” Tony tapped twice on his wristwatch, activating the door in front of them. “So when you’re ready...”

He smirked as Peter’s jaw fell to the floor.

“Why don’t you try that on...and I'll introduce the world to the newest official member of the Avengers — Spider-man.”

Tony waited until Peter had stepped in front of him to he let his excitement show. The look on Peter’s face, the pure astonishment, it made every trouble worthwhile.

This was a good choice. It was a step in the right direction. He knew he wouldn’t regret this.

Tony Stark had an aura, a vibe that could be felt miles away. There was no questioning his presence, no doubting whether or not he was around. The very air around him changed, thickening with a cock-sureness that couldn’t be matched.

That, of course, was on his good days. If things were rough, it was more like an approaching storm, dark and turbulent. There was density in the atmosphere that screamed trouble ahead.

Rhodey learned of that aura early on in their friendship, and three decades later he continued to test its limit.

He knew things were bad long before he took the turn into the medical wing, long before he entered the elevator that led him where he needed to be. Yet he jogged down the hallway as fast as his mechanical leg braces would take him, saying damn to all caution signs that tried to warn him of what was ahead.

When he found Tony, the man was alone. He stood idly against the wall, his forehead tucked deeply between the space of his elbow and his arm pressed flat against the drywall surface. His face was buried away.
Rhodey stiffened. “Tony.”

The sound of his own name barely caught his attention. Tony looked up, just enough to see Rhodey and just enough that Rhodey could see him.

The thing with Tony Stark was that he always emanated motivation. Even in the cruelest of times, even walking the deserts of Afghanistan with no hope of rescue, he exuded confidence and fortitude.

Rhodey had never seen him so hopeless before.

“Jesus, man.” He walked further into the room, one slow step at a time. “I’ve been looking everywhere for you. Are you okay?”

Tony visibly swallowed, his Adam’s apple quivering as he pushed himself off the wall and nodded.

“I’m — I’m fine,” Tony choked out. “He’s not. He’s —”

“I know. Cho debriefed us.” Rhodey gently laid a hand on his bicep. “I’m sorry, Tones. I’m...”

He sighed, ending his sentence with a squeeze of Tony’s arm. He hated that his friend looked everywhere but at him; at the chairs, the walls, the windows but never at him. Rhodey was surprised he hadn’t masked himself behind a pair of dark tinted sunglasses yet, though at the same time he was positive Tony hadn’t left the very room they stood in since arriving back.

It led to the burning question he still hadn’t gotten an answer to.

“What the hell happened down there?”

Tony rubbed at his eyes and shrugged. His mouth went to open and then closed, unsure of what to say.

“I really have no idea where to start,” he settled on.

Rhodey released his grip but stayed close by, giving a curt nod. He expected as much of an answer. It was about the same thing he got from Rogers. The details would inevitably arise later in the much-needed reports, briefings and meetings that were bound to come.

Right now, it didn’t matter. As long as they were safe, the story could wait until another time.

Rhodey titled his head to the side. “Just tell me we aren’t gonna have to worry about a certain psychopathic Russian coming around here again.”

It seemed to take Tony a moment to process what he had said.

“No.” Tony immediately shook his head, his eyes clenching shut. “I mean, yes. He was — he was dealt with. Gone.”

Rhodey grimaced. That alone explained a lot of why everyone wasn’t providing details on what happened. On one end of the spectrum, he was glad to hear the S.O.B got what was coming to him. On the other...

Rhodey sighed. This was going to be a hell of a headache with SHIELD.

“Silver lining?”
Tony barely got the chance to croak a laugh, the sound dry and empty from his throat. As he did, the doors next to them swung open. Though the woman who passed by didn’t give them even one quick glance, Tony was chasing after her with a new found energy.

“Cho — hey, Helen!”

She stopped, refusing to turn and face him.

Rhodey looked between the two, painfully aware that Tony seemed as if he was about to fall on his knees and beg. That was not a trait he ever saw from the man, not in his darkest moments. This was every bit screwed up.

“Please,” Tony said. “I need to see him.”

Helen shook her head. “No.”

“Please.”

When she spun around, Rhodey took a step back. Why, he wasn’t too sure. She radiated such intense anger that he felt safer at a six feet distance from her, five clearly being too close.

“What part of critical do you not understand, Tony?”

There was a beat where Tony didn’t respond. He stood silently, pulling his shoulders back and sniffing, hard.

“What part of I’m your fucking boss do you not understand?”

Yeah, that was more like Tony Stark.

Comfort be damned, Rhodey quickly stepped forward and placed a hand against Tony’s chest, distancing himself from the doctor.

“Whoa, Tony, back down —”

Helen stepped forward to bridge the gap. “His aunt gets to see him. Once, every hour, for five minutes. She gets to see him and no one else. You? You need to know what’s best and stay far, far away from me.”

“Fine. That’s fine.” Tony stared her down. “You’re fired.”

Rhodey huffed. “Okay, break it up —”

“Yeah?” Helen cocked an eyebrow high. “Who else do you think you’ll hire to jump in the middle of this mess?”

“Will you two — Jesus —” It was like dealing with children. Irrationally angry and emotional children. “Just take a breather, both of you.”

Tony turned away from them both, and Rhodey’s open palm fell by his side without a place to rest it against. Tony paced, hands stuffed deep under his arms and head bowed low to the floor, possibly cursing underneath his breath but too quiet to hear.

If there was one thing Rhodey knew best about Tony, it was that he never broke in the presence of others. That was reserved for solitude, for when he could be in private. This was beyond an
unusual circumstance. This just never happened.

“Helen, come on.” Rhodey approached her, keeping his tone soft. “Can’t you tell that the kid means a lot to him? Let him have a couple minutes.”

During his time in active duty military, Rhodey had become accustomed to dealing with hot-heads and tempers beyond his control. Sometimes he distantly wondered if that’s how he and Tony could get along so well. The man’s anger was never a problem for him to deal with.

Helen wasn’t angry. Frustrated, exhausted, emotionally tore up — sure. But she wasn’t angry. She even seemed to soften up when she caught sight of Tony pacing back and forth, clearly distraught and falling apart.

Rhodey gripped her shoulder. “He went through hell and back to save him. He just needs to see that he’s okay.”

Even though Tony stood behind him, his stare pierced through them both. Rhodey held his breath, hoping Tony was smart enough to keep his mouth shut, hold off on his Stark attitude until Helen gave them an answer. They both knew he wasn’t in control here, that this wasn’t his playground. Someone else got to make the decisions and he needed to respect that.

When she gave a tight nod, Rhodey practically sighed in relief.

“Five minutes. You stay out of everyone’s way,” she instructed. “They want you gone, you leave. Is that clear?”

Tony’s back stood straighter than a stiff board. The lines around his eyes deepened as he gave a curt nod.

“Crystal.” His voice, albeit audible, was paper thin.

Helen had already turned to walk back towards the double doors, pulling at the retractable drawstring attached to her hip and placing the ID card up to the access bar. Tony was all but bouncing on his heels.

The door beeped once and Helen looked at Tony, her eyes narrowed.

“Five minutes, Tony.”

The sweet smell of chlorhexidine was overwhelming as the doors slid open, familiar scents of betadine antiseptic crossing into the waiting room. Rhodey stood idly by himself, his arms crossed over his chest as he watched the two walk inside.

“Thank you, Mr. Stark.” Peter took a deep breath. “But I’m-I’m good.”

Tony shook his head, puzzled at the kid’s response. While his confusion was mostly hidden behind the yellow tinted sunglasses on his face, he had a feeling his creased brow gave away his brief falter in composure.

After all, this was not the answer he had expected.
“You’re good? Good —” Tony never stammered, never stumbled over his words. Yet the surprise seemed to strip him of his ability to speak. “How are you good?”

Peter shrugged. “Well, I-I mean, I’d rather just stay on the ground for a little while. Friendly neighborhood Spider-Man. Somebody’s got to look out for the little guy, right?”

Tony frowned.

Would you look at that — the kid was listening to him after all.

It was a process.

The entire ordeal was a process and far beyond what Tony felt he was capable of handling. But he trudged through it anyway. He scrubbed down until every germ was clean off his body. He let the nurses put him in a thin yellow isolation gown, and he placed the disposable paper mask over his mouth. He did it all silently, not daring to utter one single remark the entire time.

There seemed to be five hundred steps before he could get access to Peter’s room and his nerves screamed for them to get a move on, get this done and over with already but he kept it all to himself. They weren’t taking any chances with Peter’s current condition, and he understood that, he really did. It just took forever to prepare for a measly five minutes in the room.

All of it ceased to matter once he finally got inside.

Tony could have sworn his heart would burst out of his throat. His fragile, weak, shrapnel damaged heart.

Goddamn this kid.

He wasn’t sure how much time he had wasted standing uselessly in the doorway, unsure of where to go and if he should even walk inside. The room was packed and clustered with machinery, bustling with working staff and along the way, four-hundred-some square feet shrunk dramatically in the chaos.

Peter seemed to be center of it all, laying flat on his back, motionless in the hospital bed up against the far left wall.

It wasn’t until a nurse kindly walked him in that he finally moved. He barely muttered thanks, too busy staring at where Peter laid, a vortex of spiraling emotions sweeping him away.

Relief, horror, guilt, shame, fear, anxiety — and somehow none of it mattered. Once he was there, once he got close to Peter, he didn’t want to be a breath away. Not ever again.

He was alive. The kid was alive, and he didn’t even care that he needed to rely on the beeping machinery to tell him that. The blazing flames of a burning warehouse had been drowned out by the ocean’s salty waters and washed them ashore — damaged, beaten but alive.

He’d cling to that as long as he could.

Tony shifted weight on his feet and grimaced. Tubes, catheters, wires — Peter was surrounded by a warehouse of medical supplies. A very baggy gown barely covered him, hanging loosely from
his shoulders, more like a blanket than an act of modesty. A thin sheet covered his waist but left his one leg exposed, something Tony adamantly refused to look at because he simply did not have that kind of strength right now. The glimmer of a metal rod was enough to make his stomach churn. His face wasn’t faring much better, a tube snaking down his throat and up his nose, IV’s in his arms and even his chest.

Yet nothing bothered him nearly as much as the stillness.

Peter was always moving, always hyperactive and bouncing with an energy he couldn’t contain. Once Tony had watched the kid doze off in his workshop, and even then he was twitching restlessly. He was never sure if it was his age, the spider-bite or both combined. Whatever it was, it was Peter. Bouncing, jumping, jittery and twitching — he never sat still.

Seeing him so still, so motionless — Tony hated it. Peter looked as if he were only a shell of himself, no color to his face and no warmth to his body. Tony swallowed convulsively against the rising bile in his throat. This was too much.

He had thought that his panic developed more into a slow burn, a languid torture that he could handle. He was wrong.

Tony’s hand dropped from the bed’s plastic railing, resting uneasily on the firm mattress beneath him. He hadn’t meant for his hand to fall on Peter’s, his fingers brushing up against the IVs and wires that protruded from underneath the sheets. He also didn’t move it away.

“You’re good, kid,” Tony muttered quietly.

It wasn’t naive to say as much. Healing factor or not, the kid had the strength of a thousand warriors, strong-willed beyond his expectations. If Peter could have that kind of resolve, so could he. If that meant doing everything in his power to get him better, that was what Tony would do.

“You’re stronger than all of us put together.”

The beeping of machines filled the air, some constant and some further apart. It practically drowned out his voice, already a whisper under his breath. Protectiveness rumbled in his chest and his sight locked onto Peter, unable to look away, unable to want to look away.

His shoulders were stiff and his neck tense, and he never paid mind to his fingers slipping underneath Peter’s palm, lightly gripping his hand in a loose hold. He never paid attention as his thumb grazed back and forth over Peter’s knuckles, distantly remembering the comfort it would bring him when his mother did the same thing.

“You’re good.”

Tony didn’t notice that Helen let him stay an extra eight minutes.

He did notice that Peter’s fingers twitched under his touch.

Chapter End Notes

I am bathing in hurt/comfort right now. Swimming in it. Oh I love it so much.
Alright guys, before I say anything, there's an mind-blowing, amazing, breath-taking piece of art to this story that I have linked both here and back in chapter eighteen. Second shout-out to dragonnan for a gloriously whumpy and beautiful interruption of artwork to this story. How. The. HELL did this fic get such recognition? I'm truly speechless to all the love. More than anything I'm just happy that there are people enjoying it! From one avid fanfic reader to the next, I know how awesome it is to find a story you fall heads over heels with and I'm thrilled some of you have found that in this. All your comments and reviews are treasured and appreciated and I cannot thank you enough.
Family Ties

Chapter Notes

I really can’t emphasize this enough — no amount of words will ever explain how much I love and appreciate every – single – one – of you guys. Seriously, all the kudos and comments and even those who are silently following along — I’m beyond touched. And as long as there are people out there interested in this story, I promise I’ll be here to continue it. Thank you so much for your feedback because it truly is the fuel to the fire of this fanfic.

FUN NERD FACTS!

Annie, Jan, and April are the actual names of May Parker’s sisters.

Fun fanfic facts – you may notice the chapter count increased a bit. ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Like the graceful and agile man he was, Clint woke up by falling off the couch.

“Ophfm!”

His knees smacked on the ground and his head missed the coffee table by mere inches. It was pure luck that his instincts kicked in and his hand reached for the sofa’s armrest, directing him instead towards a complete nose dive on the sleek marble floors.

With an agitated grunt, he mentally noted to complain about the lack of carpet to Tony later. For right now, he directed his focus on his aching muscles and his clumsy attempt at pulling himself off the ground.

“God, I’m getting old,” Clint mumbled, stumbling to his feet. His joints popped and cracked as he stood up.

Across the lounge area and near the kitchen, both Rhodey and Sam sat at the table they normally reserved for breakfast. Clint noticed that the table was clear of any food, and both men instead sat engaged on their individual laptops, their focus unwavering.

Though he was preoccupied, Sam didn’t hesitate to call out, “Sweet dreams, princess?”

Clint visibly rolled his eyes. With hands pressed against the small of his back, he hobbled into the kitchen.

“Ugh,” was the best response he could muster up. The film of sleep was thick on his tongue and the glass of water, sitting on the counter from whoever it belonged to, looked positively fantastic.

“Coffee’s fresh,” Rhodey announced.

“God bless you,” Clint croaked, deciding that fresh coffee was much better than the back-washed
cup of water. Immediately he turned towards the pot and poured himself a mug.

He squinted as the sun from the skylights above glared off the stainless steel appliances around him. One hand lazily rubbed his eye, the other bringing the mug to his lips. While he was still groggy and felt as if he could sleep five more hours, it seemed too bright in the compound to be early in the morning.

“What time is it?” he asked, his words half directed to the guys, half spoke into the mug.

Rhodey didn’t look up from his laptop as he answered, “Ten after eleven.”

Clint made a face, swallowing back his yawn with a gulp of coffee. He couldn’t remember when exactly he had fallen asleep. The days and nights were blurring together into one long string of events. One moment he was talking with Nat, the next his eyes were closed, and he was dreaming about the carnival.

The carnival — he shuddered. That left a sour taste in his mouth more than anything else.

“You do remember that you still have a spare room here, right?” Sam looked straight at him, one eyebrow high in the air.

Clint shrugged. “Honestly man, I wasn’t planning to fall asleep. Something about being trapped in magical fun-house just takes it out of you.”

“There might actually be a valid reason for that,” Rhodey mentioned, his focus sharp on the laptop and his fingers darting across the keyboard.

The answer stirred him awake in a way coffee couldn’t. Clint was already half-way out of the kitchen, his drowsiness forgotten as curiosity won the best of him. “You don’t say.”

There was a stretch of silence, followed by a few mouse clicks.

“Tony gave me the scoop on those files he found in the base,” Rhodey elaborated, looking up from the screen and towards Clint. “Apparently they left behind a ton of documentation when they abandoned the place. There were records of numerous different generic experimentation’s, the creation of Awesome Android —”

Sam huffed. “You guys seriously suck with names.”

“Coming from *Falcon*?” Clint mocked.

Sam rolled his eyes. “Okay, *Hawkeye.*”

“It was a hallucinogenic.”

Rhodey cut right to the point, so fast that Clint almost did a double take between the two men. For a split second, he considered checking his hearing aids. He settled on putting his coffee mug down, his hip leaning heavily against the kitchen island.

“Wanna pass that by me again, shellshock?”

Rhodey leaned back in his chair. “Those playing cards — the ones you all talked about? They were built with housing units to contain a neurotoxin. It was environmental imagery deception; you all thought that you were in trapped in some sort of...demented mirrored fun-house but you weren’t. The gas altered your mental state, tricking *you* into thinking your environment had changed while
everyone around you thought you were gone. Strange was right, once they were destroyed you returned but only for the reason that the hallucinogenic gas had no source to emit from. His magic was fake, all tech and no trick.”

Clint furrowed his brows. From what he remembered, one moment he was walking away from Tony in the abundantly creepy laboratory and then wham, it was like he was surrounded by his own reflection. It all felt so real, so vivid that his stomach began to churn at the idea of anything else occurring.

Someone got into his head, messed with him, played with him. ‘Mind tricks.’ he thought, a growl stirring in his chest, a dangerous rumble at the concept of his mental stated being altered. Again.

Clint rubbed away an approaching headache. As if most of his nights weren’t already haunted by Loki. That, at least, was a problem they were able to get under their control.

This — this was a whole new playing field they hadn’t even begun to unravel.

The thought spurred the question, “And OsCorp created them?”

Rhodey nodded, spinning his laptop around to face Clint. “Along with a hell of a lot of other stuff.”

He walked closer, ultimately taking a seat at the table across from the two men to better read the screen. On the monitor was a multitude of different documents, most classified with redacted information that not even Rhodey’s government access could unlock.

Clint whistled. “This is Strucker level experimentation.”

Rhodey turned the laptop back around. “Minus the scepter gem, yeah, it is.”

Clint let out a huff of air through his cheeks, blowing them out with exasperation. It was naive to think getting the spider-kid back would solve their problem. Turns out their problem was a whole can of worms they had only now just discovered, sitting in their own backyard.

It looked like Tony was right after all. OsCorp was into some seriously shady shit.

“I won’t lie, that’s some disturbing bullshit.” Sam’s finger wagged at the laptop. “All this done by one man? Who knows what else Norman Osborn could be up to.”

“Well, that’s what I’m hoping we can find out.” Rhodey cracked both sides of his neck and pulled the laptop closer to the edge of the table, his fingers returning to the keyboard.

Clint frowned, noticing that the lines of fatigue on Rhodey’s face stood out among his concrete focus. The bags underneath his were highlighted from the laptop’s screen and overall, he looked tired. Positively beat.

Granted, they all were. No one had slept well over the past handful of days, not with Peter’s condition weaving in and out of something the doctors would determine as being remotely close to stable.

Clint groaned and scrubbed at his face. Seeing the boy the way he was —

He slid his chair back and stood up, unwilling to let himself fall into the trap of wallowing. It wouldn’t do anyone any good if he did. The team seriously needed some strong glue to keep them together during all this. Clint wouldn’t deny that some days, he felt like was always playing the role of that glue.
And if he knew anyone in the building who needed him right now, it was one person in particular.

“Speaking of Strucker,” he started to say, stretching out his arms with a yawn. “I should probably go talk with Wanda. She was a wreck last time I saw her.”

Rhodey’s head shot up. “Actually, Clint...”

“She’s gone,” Sam bluntly finished.

Clint’s jaw dropped. “What!?"

The panic that made his voice increase an octave could only be rivaled with the devastating fear they had recently witnessed from Tony. The parental overtone was overwhelming, but unlike Tony, Clint didn’t bother hiding it.

Sam held both his hands in the air placatingly. “Calm down. She left with Strange last night. Actually, Strange left a few days ago and then came back for her. It was kind of...”

Rhodey quirked an eyebrow. “Strange?”

Sam smirked. “Good one.”

Clint shook his head, eyes closed as he tried to process the fact. “Why? Why would she leave?”

And not say goodbye. But that was a thought for another time.

“SHIELD, man,” Rhodey answered, his tone slightly accusatory that Clint had forgotten so soon. “You know how closely they’ve been watching her since Lagos, she’s on thin ice with them already as it is. If they find out she was insubordinate to the lock-down, we could lose her as part of the team.”

“Shit,” Clint muttered under his breath. “You’re right.”

He felt a little silly for not coming to that conclusion early. A beat passed, and at that moment he remembered Steve’s strict instructions on not leaving the compound until SHIELD gave orders. Seeing as those instructions went all the way down to the janitorial staff, he couldn’t help but feel confused.

“How’d she get out?”

Sam’s only answer was a demonstration. His hands waved around dramatically, mimicking the same motions the Sorcerer had used to create his magical portals.

Rhodey cocked an eyebrow at how greatly exaggerated he acted.

Clint merely nodded. “Right. Makes sense.”

Still, it didn’t sit right with him. Clint picked up his coffee mug, taking a hefty sip. If he had to be honest, after everything that had happened, he really just preferred if the entire team was all in one place, present and accounted for. Not to mention, the last he saw Wanda she had been nearing a breaking point, her heartache so unabated he could practically feel it vibrate off the girl.

He was worried about her.

He was worried about a lot of them.
“It might help you to know that Steve encouraged it,” Rhodey explained. “Strange extended the offer to train her. Rogers thought it would be best, seeing as we can’t exactly teach her much in the...magical department.”

Clint noticed how hesitant Rhodey sounded using the term ‘magical’. He couldn’t blame him. Before this, the archer never actually considered Wanda to have magical abilities himself. Enhanced, absolutely. Magical — well that was a whole new element for them all.

The polite side of him realized he never got to say thanks to the ‘master of the mystic arts’ for saving them. The cynical side of him was glad the man was gone, allowing things could finally go back to normal.

As normal as things would ever get for them, anyway.

“I think it’ll be a good distraction too, Clint,” Sam added, his words full of more warmth than his usual lighthearted self. “This whole thing with Peter really seemed to get under her skin.”

He sighed, knowing that was an understatement. In such a short time she had formed a connection with Peter that everyone but himself was taken aback by. Clint, however, saw it coming a mile away. Peter had filled a hole she had since she left Sovokia, and it was apparent why.

His grip tightened around the mug’s handle. “He reminds her a lot of her brother.”

“Reminds her?” Sam huffed wryly. “She’s practically taken on the role of his big sister.”

Rhodey didn’t look up from his screen as he said, “Then that makes you the annoying big brother.”

“Psh, whatever.” Sam waved him off. “Brother means I’m young. Old-man over here is pretty much the dad.”

Clint scoffed and set his coffee mug down in the kitchen sink. “Oh hell no. That’s all Stark. If anything, I’m the cool uncle.”

No one argued with his statement. Distantly, Clint wondered if Tony himself would argue with it if he were there.

He shook his head at the thought. As a father himself, he knew a dad when he saw one, related by blood or not. Tony had clearly developed something more than a mentor relationship with the kid, and he could deny that until his face turned blue; they all knew better.

Of all the changes they had gone through this past year, seeing Tony fall into such a parental role was one he hadn’t expected. It was nice. Dare he say it, Clint felt more relatable to Tony now more than ever. The billionaire somehow seemed more human, more like the dad side of him that lived away on a farm taking care of his own children.

It was just a shame that everyone else noticed it before Tony did himself. Clint could only hope that after all this, the man would accept that it was okay to get close to someone, that he and the kid were a good fit for each other. After all this, they deserved some happiness in their lives.

Sam pushed his laptop aside, leaning forward on both his elbows with a loud, thoughtful hum. “Then Natasha is…?”

“But going to kill you if she overhears this conversation,” Clint quickly interjected.

They continued on as if they hadn’t heard him.
“Aunt?” Rhodey suggested, looking over to Sam.

“I was leaning more towards surrogate mom,” he quietly answered.

Clint rolled his eyes. As humorous as he found the team’s make-shift family tree, his growing list of things to do was only getting longer by the second. His feet walked heavy on the floor, knowing that on his list would eventually be checking up on Peter. He could only hope that a new day would bring something other than bad news.

“Well, now that I’m thoroughly reminded of family,” Clint said, already heading out of the lounge area. “I need to call Laura, let her know I’m not flying back today.”

Sam frowned. “You don’t have to stick around, man. Steve will give you a pass, go — be with your family.”

“No,” Clint insisted, shaking his head. “Not yet, not until this shit with SHIELD goes away. Besides, after everything with the Raft, I owe it to Steve to stick around.”

Rhodey tsked but said nothing further. Sam shrugged, going back to his laptop.

Clint took a moment to watch the two, both busy on their computers studying the newly found OsCorp documents. Sam may have been right; they all knew Steve would be happy to let him go home. All he had to do was ask and they’d make the arrangements, under SHIELD’s radar or not.

He mused on the thought. After the past couple days, hell the past couple of weeks, there was just too much going on here for him to leave. Semi-retired or not.

“Besides...” Clint hesitated, giving a small smile on his way out. “You guys are family, too.”

“Okay, old uncle,” Sam smugly called out.

Clint hollered from over his shoulder, “Cool uncle!”

Sam glanced next to him at Rhodey, who stayed preoccupied on his laptop. His expression was neutral, surprisingly flat for someone reviewing such horrific documents. Sam wondered if it was the exhaustion that stripped him of any reaction or if he had just gotten tolerant of these type of things over his lifetime.

He tilted his head to the side with piqued curiosity. “Who are you then? The responsible uncle?”

Rhodey never looked his way as he answered, “Somebody’s gotta be.”

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May never thought much about family.

Sitting at Peter’s bedside, holding his uncomfortably cold and limp hand in hers, she found herself thinking more and more about that as the days progressed.

Despite her Italian roots, May didn’t have much family to rely on. The Reilly’s never found good footing to stand on, though it wasn’t without trying. Ben tried to help fix the damaged relationship with her sisters, Annie, Jan, and April. But once both parents passed away, there wasn’t anything left to save.
They both decided that some families just weren’t meant to be together.

The Parker’s weren’t without their share of problems, either. Honestly, May never had an issue with it. For starters, it meant no headaches from any in-laws, an added bonus to their marriage. Ben’s parents passed on not long after he started his career in the U.S Army and Richard was the only relative left in his life worth hanging on to. The marriage with his wife Mary only brought them closer together, and when they had Peter...well, May was sure that the sweet, dimply baby boy would be the cherry on top of her already perfect sundae.

Losing them ended up being the hardest thing she had to go through.

It left her with Peter. He was all she had left.

The knowledge festered in her mind and as the days passed by, each one tortuously slow, May discovered something about herself. Though she felt lonely, she was never actually alone. It seemed there was always an audience, always someone checking in on her and Peter and always a flurry of nurses and doctors coming and going.

The stress that clouded the air was persistent and oppressive, the machinery around her cold and mechanical, even Peter’s skin was chilled to the touch. But slowly and surely, an unexpected wave of support tore through the monotony of time.

It started with Happy.

Tony, who had all but camped out in the infirmary with her, was not-so-elegantly kicked out by Colonel Rhodes early in the morning. “Tony, you look like shit and smell like a rotting aquamarine,” she heard him say. “Go take a shower, for Christ’s sake.”

She appreciated Tony’s company, especially since his presence kept her from having a full-on meltdown in front of staff and a very drugged up Peter. But she appreciated the break from him just as much. It gave her breathing room, time to collect her thoughts and be by herself.

Or so she thought. Happy had entered through the two automatic glass doors to the med-bay room not long after the billionaire had left. She wasn’t sure if that was by coincidence or at Tony’s insistence.

For a moment, May almost considered asking him to leave. Her hand trembled holding Peter’s and her ears burned with embarrassment, knowing full well that she wasn’t strong enough for this — whatever this was.

But when she looked up and saw Happy, saw the sad, sympathetic and remorseful smile he had for her, she decided against it.

“May,” he greeted softly.

She wanted to say something, she really did. ‘Sorry for yelling at you the other night.’ ‘Thank you for all you’ve done for Peter.’ even just ‘Hey.’ But the lump in her throat hardened and her words seized in her mouth.

Luckily for her, she didn’t have to say a single thing. Happy was already halfway into the room, his arms open wide.

“Come here.”

He gestured for a hug that she greedily took, and it wasn’t until she received it that May realized
how desperately she needed the physical contact. It felt like a warm blanket on a cold day, a comfort she had been unknowingly longing for.

May knew Happy better than anyone in the facility. While she would never consider them close, she would consider him a friend. She knew, realistically, it was because she had so little friends left in her life, but his reliability to both her and Peter was something she didn’t take for granted.

So all and all, she knew him well enough to know that he didn’t like showing much emotion. The hug was short, sweet and to the point.

When he pulled away, she looked up at him and tried her best to give a smile. Not only did the attempt hurt her lips but it must have looked terribly pathetic. His face immediately fell flat at what he saw.

“You doing okay?” Happy put a hand of her shoulder, squeezing it gently.

His voice was considerate, but not overly so. It still sounded like Happy, no pity in his tone like how the doctors sounded, not syrupy with false affection like the nurses. It was grounding to hear him, bringing back a sense of normal to her world.

May sniffed, wiping away the wetness from underneath her glasses.

“I don’t know,” she croaked out, sitting back down in her chair. “I don’t...this is just — it’s all a freaking crapshoot, they can’t get his meds right and he’s — he keeps waking up and I’m — god, I’m so sorry. I am such a wreck.”

Happy shook his head. “Hey, no, that’s okay, no one expects you to have it together right now.”

May scoffed a laugh. ‘Together’ was the furthest thing on her mind. Semi-sane and not-a-complete-mess were the best she could hope for, and yet there had been no sign of her regaining any of her former composure.

She was tired. Tired of panicking, tired of crying, tired of watching the monitors attached to her boy and hoping they’d tell her lies that would bring a better tomorrow. All she could think about was the road they had in front of them — the road Peter had to take — and how she feared she wouldn’t have the strength to endure it. Not after Richard and Mary, not after Ben.

Most days, Peter was her strength. Her rock. She was lost without him.

“I don’t know what to do.”

Happy was quick to squat down to her level, his hand still gripping her shoulder if not tighter at hearing her crackly, tear-filled words.

“You don’t got to do nothing, May. Tony’s got this all taken care of, you just...you be here.” He glanced over at Peter, frowning at the sight of wires, tubes, bags, and machinery that made him seem so much smaller. “They’ll fix him up. I’m sure of it.”

May wanted to believe it. Scrubbing at her face, she knew that there wasn’t any other choice but to believe it. Stark’s medical team was all Peter had going for him, and they were advanced well beyond what any John Hopkins or Saint Jude’s hospital could offer. She was eternally grateful for the overwhelming amount of help and support he was putting forward, really — she was.

It was the fact that with every dose of whatever crazy steroid induced painkiller they were giving him, it seemed to become less effective. A tolerance build up, they explained. May had no idea that
the spider-bite Peter told her about had changed his body this much, to the point where basic modern medicine wouldn’t help.

‘Screw that spider,’ she found herself thinking. It hurt to hear her baby cry the way he did, muffled from the restraints of a breathing tube. It hurt her ears and her heart, and her heart was already a broken, crumbled mess — she had no idea where to find the strength to tolerate anymore.

Happy stood up, awkwardly clearing his throat and pointing to the doors behind him.

“You need some coffee?”

She opened her mouth to answer.

He beat her to the punch. “You look like you could use coffee, I could use coffee — I’ll get us some coffee.”

Happy was already squeezing out of the two sliding doors before she could blink. His movements were jittery, nervous and uncomfortable. If she had to be honest, May never expected him to return.

For some time she occupied herself holding Peter’s hand, caressing what skin of his was left exposed underneath the tape and catheters, reminding herself to count small blessings. It was what Ben always told her to do.

And then Happy returned, two steaming hot coffees in each hand. She was slightly surprised as he leaned across the hospital bed to offer her the styrofoam cup, and graciously she took it.

“I ever tell you about the first time I went to Peter’s school?” Happy took a seat in the vacant chair across from her.

“It was the autumn Decathlon competition last year, right?” May heard her voice become a little more firm, less watery the more she spoke. “I was out of town, so Tony offered him to stay here after they returned from South Carolina.”

Happy paused. His coffee cup froze half-way to his lips and he pondered her words.

“That’s not...wrong,” he admitted.

May was too tired to work up any anger. She settled on an exasperated sigh that Happy followed up with an innocent shrug.

“Well, cats out of the bag now, so...”

They could both almost hear what Peter’s whine of protest would be. “Hap, dude, not cool, man.”

By the time she finished her coffee and politely declined his offers of a refill, Happy had gone on to tell her about what happened after Peter’s Homecoming dance. More accurately, the surprise invite to become an Avenger.

“And here I am, in the boy’s bathroom of a high school — do you hear me, May? You want to talk about feeling pervy. And then he asks if Tony’s here, in a stall — I love the kid, but Christ.”

May laughed. For the first time in almost a week, she laughed with purity, her smile hurting a lot less as she listened to Happy tell her story after story about her nephew.

There were many she hadn’t heard before, some more embarrassing than others. She found herself promptly apologizing when he told her about the time Peter drank way too many energy drinks, his
hyper behavior making a two hour trip to the compound significantly more annoying than usual.

“Kid insisted they didn’t affect him. Turns out twenty of anything will affect him pretty damn good,” Happy chuckled.

There were stories she hadn’t expected to hear, like how he told her about late last year when Peter aced his finals. Apparently, unbeknownst to her, Tony had taken them out for ice cream, which resulted in both men trying to out-eat each other in dairy product that only made one of them sick.

“Let’s just say rush hour traffic got to watch a grown-ass man puking on the side of 295 and this kid,” he pointed to Peter, "has a freaky stomach of steel."

She hummed. Tony’s incessant presence in the infirmary was beginning to make more sense, and a part of her was ashamed it took her this long to see it.

They eventually found themselves on the subject of television. Happy found the TV remote she had yet to even touch, fondly recalling the time Spider-man was caught on live TV dumpster diving for what they’d later find out was his lost backpack.

“I mean, the dumpster?” Happy flipped through the channels. “C’mon, surely you or Tony could spare him another backpack. That thing must have smelt like New York on its worst day.”

“But you don’t get it — he loses one every week,” May stressed, caught between a laugh and honest frustration.

Happy chuckled, otherwise leaving the statement untouched. For a moment only his channel surfing and beeping monitors filled the empty air.

“You ever watch Downtown Abbey?” he suddenly asked.

May shook her head.

He was quick to turn on the television program, leaving her no time to protest. As he sat back down, he went on and on about what a great show it was and how much she would love it. With nothing else to do, she gave it a shot.

Three episodes in and May realized that there was no amount of time she could give that would make her even remotely like the show.

Happy seemed enthralled though, so she let it be. After all, having him around seemed to put her crushing heartache on a warm back-burner. It was a nice distraction, time going by faster with him around. Peter still laid hooked up to machines, injured — ‘recovering’ she corrected herself — but those problems almost seemed less troublesome for the next couple of hours.

She watched the show with Happy, and even kept it on in the background after he left.

It wasn’t long after that someone else made an appearance, someone she wasn’t familiar with.

“Mrs. Parker?” The man waited at the entrance of the room. “May I come in?”

She was confused at first, unsure of who he was and why he felt the need to be there. Dressed in jeans and a t-shirt, it was clear he wasn’t a part of any medical staff. But Tony had yet to return and she had been sitting by herself for the entirety of the morning. May couldn’t deny that it felt nice to have some sort of conversation again, something she and the billionaire had been struggling to manage.
So she shrugged. “Whatever floats your boat.”

He smiled. It seemed genuine, like he could actually care about her as much as everyone seemed to care for her nephew. She couldn’t help but wonder why.

“My name’s Clint. I’m a member of the team here.” The way he downplayed his introduction was obvious to her. ‘Team.’ she thought. “I had the opportunity of getting to know your nephew very well the past couple of weeks.”

His face looked familiar. With a squint of her eyes, May studied his features, slowly starting to recognize him the longer she looked. It quickly dawned on her that she was face-to-face with an Avenger.

“You helped save him,” May bluntly stated.

Clint paused and stuffed his hands deep into his jean pockets. His attention fell on Peter, his expression darkening the longer he took in the sight.

“Something like that,” he ended up muttering.

She swallowed several times before saying, “Thank you.”

He shook his head. “You don’t need to thank me, ma’am. We wouldn’t hesitate to do it again.”

May looked away, her chest tightening with either an abundance of pride or a breathtaking amount of sorrow; she wasn’t sure which. She squeezed Peter’s hand a little harder, wishing he was awake to hear as she told him just how proud she was, how proud Ben would be of him.

She also wished he was awake so he could hear her ground him until his senior year of high school. There was no way she was letting him out of her sights again. No way in hell.

“Peter’s a great kid.” Clint’s voice broke her away from her thoughts, and she looked over to see him slowly take a seat across from her. “I have a teenager myself. They can... they can be a handful.”

May blew a sigh through her lips. “Yours also an overly ambitious inexperienced superhero with no self-preservation skills?”

Clint barked out a laugh, quickly swallowing it back with a shake of his head. “No, no, I uh... I can’t say that he is.”

“Keep it that way,” May replied, her voice tight.

Clint gave a ghost of a smile. “I’m doing my best.”

She couldn’t keep her eyes off Peter and apparently neither could he, the both of them taking a moment to soak in his appearance. Being a father himself, May wondered if he could ever see what she saw.

The others that came and went saw a super-hero, a super-kid, Spider-man. She saw her little boy, carefree, happily playing with bugs in the dirt at the park. That little boy shouldn’t be so hurt, he shouldn’t be in so much pain.

“But if I may say…”

May looked up at him. Clint had leaned forward, resting his forearms against the plastic guard
railings of the hospital bed.

“A kid like Peter? You wouldn’t want him any other way. He’s got something most people don’t. Being Spider-man — that’s taking on a lot of responsibility for a boy his age. I don’t know any other kid who would use that sort of power the way he has.” Clint paused, frowning thoughtfully. “Hell, I don’t know many adults who would do the same. It’s a seldom find to come across someone so willing to be the hero, against all odds, no matter the costs. With all due respect, that’s not a trait you want to smother.”

“Yeah, well, no worry about that.” May found herself speaking before she could think twice, her tone containing more bite than she intended. “Stark’s doing a great job of bringing that part out of him.”

She sounded bitter. May immediately realized it, cringing with a shake of her head.

“I’m sorry, I —”

Clint held his hands up placatingly. “You don’t need to explain yourself.”

“I don’t know where you two stand and I didn’t mean that the way it came out —”

“I understand, I do.”

Clint tried dismissing her concerns. May continued to shake her head, frustrated with how unintentionally angry she sounded at someone who she, quite frankly, wasn’t angry at. She felt stupid with fatigue. Nothing she said or did was coming out right.

“No, no, that was...that was mean. That was callous. That’s not me, I —” May waved both her hands around frantically. “I take all that back. Forget I said that.”

Clint’s eyebrows arched to his hairline. May wouldn’t blame him if he was confused. Every word she rambled made her feel more and more like a lousy mess, unable to formulate her thoughts and more so, unable to keep her emotions in check.

She knew it was easy to replace her sadness with anger and she had to continually tell herself that she wasn’t angry, that she was trying to take the easy way out of dealing with the problem. She would never be okay with Peter behaving that way. Now more than ever she needed to remain an example for him.

“It’s not even that I don’t like Stark — Tony.” May was quick to correct herself. “It’s not that at all. I’m sure even if he never got involved, Peter would still be out there doing the...crazy things he does. It’s not about Tony.” May rushed through the words and hit each syllabub as if she was trying to convince herself of what she said.

“It’s...” She let out a heavy sigh, and both her hands clenched around the air surrounding her, mimicking a choking action. “Have you ever wanted your child to get better just so you could beat the living crap out of them?”

Clint showed a quick, fond smile. “Yeah, that sounds about right.”

May slouched deeper in her chair, both her arms going to hug herself tightly. “I know its not his fault. I just...I miss our normal. I wish he could be normal again, a normal kid with ingrown wisdom teeth, or appendicitis, not...not...”

It went without saying. Everything surrounding Peter, everything keeping him alive — ‘Count the
small blessings. ’ she had to remind herself. Small blessings like her mutated nephew’s healing ability, the one and only thing primarily keeping him alive. She could hate the spider-bite as much as she wanted to, but fact was it was making a really shitty situation a little less shitty.

Clint leaned further forward against the railings, letting his chin rest against both his forearms. “If it means anything to you Mrs. Parker, this will eventually become your new normal. It takes time, but it’ll happen.”

May watched him, cocking her head to the side. For the most part, she felt like she was good at reading people, give or take a few misjudgments. So witnessing the brief flash of affection soak beneath the blues of his eyes was all she needed to know — the man cared for her boy. Not just Spider-man, not a potential Avenger or a kid that got into trouble under their watch.

He cared for Peter.

She relaxed considerably in her chair. “May. Please, call me May.”

“Well, May,” he leaned back into his chair and crossed his arms over his chest. “Did Peter ever tell you about how he played baseball with the Hulk?”

May groaned. “That’s going to be my new normal?”

He smiled in return, the grin open and sweet. To her credit, she managed something back, though she was sure it had to look as weak as it felt, lopsided and empty. She questioned if that was part of the reason he stayed with her as long as he did. She didn’t mind either way.

He kept her company, sharing stories and talking so effortlessly it as like they knew each other for years. She found out more about the man than she assumed most people knew. He had a lovely wife, two sons and a daughter who he’d do anything to protect. He cared for his team equally as much, going on to talk about the Scarlet Witch she had seen on the news almost as much as he did his own kids.

He promised to give her his wife’s recipe for meatloaf before she returned to Queen’s, and promised that no one would hurt Peter again under his watch.

In that moment, she believed him. More than that, she trusted him.

It was a relief, knowing she wasn’t alone in this.

Sometime around sunset, May momentarily stepped out into the hallway. She was thankful for the large bay window in the hospital room; it was practically the only thing that told her what time of day it was. And throughout the day staff would come and go, certain tasks being done on the top of the hour, some being done at random.

May had gotten used to it, never feeling the need to leave as they changed bandages, emptied wound drainage bags — she wanted to be there for Peter, no matter what the case was.

It was the suctioning of the intubation tube. The sound was almost enough that she lost it right then and there, all her control threatening to escape from her stomach in undignified ways. She couldn’t break, not yet, not while there was so little strength left in her to begin with.

The hallway was cold, somehow much colder than Peter’s designated room. May tightly wrapped her arms around herself, wishing she had brought a jacket with her on the way out of Queen’s. At least it was slightly warmer when confined to the oddly large hospital room. The large window overseeing the compound’s facility provided a bit more warmth, combined with the heat of running
machinery surrounding her. Up until now, she hadn't even thought twice about being cold.

A shiver ran down her spine, and she visibly shuddered. Her movements were practically synced with the sound of clicking high-heels hitting the tiled floor, so loud it overtook the chatter at the nurse’s station across from her.

“No, no, the conference in Atlanta needed to be rescheduled for next week, not tomorrow.” The voice bounced off the walls, sharp and professional. “Well, I can’t. I’m here in New York for at least another day. You need to figure that out, I’m not — no, I am not leaving here. I am unable to, Mark. Listen, I need to go. I’ll call you back. Mrs. Parker,”

May hadn’t even realized the voice was directed at her, not until she heard her name. She snapped herself to attention, realizing that the long-winded conversation was so seamless she almost didn’t notice someone was calling out to her.

When she turned around, a ginger-haired woman was quickly approaching her, extending her hand out to shake.

“I’m —”

“Pepper Potts,” May finished. “Of course.”

Pepper smiled. It wasn’t cocky or pretentious, lacking all the things Tony Stark would usually ooze in abundance. Instead, she seemed slightly embarrassed, if only for not realizing someone would so easily recognize her. She was, after all, the famous Pepper Potts, CEO of Stark Industries.

May didn’t know much about the company, that was more Peter’s field of interest. But she did know the obvious. She was suddenly very aware of her own presence, things like her greasy hair, clipped back in a messy bun making her feel like a hobo next to the pristine, polished woman.

“Of course,” Pepper repeated, her hand reaching to remove her Bluetooth earpiece. “I wanted to stop by and make sure you were doing okay.”

May felt her blush run all the way up to her ears. “I — thank you, yes, I’m — I’m doing fine. Thank you.”

While far from starstruck, there was still something overwhelming uncomfortable about having the CEO of a multi-billion dollar corporation take notice in her. She wondered how hilarious the two of them looked from the outside. Her, dressed in four-day dirty jeans and an over-sized long-sleeved t-shirt. Pepper, clad in a wrinkle-free black and gray two-piece suit that was likely worth three times her monthly rent.

Pepper smiled warmly. “What can I get for you?”

May almost balked at her question. “I’m fine, really. Thank you, though, for taking time out of your busy schedule to —”

“Mrs. Parker, please.” Her tone never hardened, remaining as soft as the smile on her face. “We’re here to help.”

May was silent for a moment. Having never met the woman before, all she had to go off of were the tabloids, magazines and the occasional interview she’d find Peter watching. She never expected the Pepper Potts in the media to be the same in real life, but all and all there was a surprising charm to the woman she hadn’t anticipated.
“You can call me May.”

Pepper clasped both hands in front of her and nodded.

“May,” she started to say, “I can’t even imagine how hard this is for you. How’s he doing?”

The question took her by surprise. May found herself fiddling with the loose strands of fabric on her shirt, realizing that up until now no one had bothered to ask such a thing. She had taken for granted how much everyone simply knew what was going on, always in the loop, always up to date.

“We’re just taking it one day at a time,” May answered.

Pepper’s touch surprised her, the gentle hand that rested firmly against the back of her elbow an unexpected gesture of sympathy she didn’t see coming.

“He’s strong. He’ll pull through this,” she assured. “And for anything he can’t do, we’ll be here to help him. For however long it takes, you and Peter are more than welcome to stay here.”

May offered a smile as her response. There wasn’t much else she could say. Agreeing seemed like an empty attempt at tricking herself into believing what she didn’t know could be true, so she held onto Pepper’s sympathy for what little strength it provided her.

Pepper tightened her grip before letting go. “Listen, I know the compound is on lock-down right now, but if you need anything — and I mean anything, clothes, toothbrush, whatever you need, you let me know. I can have it shipped here overnight, cost on us.”

May stared at her with eyes as wide as saucers. Before she could decline the offer, Pepper was already talking again.

“You have Happy’s phone number, right?” she asked, her hand digging into her blazer’s pocket and retrieving her cell phone.

May wordlessly nodded.

“I’m going to have him send you my contact information. Don’t hesitate to reach out to me. I know you didn’t have any time to prepare before you came here, so I’ve made it my responsibility to ensure you’re taken care of.” She already complete typing out her text message and hitting send by the time she finished talking. Pepper looked up at May, her expression melting with empathy. “No matter what it is, call.”

There were a lot of thoughts that began to run through May’s head. Like how she had been wearing the same jeans for days in a row, how she had nothing but her purse with her and a stick of deodorant running down to it’s last few swipes —

How she was perfectly capable of handling all those problems on her own, like she always had. Because she had no one but herself to do so.

“I appreciate that Ms. Potts —”

“Pepper.” She didn’t miss a beat, her tenderhearted smile remaining intact.

May nodded. “Thank you, Pepper. But you don’t have to go out of your way like this. Really, I’m fine.”
“Please. It’s no trouble,” Pepper insisted, quiet and sincere. “Peter’s family, and so are you.”

May felt her stomach flip at Pepper’s words. ‘Family.’ Her arms reached around her own waist, hugging herself tightly. She had become so adjusted to watching her own back, taking care of herself and Peter that she wasn’t sure how to let anyone else help.

Maybe it was time she let herself know what that was like.

“Happy’s tied up with security for most of the evening, but I’ve made sure that he stops in later tonight to show you where your quarters will be.” Pepper immediately caught onto her confusion, holding an open palm in the air to correct herself. “Well, it’s Peter’s quarters. Obviously, you’re more than welcome to utilize the space while you both stay here. I believe Tony bought him Star Wars bed-sheets though, so as long as that’s not a problem for you...”

May’s eyes crinkled as she laughed. “Of course he did.”

She savored the moment. It was nice, to feel light again, to not feel the crushing pain in her chest occupy her every thought.

The cynical side of May wanted to do nothing more than disregard the conversation she had with Pepper, chalking it up to false pleasantries she’d be lucky to receive again. Even after Happy returned to show her Peter’s private bedroom at the compound, and even after she took in the enormous amount of effort Stark clearly put into the living space for her boy, she refused to let herself believe it was anything more than basic courtesy.

So when she returned to Peter’s hospital room and found a gift basket awaiting her, she couldn’t help but be surprised.

And it wasn’t just because Captain America was the one there to give it to her.

“Mrs. Parker,” he greeted. “Pepper personally wanted to make sure you got this tonight.”

“Oh.” May reached out to take it from him. “Thanks.”

It wasn’t until she had it in her hands that May realized how comically large the woven wooden basket actually was. Held against Captain’s America’s chest, it barely looked to be the size of her purse, his admirably large physique easily downplaying its size.

She barely managed to get it across the room, setting it down on the bay window ledge with a muffled grunt. While she would wait to open it, many items laying on top caught her attention. Most were the basics; toiletries, essentials, food and water bottles of brands she never recognized and was sure she could never afford. Deeper inside she caught sight of unexpected items; blankets, a bottle of wine — was that a Starkpad?

“That’s one thing Pep and Tony have in common.” His voice caught her attention. She turned to look at him as he casually shrugged. “They both like to go all out on certain things.”

“Yeah, I can tell.” May huffed, pointing to the basket with a quirked eyebrow. “How much do you think I could sell this all for?”

Steve grinned, the whites of his teeth shining brightly from the overhead fluorescent lights. “Please, use it. You need to take care of yourself too, Mrs. Parker.”

“It’s May,” she corrected. “Please, if one more person calls me ‘Mrs. Parker’ I might actually start to feel my age.”
As she settled into the over-sized upholstered armchair at Peter’s bedside — ‘Stark really does go all out here’ — across from her, Steve chuckled and leaned his hip against the footrest of the hospital bed.

“Fair enough. It’s good to see you again, May.” He gestured to the open chair across from her. “Would you mind if I sit with you and Peter for a while? I might become...a little tied up here soon. I would like to...”

Though his words trailed off, she understood his intention.

“Of course. But we can never tell him you were here. At least not while he was like...” May motioned to the bed with a somber expression. “…this.”

Steve slowly sat down, his gaze softening. “Why’s that?”

For a moment, May stayed silent, dumbfounded. She looked between Peter and Steve, ultimately settling on the latter with high arched eyebrows.

“He’s a teenager. This right here — it’s the be all and end all to embarrassment. He’ll be mortified.” She slouched wearily in the chair, managing a faint smile. “I can hear him already. ‘May, god! I can’t believe you let Captain America see me in nothing but a hospital gown. Ugh, god, bleugh, eck, hashtag why didn’t you just let me die’.”

Her voice was absurdly exaggerated, and though Steve seemed to be slightly confused and extremely horrified, May carelessly waved him off.

“Kids have gotten more dramatic these days,” she explained. “Don’t think I understand it. I swear it’s like they have own language.”

Steve nodded, chuckling. “Sounds about right. Me and an old friend of mine were similar back in the day. Our parents couldn’t seem to keep up with the lingo.”

May found herself curling up further in the chair, to the point where she was hugging her knees close to her chest.

“Then I guess there’s no turning back for me. I find myself using Urban Dictionary way may then I’ve ever wanted to.” A beat passed, and she didn’t need to look at Steve to see his lack of understanding. “Don’t look it up. I’ll save you the horrors, just come to me if you need anything translated, got it mister?”

He laughed, his smile so amiable and natural that May was sure it could melt even the hardest of hearts. She liked him better in person, his compassion much more authentic, more substantial than the old war posters and videos she watched growing up.

“Duly noted.” Steve’s laugh faded away, and he looked towards Peter affectionately. His expression was soft, strong, but it was impossible not to notice the crack forming underneath the surface. It was different from the night he arrived at her home to break the news of Peter’s then assumed death. It was a glimmer of remorse, reflecting vividly in his eyes.

It reminded her of Happy, of Clint, of Tony — so many people she had come to find out would give their lives to defend this boy. She thought she had been alone in protecting Peter, her sole responsibility, her burden to carry. Come to find out she was terribly wrong about that.

“You know, I have to say...Peter reminds me a lot of that friend.” Steve looked up, forcing a smile that held more sadness than anything else. “Looking out for the little guy? It’s a very noble thing to
She was, but it never hurt to hear it again. May’s hand reached out for Peter’s, a swarm of butterflies rolling in her stomach from the sheer amount of maternal pride. Sure, this wasn’t the life she ever expected to live, not after taking Peter in and not even after Ben died. It wasn’t her normal, and she wasn’t efficient at letting others help, that much was clear.

But hearing about how much Peter had changed, how he was flawlessly growing into such a heroic man behind her expectations — May started to believe she could manage some change as well. It was hard, change always was, but having others around to help would make a little easier.

She cleared her throat. “That friend of yours...he make it out okay?”

Steve didn’t answer right away. Instead, he dropped his head, slowly crossing his arms over his chest in deep thought. The topic seemed to be troublesome for him, and she almost apologized for bringing up what was clearly a sore subject.

“He’s getting there,” Steve remarked before she could say anything, bringing his eyes up to lock with hers. “And so will Peter. Consider this nothing more than a bump in the road.”

May nodded, her thumb absentmindedly caressing around the clear tape sticking to Peter’s skin. Suddenly, it didn’t seem so threatening — it was just tape, she remembered. It was just tape keeping IV’s in place, of which were simply there to make Peter better. The monitors weren’t as scary anymore, the beeping a pleasant reminder that he was alive, that his heart was beating in a similar rhythm as theirs.

‘It’s all just a bump in the road’, she told herself. She could handle that.

“You know, speaking of bump in the road.” Steve awkwardly cleared his throat. “Pete here told us he’s working on getting his driver’s license?”

May practically choked on her snort. “Yeah, and I promise to give plenty of heads up when that happens. Whenever Peter Parker hits the streets, you will be rightfully notified to stay on the sidewalks.”

Steve’s laughter guided her into a gentle state of relaxation, one she let saturate her every nerve. Somehow along the way, he encouraged May to tell him what was later dubbed as the ‘Whole Foods parking lot disaster’, a story she was sure Peter would straight up murder her for repeating.

She could still hear his defense ring in her ears. “May, c’mon, you are such a drama queen. I didn’t hit seven shopping carts. It was six and a half, everyone knows the tiny carts don’t count as full carts.”

She lost count of time after that, the sun that had been beaming in through the bay window now nothing but dazzling stars across the compound’s acres of land. Her time wasn’t spent listening, rather telling, her stories reminiscent of an easier time in their lives.

Steve sat and took it all in, smiling and laughing along the way.

It didn’t take long for May to realize there was something different about him, a unique trait that made him stand out from the others. While it seemed everyone wanted to tell her a story about Peter, Steve wanted to hear what she had to say. It was as if he wanted to get to know Peter better, treating him more than just some kid who had gotten in over his head or someone he felt responsible for having gotten hurt.
May had a feeling that after all was said and done, Peter wasn’t going anywhere in these people’s lives. It was funny in retrospect; she had been worried he was a nuisance to them all. Yet they couldn’t seem happier to have him around.

She had just finished telling Steve about Peter’s ninth birthday party — “I swear if we had the money, he would have been both Iron Man and Captain America. But those costumes are expensive, and he had to pick between the two. If it’s any consolation, I remember the Iron Man costume being significantly cheaper.” — when Tony came strolling through the room’s two automatic doors.

“Rogers,” he curtly greeted. “Treating the woman well, I hope.”

They both looked up when he walked into the room. It was impossible not to notice just how tired he was, like every trace of his normal momentum was gone.

Steve carefully stood up from his chair. “Wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Tony had immediately made a beeline for the wall closest to the room’s entrance, pulling up data on the monitors that neither were one hundred percent sure he had permission to access. It didn’t stop him. He clicked through the medical charts and studied them carefully, not uttering a word to either of them.

May didn’t question it, and frankly, she didn’t mind. It was easier if he briefed himself on Peter’s condition rather than have her do it for him, not that there had been much change throughout the day.

Steve straightened his shirt as he looked down at her. “It was nice talking with you, May. Thank you for letting me get to know Peter a little bit more. Your stories were a treat to hear.”

She pointed a finger his way. “You’re sworn to secrecy on the Captain America underwear.”

Steve chuckled and nodded. Both of them seemed to expect a quip from Tony, some sarcastic remark about ‘being offended’ or ‘needing to change the kid’s wardrobe.’ They paused in anticipation, but his silence never broke.

It was uncharacteristic, so much so that May noticed even Steve seemed rattled by it. As he made his way to leave, he stopped short of the doors where Tony stood. While they automatically opened for him, he stayed near the other man.

“Tony,” Steve said, keeping a few feet of distance. “You alright?”

Tony didn’t break his focus on the monitors as he answered, “Always.”

There was a pause between them, the tension thick enough that May could feel it across the room. It was like a bad car accident, curiosity preventing her from looking away. While she would never ask, she could tell there was something unspoken in the air, something lingering in limbo that very obviously put a metaphorical wedge between the two of them.

Steve looked like he wanted to do more than just nod and leave. Ultimately though, that’s what he did.

The doors slid shut. Tony sighed, his shoulders heaving as he made his way to the recliner chair not too far away from May. The cushions visibly dipped when he sat down.

He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees and holding his head in his hands.
“So,” May started to say, “you were gone for a while.”

Tony shook his head and ran a hand across the length of his face. “Yeah. Not what I intended.”

His words bit harshly with resentment. May distinctly remembered how quickly he wanted to return after taking a shower and looking at her wristwatch she realized he had been gone for a better portion of the day. If possible, it seemed he returned with even more stress than what he left with.

“I’ve been told that requesting to have an unofficial intern put on company health insurance is ‘cause for suspicion’,” Tony scoffed, his hand reaching to rub the back of his neck. “Somehow that ended up in an emergency meeting with my legal team, and I swear to God I can’t do one single thing without...”

His words trailed into an incoherent stream of grumbles that May didn’t even try to understand.

“Health insurance? I — I appreciate the sentiment Tony, but Peter’s covered under my plan.”

Tony’s gaze met hers, looking nothing short of torn. “There’s no way any of these doctors fall under your network, May.”

Her face fell flat, and she was sure a quiet ‘Oh’ fell out of her mouth, but she was too far gone to know for sure. Of everything that went on the past couple days, she had to admit that never crossed her mind. In hindsight, she felt stupid for not coming to that conclusion earlier. As Peter always said — she was the adult, she knew how to do the adult-things.

Suddenly, her stomach began to boil with panic over how they were going to continue to manage this, how they were going to continue with him hospitalized here and keep a roof over their heads all at the same time. She hadn’t even realized she had begun chewing her nails until her tooth accidentally bit into skin.

Tony must have read her thoughts, or at the very most seen her concern. He leaned back into the recliner with a gesticulated wave of his hand.

“It doesn’t matter. Even if we can’t get him covered under Stark Industries, I want him being treated by the best. No matter how long it takes for him to get better, he’s taken care of, here, by me. I’ll pay out of pocket if needed.”

May’s tired and puffy eyes shot wide open. “Tony, that’s —”

“Look who you’re talking to. You’re not paying a dime.” He sighed, folding his arms over his chest. “Besides, I’ve got plenty to go around.”

It had to be the first time she ever heard the man talk about his money in such a bitterly way. Usually so proud about his wealth, always boasting about his lifestyle, he seemed unnaturally upset at his own words.

They were quiet for a moment, the clean air diminishing any stress between them.

Even though May kept her focus primary straight ahead of her, staring at either Peter or the machines and the numbers she’d never understand, it was impossible not to notice Tony across the room. Every so often he’d stretch out his jaw, wiggling it in circles before returning to normal.

May leaned over and reached for her purse, digging inside to break the silence.
“Gum?”

“Hm?”

“It helps,” May clarified, leaning forward with the stick of gum. “With the ear popping.”

Tony paused, observing her and the silver wrapped gum in her hands. He hesitantly leaned forward to accept it.

“Thanks.”

May wasn’t sure if he planned to chew it or throw it in the trash like her walnut date loaf — ‘Come on Tony, I’m not clueless’ — so she was surprised when he actually unwrapped the stick and popped it inside his mouth.

What followed was a few minutes of awkward gum smacking and her fidgeting with her hands. For two people who had occupied the same room for over twenty-four hours, they had said little to nothing to each other.

May audibly cleared her throat. “Peter used to take swimming classes. Way back when, long ago before...before any of this. Anyway, he stopped because no matter what we tried, his swimmer’s ear wouldn’t go away. He’d be sitting at the dinner table making that same face trying to get his ears to pop. Gum helped sometimes.”

Tony hummed out a response. It was barely heard over the other machinery in the room. His head craned to the side, studying the outsides of the bay window. May wondered if there was something out there that caught his attention or if she had brought up a sore subject with the swimming.

“You look better,” she said. “Cleaner, anyhow.”

He nodded.

And said nothing.

For the most part, May didn’t mind the silence. It gave her time to think. Only she had run out of things to think about and the possibilities, assumptions, and worst-case scenarios were running ragged in her head. She couldn’t stand to be in the dark anymore.

“What happened?”

The question finally got his attention. Tony broke his gaze from the window, looking over to her with his eyebrow arched high.

“You said you’d tell me when I was ready.” May tried to make herself seem bigger in the over-sized chair, an attempt to emit confidence she didn’t feel. “I’m — I’m ready to hear about what happened.”

Tony paused. "You sure?"

He looked at her with doubt, as if there was no way she really wanted to hear about the events that transpired. A part of him was right; May didn’t want to know. She needed to know.

"No," she admitted, folding her arms tightly around her chest. "But I think I might actually go insane here soon if I'm not told something."

Her awkward and forced laugh fell flat. Her chest tightened as Tony sat forward, a loud sigh
heaving his shoulders as he rubbed harshly at his face.

“It was the explosion,” he started to say. "The one Rogers told you he died in. It was all a trap.”

The first words he said were the last she heard clearly, the rest of the story falling into muffled territory. It wasn’t pretty. May was positive he left out a chunk of details, stammering over certain parts and quick to rush over others. By the time he was finished, she was actually glad he kept the gory bits to himself.

A facility kept under the sea, prevented from using even the most basic of their technology, magic, both fake and real, drowning — she waited for the part where he admitted it was all an elaborate joke and he was kidding. It was all too surreal to believe. Too overwhelming. Like a plot of a bad movie, not something that actually happened to someone.

One look at his face and she realized with a heavy heart that it did. It happened to them. To Peter. And Tony carried every bit of that on his shoulders.

“It’s my fault, May.” His voice was strained and quiet, his expression a deep, dark apology. “I’m sorry.”

May wouldn’t admit it out loud, but she wished it was. It would be so much easier to carry on if this was Tony’s fault. She could be angry at him, she could unleash her fury with no second thoughts. It was so much harder to be furious at life when life wasn’t an actual entity she could project her anger out on.

She sniffed and let down her hair, ruffling through her long locks with stiff fingers. “We call it Parker luck.”

Tony’s head shot up. His energy was long since gone and so was his charisma, in its place confusion and disbelief.

May shrugged. “Sounds like that’s what this is. Doesn’t sound like your fault.”

The sounds that echoed between them seemed to be louder in their gap of conversation, an unsettling metronome that persisted without an end in sight.

Hissss from the respiratory.

Click click from the infusion pumps.

BEEP from the monitors.

Tony frowned. “They used Peter to get to me.”

Hisss.

Click click.

BEEP.

May looked away, her eyes focusing down below. “Sounds like they would’ve used anyone to get to you.”

“But they used him,” Tony argued.

Hissss.
"Like I said," May repeated. "Parker luck. Not your fault."

Tony seemed to be at a loss for words, his mouth opening and closing with no sounds managing to come out. It took a handful of seconds before he shook his head, rubbing fiercely at his temple with frustration.

"You’re...you’re not hearing me, May. They took him to get to me. They hurt him just so they could get my money. This is my fault," Tony stressed, his voice fracturing with each emphasis. "You were right all along, I’m not only a bad influence for the kid but I’m bad for him. Some psychos did this to him for a quick buck and I...I couldn’t get to him fast enough. He wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for me."

“I do hear you, Tony.” May curled up on the side of the chair, facing him. “And I get it, I do. Don’t think I’m not upset because I am. But what’s done is done.”

Tony looked as if he could argue that statement for days. She was mildly surprised when he kept his mouth shut, his jaw clamped closed. She was unsure if it was his exhaustion or something else entirely that kept his defense at bay.

And then she realized why he was so quiet, why he was speaking so little.

**Hisss.**

**Click click.**

**BEEP.**

"Mhmfp...” Peter groaned.

Her neck whipped around so fast it physically hurt her. She could see as Peter’s eyes danced wildly underneath closed lids, sweat glistening on his pale skin as his forehead scrunched up in distress.

“He’s supposed to be out for three more hours,” Tony mumbled. “Cho will have to up the dosage again. FRIDAY?”

**Already on it, boss.”**

May flinched slightly in her spot, the sound of the AI never ceasing to startle her.

Tony never looked up. His temple rested against his open palm, his elbow leaning against the recliner’s armrest.

It was hard not to notice how fragile he seemed, as if one stone could be thrown at his glass house and it would shatter all the walls he had so delicately built up around himself.

“You’re right about one thing, you know.” May’s shoulders slumped with deep fatigue.

Tony’s worn out eyes met hers and his eyebrows raised in the air, encouraging her to go on.

“He wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for you. He wouldn’t be alive.” May squeezed Peter’s hand in hers, desperate for the physical contact. “So you can ride your guilt train all you want, but all that matters to me is you saved him. If I were you, I’d try to make that your focus as well.”
“I promised you I’d protect him,” Tony croaked, his voice gruff. “I promised he wouldn’t get hurt.”

“Yeah, well, let’s be honest here. We both knew we weren’t going to be able to hold onto that illusion for much longer,” May said, hard-pressed to keep her pessimism at bay. “It was bound to happen eventually. Sometimes these things are just beyond our control.”

Things like the only two people she considered family falling victims to an unexpected plane crash. Things like her husband getting shot in an alley and her only nephew watching as he died in his arms. Things like — Peter groaned, muffled by the breathing tube and she gripped his hand tighter — things like this.

May had adjusted to life throwing her curve balls, and she never participated in the pity game of it all. With each tragic event that tore her life apart, she insisted on finding strength from her sorrows. But it had been days now, and she had pawed, dug and searched relentlessly for strength to come from this. Every time she came up empty-handed and every minute that went by, she felt weaker and more alone.

She needed to be strong, not only for herself but for Peter. She just didn’t know where to find that strength anymore.

“I appreciate your sentiment May,” Tony barely blinked as his eyes locked straight ahead, focusing on Peter and nothing else in the room. “Unfortunately I can’t say I agree with it.”

May shrugged.

“You choose to believe what you want to believe in. Just know that I don’t blame you. And while I don’t like speaking on Peter’s behalf, I’m pretty confident in saying he won’t blame you either.” She sniffed, hard. “You saved my boy from the bottom of the ocean, Tony. That makes up for a lot.”

He didn’t have anything to say in return. While May had returned her focus on Peter, she could still see as Tony closed his eyes, letting them rest that way. One may think he had fallen asleep, but she knew better. She knew he was hiding.

It was something she noticed early on with Tony. It was an attempt to keep her from seeing the flurry of emotion that always passed through him, a rush of humanity almost always hid behind some fancy pair of sunglasses he insisted on wearing, the gatekeeper to his true self. He never showed his emotions by talking, instead it was his actions. Always do, never say.

He stayed quiet, occupied with his own thoughts, but his eyes would speak more than his mouth ever could. His actions always showed his concern; he would pace the floors, repeatedly check Peter’s medical charts, go as far as to make sure the hospital bills were covered, and was always persistent on getting updates from the doctors.

But this was the longest they had spoken since she arrived at the compound, going on three days. Even then, the conversation was mostly one-sided on her part. It was like a self-defense move, as if not talking would keep him in place, in check, from getting any closer to her and Peter.

May held back a laugh. The only problem with that was Tony had gotten himself knee-deep into that pool already.

Maybe he didn’t realize that yet.

Maybe he had trouble accepting it.
She caressed Peter’s hand. For a while, the quietness returned. Never peaceful, just a lull from their voices.

“You know, my husband used to have this look in his eyes whenever he was with Peter,” May said, the words heavy on her tongue. “It was unique, something I had never seen in him or...or anyone else before. It was like...I don't know, it’s hard to explain. It was like no matter what, Ben wanted to be there. For all the good parts, for all the bad parts. He wanted to teach him everything he knew and hope he could guide Peter from making the same mistakes he had made before. It was like...he knew he wasn’t Peter’s dad and he never wanted to try and replace Richard, but at the same time...he still wanted to be a father-figure for him. He didn’t want Peter to go without that in his life.”

May let out a heavy breath, and with it she turned to look at Tony. “I see a lot of that in you.”

Tony averted his gaze.

May didn’t need to see him to know how he felt.

So she turned back to Peter, a faint tug at the corner of her lip bringing a sense of relief to her core.

Sure, May would never be Tony’s biggest fan. She said it before, and she’d say it again, it was just fact. While never unsuitable to be around her nephew, they were simply two completely different people with little in common. Like others, she questioned some of his behavior and actions throughout the years.

But they had a buffer between them now. They both had Peter.

They had miles to go, but it was something. A foundation. His presence held a different weight now, no longer the problematic Tony Stark that brought her kid into the crazy world of superheroes. He was the hero that saved her kid, and it cast his appearance in a different light. It wouldn’t be effortless, but as one of the many changes she could feel approaching over the horizon, she could see herself accepting him as a part of her life.

May restrained herself from laughing; that was a scary thought. She didn’t know how to ‘do’ family. Not outside of the obvious, not outside of those she had lost and the few still around — she gripped Peter’s hand tighter. If he could manage to take on the persona of a superhero, she could manage to let a few more people into her life.

Besides, a support system was beginning to sound absolutely fantastic right about now.

Across from her, Tony relaxed, just a smidgen, just enough that May could notice. He ran a hand through his hair with a sigh.

“Parker luck, huh?” Tony said dryly. “Sounds like we need to get some Stark charm on his side to balance things out.”

This time, May did laugh. Although it was considerably short, and though Tony’s smirk barely showed beneath the stress lines of his face, the moment lightened the air in the room. It became a little easier to breathe, a little easier to make it through the next minute, and the one after that.

They kept vigil together, using each other for support when they needed it. She could do this. She had family to help her through it.

‘Family,’ May realized.
Family would be where she’d find her strength.

Chapter End Notes

Jeezy peezy, someone stop Tony’s guilt train before it goes off the rails. I swear. Tisk tisk.

Sorry for the delay in updating, folks. But don’t think for even one second that this fic is or will ever be left in the dust. Your feedback keeps my love for this story pumping out the chapters, and I may-even-possibly-though-it’s-too-soon-to-say-be-planning-a-sequel-oh-god-no-take-that-back-take-that-back-that’s-too-soon-to-say-wait-I-can-just-stop-typing.

Speaking of the unspoken though – I am a foreshadowing addict. I swear, all these Norman Osborn bread crumbs I keep laying down...god, if a sequel does end up existing, the pay off will be so amazing. Mhmm.

I know there's a good chunk of this story's narrative that falls into "happened-but-not-written" territory -- after all, I think I probably set a good 9 months between Civil War and 6 months between Homecoming and when this fic starts. But I hope none of it is too jarring. Things like Tony and Peter bonding and Happy getting inadvertently close with the Parker's -- none of it is a foundation I was able to set up throughout the fic so I hope the throw away lines still feel grounding to the story. Also, I totally headcannon Happy driving Peter around (when he can of course, between being forehead of security and all :-P) so I can't help but imagine May invites him over to dinner every now and then or something. I dunno, I want an Avengers family and Infinity War broke me beyond repair. After all, I told ya'll this was my way of coping when I first started.

Back in Tony’s POV for the next chapter with some punch-in-the-gut Irondad/Spiderson, see you there fam!
Chapter Notes

Let’s have at those fun nerdy facts!

Claire Temple is from the MCU’s TV universe of Luke Cage, Daredevil, Jessica Jones, Iron Fist and the Defenders. This fanfic 100% isn't lining up with the timeline of those shows, lol. Remember that throw-away line of Strange needing to go help the Defenders deal with the Hand? Claire would be busy occupied with that and wouldn't be able to make her presence here. But eh, we're all having fun here, right? She’s also from the comics, and an awesome character at that (though I wanted to use the MCUTV version instead, as that’s someone who most are familiar with) She’s kinda like the go-to doctor for a lot of superheroes. Super small cameo but one I had fun with.

Remember how in Avengers, Bruce mentioned that the “last time he was in New York, he sort of broke Harlem?” Yeah, I had fun with that. I’ll be honest, I didn’t collateral timelines with Bruce and Claire. Pretty sure Claire moved back to Harlem long after the Battle of New York, but I’ve mentioned before I really don’t keep up with a good portion of the TV MCU (love Punisher, though. That’s some good shit.) Anyhoo, had some fun sorta tying those two characters together.

Onwards to the angst!

See the end of the chapter for more notes
The air is crisp and cool. Refreshing. Tony takes in a deep breath of it, his shoulders sagging with relaxation.

The smell of salt water is strong, drafts of wind hitting his face with no sign of letting up. It’s his favorite aspect of the Malibu mansion. The evenings provide solitude, moments where only whispering waves of the ocean could be heard, water crashing and beating unforgivably against the mountain rocks.

His home. Looking out from his bedroom windows, he releases a lungful of air, and his eyelids close shut, giving way to a small smile on his face. Nothing could ever take away the tranquility of his home.

“Mr’...Stark...I...I don’t...”

His eyes snap open.

Peter lays heavy in his arms, beaten and broken. Bleeding. The blood is everywhere, coating his hands, staining his skin. He grips Peter’s body tighter, pulling him closer, hugging him with nauseating despair.

Over the sound of ocean waves, he hears the wheezing, the struggle — a crackly, heartbreaking whine.

“I don’t feel so good.” Peter’s voice is barely a whimper, drifting away in the wind. An exhale of air escapes the boy’s chest and Tony waits for a returning breath.

It never comes.

The smell of the open sea no longer brings him peace. The horror swells inside of him, eats away at his bones, the sulfur and ocean-life now nothing but a repulsive taste in his mouth.

CRASH!

Tony shields the motionless body with his own, bracing himself for the impact. Windows break around him, the glass mansion shattering with the intensity of the wind. He waits to be swept away, to feel the never-ending tide hit his body like knives, freezing and paralyzing. He waits for the outpour of the ocean that never comes.

“Tony, Tony, Tony...”

His eyes locked intently on the man kneeling in front of him. He’s no longer kneeling, he’s sitting. He’s paralyzed. He can’t move, crippled to the sofa. His heart withers away with fear, decaying from the ruins of panic that steal his breath.

Obadiah shakes his head, scoffing. “Look at you.”

The man’s voice is gruff, breathy against his skin. Too close, too close for comfort, his nerves screaming danger. The weather from outside the mansion roars, winds howling, lightning blazing and thunder rolling. He’s helpless to its wrath, paralyzed in place.

“It’s a shame, you know.” Obadiah moves closer, leaving little space between the two of them. His hand lays against Tony’s chest. “I spent thirty years of my life holding you up, at your side, guiding you through the tundra of a dog eat dog world that you would never have survived without me.”
The lights from above shine brightly onto his bald head; successions of flashing lightning obscure his face. Tony’s mind hollers to get up, to run, run-danger-run-run—

Obadiah squeezes his face, hard. His other hand claws at Tony’s chest, fingers digging for a hole that no longer exists. Tony shudders at those familiar, sadistic blue eyes staring him down, the need to scream burgeoning.

“Thirty years, Tony. You barely gave that boy one, and look at what it did to him.”

His face is held tightly in Obadiah’s grasp, cheeks aching at the pressure. His eyes wander freely. They lock on the corner of the room, the shadow of a mangled body barely seen. The lightning illuminates red and blue, the suit — his creation, Peter’s livelihood — laying in a crumbled mess.

“You finally outdid yourself,” Obadiah belittles. “Did you really think that you could right your wrongs...just like that? Take a child under your wing and sing the praises of unearned, undeserved redemption? He was better off without you, Tony. Your influence is only poison, you containment and kill everything you touch. That’s why we worked better in weapons manufacturing. That’s why you’re a —”

“You’re a failure.”

His eyes look back.

Stane is gone.

His limbs move freely, no longer held down by his former business partner, someone who he once considered to be a mentor. The storm comes to a sudden stop, leaving only darkness in its wake.

And Howard Stark.

They stare at each other.

Howard stands by himself in the gaping black void. His back is straight, and chin held high, as tense as the last day he had ever seen the man. His father, a man who raised him in anger, in hate. Someone who had abandoned him long before ever leaving the physical world they lived in.

“Please don’t leave me.”

The voice echoes from above. It doesn’t come from his father, it didn’t come from him — he looks around, desperate to find the source. Desperate for reassurance that the voice it belongs to is still alive.

Only darkness surrounds him.

Howard is gone, without a word, without another breath. In his place stands one object, floating in the abyss. Tony eyes it, curiously and cautiously.

A glass case, square with sharp edges and a blue light that shines from inside. He slowly approaches it. The text boldly stands out; it seems he could read it from miles away.

‘Proof that Tony Stark Has A Heart.’

The decade-old arc reactor looks as new as the day he created it. The silver metal is polished and glimmering, the blue glow dazzlingly bright.

He picks it up, holding the square case in both his hands. It feels light, as if it isn’t even real. It
feels like a distant memory. The darkness begins to recede away the longer he holds it, bringing sight to the moldy, steel walls enclosing him.

A hand grabs his shoulder.

He gasps.

The glass case drops below and shatters.

Dmitri sneers through bloodstained teeth. “The heart that beats inside of you will be your greatest downfall, Stark.”

Beep.

Beep.

Beep.

He looks down, the arc reactor no longer there. In its place is a bomb. The Jericho. The Stark Industries logo taunts him, a weapon with his namesake ready to kill him.

BeepBeepBeepBeepBeep.

He looks up. Dmitri holds an object tightly in his hands.

Beepbeepbeepbeepbeepbeep —

The glow of a different bomb reflects in his eyes, blinking rapidly, orange and green emitting from the round shaped design.

Dmitri grins, sickeningly menacingly. “You will fail him, Stark.”

BeepbeepbeepbeepBEEPBEEPBEEP —

Tony jolted awake.

Thunder rolled from outside, a boisterous sound muffled from the insides of the compound. It masked his sluggish, startled gasp, his uncoordinated limbs jerking in place. The pitter-patter of rain began to start up, hitting heavily against the rooftop.

He leaned forward in the recliner, slowly swinging his legs over the footrest. “Damn it...”

Tony sniffed, hard. His hands scrubbed at his face, the pounding of his heart lessening into a more tolerable drum. It took him a moment to blink through the darkness, rubbing away the drowsiness in his eyes to better see his surroundings.

The few lights around him came from the abundance of medical equipment in the hospital room, all emitting a soft glow.

The same equipment that was making unusually loud and alarming sounds.

“May?” Tony croaked, looking to his right where he had last seen the woman.

The love sofa he had insisted she take for resting was unoccupied. The curtains nearby were still
closed, lightning flashing through the fabric, and her blankets laid tossed in a bundle. A brief glance to the clock on the wall showed digital numbers that read ‘3:42 am’, telling him it had been hours since he had fallen asleep.

Well damn, that was embarrassing. So much for just resting his eyes.

Tony shuffled out of the recliner, fighting off the pull of sleep. The more awake he became, the louder the machines seemed to get. They were piercingly incessant, no longer the repetitive, steady hum that he had dozed off too. He didn’t need to be fully awake to know something was wrong. Adrenaline kicked in almost immediately.

He almost collapsed the moment his foot hit the ground, his exhausted and overworked muscles failing to take all his body weight. Despite it, he stumbled to the far end of the room. The lights automatically flickered on the closer he got to the hospital bed, and thank god for it because he hadn’t realized how dark the room had actually become.

On the wall was a panic button and he hastily smacked his hand on it. His heart was making leaps into his throat, and while he was almost positive a response team was already on their way, he figured there was no harm in being overly cautious.

Looking down onto the hospital bed, he was glad he had been.

“Shit.”

Peter was awake.

Tony felt a tense knot form in his gut, his heart somehow beating faster than the quick pounding of footsteps he heard down the hallway. The machines were blaring with shrill noises, getting worse by the second, all accompanied by the panicking patient they were attached to.

“IT’s fine. You’re fine.” Tony’s voice was still groggy with sleep. He laid a firm palm against Peter’s forehead to keep him still, a feeble attempt against the growing thrashing beneath him.

The room lit up with more overhead florescent lights, and he could see clear as day as the kid’s throat convulsed around the endotracheal tube. Peter grunted, gagged and groaned, making sounds that were constricted and muted from within his chest.

It was horrific. Tony stared at him, shock coursing through him like a riptide, and by the time nurses and doctors swarmed into the room, he had already become clammy with sweat.

Bruce pushed through them all, rushing in with a stethoscope bouncing around his neck.

“How long has he been —”

“Just now,” Tony answered, stepping back to give the staff space to work. “The alarms woke me up, I must have fallen asleep. He hasn’t been...”

His voice drifted away in the organized chaos that followed, his words no longer a priority over the overwhelming amount of instructions that were tossed about. It was a stark contrast to the past couple of days, the previous evenings providing a calm that nearly gave them a sense false of confidence.

“Vitals showing tachycardia, push forty mg’s of diltiazem.”

“Hold on, let’s see if we can get him to relax with the enhanced opioid.”
“Pulse OX dipping down to fifty. Kid’s not getting enough oxygen.”

“He’s too anemic for this high of blood pressure, are we administering to treat or observing?”

Tony knew things would eventually take a turn for the worse. It was just a matter of when. This, though — he rubbed at his eyes in hopes that the scene unfolding was just part of his chilling nightmare. They had managed to keep Peter fairly sedated up until now — this was bad.

“Peter? Peter, can you hear me?” Bruce spoke loudly, standing opposite of him where he lowered the plastic guard rail to the hospital bed. “We need you to calm down, Peter — Claire, where are we on the dosage?”

Tony’s eyes darted back and forth, trying to keep up with the conversation between Bruce and the caramel-skinned woman standing at his side. While he couldn’t hear what was said, Bruce’s grimace told him that it wasn’t good.

He ran his hands down the length of his face, forcing himself to wake up. “FRIDAY?”

“Here, boss.”

Tony was impressed that he managed to hear her over the noise filling the room. The machines, the staff, Peter’s increasingly louder struggles — the once quiet space had quickly fallen into pandemonium. He dropped his head to look at the floor, a hand forcefully rubbing away the crick in his neck. He hadn’t remembered falling asleep, and clearly he must have done so in a vastly uncomfortable position.

“Where’s May Parker at?” he asked the AI.

Thunder rolled violently from outside.

The sound briefly startled Tony.

It was nothing compared to the havoc that came from Peter, who incoherently started to lash out at the nurses trying to help him. His arms swung in every direction and his good leg jerked back repeatedly, as if he was trying to lift himself up from the bed.

Tony inadvertently cringed. God, the sounds. Frantic, smothered and strangled cries — he felt them cut razor deep.

“Tony,” Bruce’s voice was tense, both his hands struggling to hold down Peter’s one shoulder. “A little help over here?”

There wasn’t any hesitation on Tony’s part. Four large steps and he was already there.

“Hey hey, calm down now, Pete.” Tony rushed to use both his hands to still Peter’s thrashing, who was surprisingly strong in his state of agitation. “It’s me, kid. Still the same side. It’s me.”

Peter’s jaw clenched down persistently with each cry he tried to let out, his teeth practically biting into the tube snaked down his throat.

“Boss, I have located May Parker’s whereabouts,” FRIDAY informed him. “She appears to have taken a walk around the facility. A security officer is with her on the far south wing. Would you like me to —”

Whatever FRIDAY had said next was drowned out by the crashing boom of thunder.
Peter’s uninjured leg kicked against the mattress, his arms twisting against both Bruce and Tony, both of whom fought to hold him still. Tony’s eyes locked on his, now wide open and panic-stricken, darting around wildly. In his stupor, they never landed on anything particular. His dilated pupils rolled around, overwhelmed at the number of people surrounding him.

Tony was painfully familiar with that type of panic.

He leaned forward, hovering himself over the bed and forcing his face into Peter’s line of sight.

“Hey. Hi. Kid, it’s me.” Tony could have sworn he saw a glisten of lucidity from Peter. He went with it. “You gotta calm down, Underroo’s. It’s only thunder, it’s not going to hurt you.”

Tony had a feeling that, if a doctor hadn’t pushed by, he just might have gotten through to the kid. Immediately though, she started pulling away at the thin bed-sheet and loosely fitted gown sitting on top of his body, easily startling him.

Once she began injecting contents of a syringe into the central IV line embedded in Peter’s chest, something the poor sap was just now able to notice, all hell broke loose. Peter looked back over at Tony, terrified, muffled cries louder than ever.

Tony quickly squeezed Peter’s arm, forcibly in a way that drew his attention. “The thunder’s just Thor, okay? He’s saying hi. Right, Bruce? It’s just our buddy Thor, right?”

Bruce didn’t look his way as he tensely answered, “Yeah, yeah, right.”

“You’re okay. Calm down, you’re alright.” The terrified agony stretching along Peter’s face could only be rivaled with the stress coming from Bruce. “What’s that look for, Banner?”

His question fell on deaf ears. Bruce only shook his head in response, something done more for himself than for Tony. The readings and layouts from the equipment kept his attention, his focus never faltering.

It was around that same time Helen had come rushing into the room, and the stress that came with her presence only made Tony’s concern grow.

“What’s going on?” she quickly asked, slapping on a pair of latex gloves.

Bruce kept his eyes fixated on the screens. “He’s fighting intubation, the medicine isn’t calming him down like it should and we’ve exceeded the maximum dosage. We’re going to need to extubate.”

“Without weening him off?” Helen paused, coming to a halt near the bed. “What makes you think that will be safe?”

Bruce pointed towards the monitor. “Look at the flow of his oxygen saturation. Not even five minutes before he fell into distress and his levels were within the acceptable range. He’s having unassisted spontaneous breathing —”

“Have you done an SBT test to confirm —”

“We don’t have a choice, Helen. We can’t risk hypoxia.”

“You’re risking extubation failure.”

Tony had tuned out their fast-paced conversation. It was easy to let their medical jargon and
terminology fall into a blanket of white noise. The pained grunts and choked gags coming from Peter, however, were difficult as hell to ignore. He tried not to watch as Peter flimsily wrestled against them, the events from a couple of days ago already playing back in his mind, on repeat — over and over again.

For a brief moment, he zoned out. Fell absent to everything around him. Disassociated. It was easier than handling the situation, the nightmare, occurring in front of him.

This wasn’t fair to the kid.

Jesus Christ, this wasn’t fair. They couldn’t even do their jobs in helping Peter rest, just *sleep* it all away. The smallest act of kindness and they had managed to screw that up too. What else was he going to miserably fail at next?

“You will fail him, Stark.”

“Boss?”

Tony snapped himself back into the moment.

“What, FRI?”

“You never provided an answer to my question. Did you want me to have security escort Mrs. Parker back to the infirmary?”

The black-haired woman at Bruce’s side — Claire, from what Tony had gathered — passed a syringe his way. Tony watched as Bruce quickly placed it within the much smaller catheter hanging from the tube in Peter’s throat, sucking air out of it to deflate the internal balloon that kept it place.

“No,” Tony bluntly answered. “No, keep her away from here. They...hopefully they’ll be done with this by the time she comes back.”

Tony swallowed dryly, unable to wet his suddenly parched throat at the sight of Bruce messing with the intubation tube. Peter was watching him with a fear that couldn’t be described and Bruce looked at the kid with a sense of pity throughout it all.

May didn’t need to see this, not if it could be avoided.

Honestly, he didn’t need to see it himself. This — bedside comfort — it wasn’t something he was good at. Peter had been kept well out of it up until now, and suddenly the maelstrom of nurses and doctors manhandling him was much too uncomfortable to witness.

It was becoming harder to ignore the voice in the back of his head constantly reminding him of how this was his fault. Maybe, after everything that had happened, he was afraid of being confronted by a conscious and defeated Peter. Maybe he was just a coward who couldn’t handle the sickening seesaw of his own conflicting emotions.

At this point, Tony didn’t care which it was. He just wanted to leave.

“Peter, we’re going to remove the tube from your throat, okay?” Bruce kept his voice calm but loud, ensuring Peter could hear him over the rising commotion. “We know it’s bothering you, buddy, we’re going to take it out. But I need you to do me a big favor. On the count of three, I need you to cough the best that you can. Squeeze Tony’s hand if you understand what I’m saying.”
Tony hadn’t realized he was still holding Peter’s hand, not until he felt the squeeze that came with Bruce’s words. It clenched and unclenched, each move followed by a painful, muted grunt. He looked down, seeing through the mess of wires and IV’s Peter’s much smaller hand clasped within his.

Bruce looked away from the machines and towards him. “Tony?”

Tony hadn’t looked up from below, squeezing Peter’s hand back. It was all he needed to ground himself. He wasn’t budging. Not yet, not while he was still needed.

“Y-yeah, he’s…” Tony breathed out, “he gets it.”

They didn’t waste any time after that. The countdown was painfully short.

Bruce steadied his hands around the intubation tube. “One, two — cough, Peter — three!”

Peter’s forehead creased, his face contorted with wide eyes screaming for help. It took one fluid and flawless motion to remove the tube. Once free of it, he was coughing uncontrollably, his wheezes for air dry and restricted.

Claire leaned forward to strap an oxygen mask around Peter’s face. Tony didn’t think twice about it. Not until the kid went absolutely ballistic.

A hand smacked into her, pushing her back. “Sweet Christmas — whoa!”

“Hey, whoa, steady him!” Helen was quick to take action, half her body weight pinning Peter’s one side to the bed. The instruments Bruce had been holding immediately fell to the ground and he lunged forward to help.

“Kid — Peter — shit!” Tony tightened the grip he had on Peter’s hand, his own shoulder buckling against the frantic jerking. The sight was jarring. The kid was acting as if someone had forced him to inhale poison, repeatedly swatting the oxygen mask away with delirious fear and an ungraceful hand.

“No! N-no!” Peter’s voice was weak and raspy, spoken between a handful of stifled coughs.

Claire didn’t back down. “Peter, we need you to —”

“No, no, don’t! Plea-please —” He gasped with a series of strangled huffs that bordered on hyperventilating, his body twisting to evade her movements. “Don’t, please — no!”

A nurse huffed. “He’s moving too much, Doctor Cho, he’s going to rip his damn structures.”

That was all Tony needed to take action, his own panic shooting through him at an alarming rate. His free hand started to make grabby motions at the oxygen mask Claire held.

“Give me.”

Claire furrowed her brows. “I’m sorry, what —”

“Now!” Tony all but snatched it out of her hands, gently though forcibly using his open palm to turn Peter’s face towards him.

“Hey, hey, kiddo, it’s okay. See?” Tony shoved the mask against his mouth, exaggerating the breath of air he took in. “It’s just air, it won’t hurt you.”
Peter froze. His eyes glistened brightly from the overhead lights, staring at him. Tony absolutely hated that one blink led both his eyes to leak tears down his still-too-pale face.

He quickly placed the device back over his mouth, inhaling again, pointing to the plastic mask.

“See?”

Peter didn’t respond. His eyes stayed locked on Tony, but otherwise he was motionless. Aside from finally falling still, there was no indication in his face that showed any understanding of what was happening. Tony handed the mask back to Claire. She quickly sterilized it and, very slowly and with great hesitation, placed it over Peter’s face.

This time, he didn’t fight it.

He did, however, let himself break down into a pile of messy, weak cries once the oxygen whirred to life. Each sob wrecked through him, his upper body heaving with raw and painful sobs despite the reassurances fed to him.

“Honey, it’s okay, it’s okay,” the nurses repeated.

Peter clenched his eyes tightly, his face contorted into a distressful mess. “Ple-please, please...”

“Shh, sweetie, you’re going to be okay.”

Tony looked up, forcing himself to count ceiling tiles in a desperate attempt to calm himself. He knew he was blatantly ignoring Peter wheezing and crying into the oxygen mask, but fuck he really wasn’t good with crying.

“God, kid...what did they do to you.”

Maybe he should’ve had FRIDAY direct May back to the hospital room after all. Tony was becoming more confident that he wasn’t equipped to handle this problem. He kept a firm hand on Peter’s shoulder, occasionally squeezing his grip. He was positively clueless on what else to do.

“Tony...”

Standing opposite of him, Bruce jerked his head towards the corner of the room, near the recliner where Tony had fallen asleep earlier. With a quick glance spared to Peter, Tony followed Bruce away from the hospital bed.

Thunder rumbled violently from outside, seemingly louder the closer they got to the room’s bay window.

Tony nervously crossed his arms over his chest, stuffing his hands under his armpits with his shoulders hunched upward. Any trademark Stark poise he had was lost.

“What is it?”

Bruce stared over his shoulder for a moment, eyeing the scene behind him. Tony didn’t miss the pause between responses.

“The enhanced analgesic isn’t affecting him anymore,” Bruce ruefully explained. “At least not intravenously, not at the highest dose we can manage before it causes organ damage. He’s built up a tolerance way faster than we expected him too.”

Tony frowned. “What are you saying?”
Bruce hesitated. “Helen wants to try giving it to him intrathecally. Inject it directly into the spinal canal. It’ll reach the cerebrospinal fluid and —”

“You want to give the kid an epidural?” Tony arched an eyebrow. That was certainly a new development.

“Not quite. There’s a difference between the two. But they are similar, so...” he paused, nodding his head a little, “yes, if that’s how you chose to view it. It should be more effective. We can provide a much more stronger, concentrated dose that’ll bypass the blood-brain barrier —”

A harsh, high-pitch yelp reached over Bruce’s voice.

“Ahh-ACK!” Peter cried out.

Tony closed his eyes, refusing to let himself turn around and see first hand what had happened. “Spare me the semantics. Do what works at this point.”

Every ounce of patience he had leaked away with each painful cry he heard from Peter. If he ran off a percentage, he’d surely be at negativity right now.

Claire’s tone remained calm. “Shh, shh, honey you’re making it worse —”

“St-stop it, pl-please. Please. It – it...”

“Will one of you get off your damn asses and help me keep him still? The more he moves the worst this is for him.”

Tony hunched his shoulders up tighter, unable to hide his discomfort. Bruce took pity on him. Tony absolutely hated that he took pity on him, but he did, if only in the form of laying a gentle hand on his arm.

“It’s temporary,” Bruce reassured. “We’re making progress with a new formula, I promise.”

Another shout pierced the air, broken and rough as sandpaper. Tony finally turned around, slightly agitated at the persistent cries that quite frankly, in his opinion, shouldn’t be happening at all.

Peter choked on a sob. “Stopstopstopstopstop —”

“Count of three. One, two —”

Nurses were rolling Peter onto his side, adjusting his limbs when he couldn’t do so himself. Tony’s knees trembled at the sight of the kid stuffing his face into a pillow, muffling each sound that came from his mouth.

He remembered the pain of having an electromagnet placed into his chest, each slight twitch of his muscles causing a fiery agony that couldn’t be tamed. He was sure that wasn’t anything close to what Peter was feeling now. That thought was unbearable, clouding his better judgment with guilt.

Tony’s lips pressed into a thin line. “It’s been days now, Banner.”

“I know,” Bruce somberly answered. “There have been some roadblocks — the first trial dose wasn’t strong enough to inhibit the arachidonic acid pathway in the prostaglandins —”

Tony held his hand up. “Just-just do what you have to do, alright.”

His vision tunneled as he watched staff quickly prepared for the procedure. Claire was already
cleansing Peter’s back with a swap of iodine, the russet brown antiseptic standing out among the white sheets and pale complexion of his skin. It was all too clinical for his liking.

“Do I need to...” Tony shifted uncomfortably. “Should I leave?”

Bruce looked between the two of them — Tony and then Peter, as if taking a moment to deliberate on his answer. He ultimately shook his head.

“No, I’d uh, I’d actually advise that you stay,” he warmly suggested. “Or get his aunt here. We need him calm while this is done and...he looks like he could use someone familiar to comfort him. We’d restrain him, but he’s...not reacting well to that.”

Tony scoffed incredulously. “You think? He was bolted to a wall, of course he isn’t reacting well to restraints.”

Bruce decided it was best not to respond to the sarcastic remark. Tony decided he was smart for doing as much. He reproached the hospital bed, slowly, one foot at a time. He felt incredibly out of place around the scrubs and lab coats. It was an odd feeling for him, almost foreign, to not be in control of the room. It felt unnatural.

He watched intently as nurses handled Peter, Claire specifically. She moved Peter’s arm away from his hip, positioning it towards his chest and letting him rest it near the plastic guard rail they had risen up. The movement sparked obvious pain that he vocalized, half smothered in his pillow, half sharp in the air.

“Gah-ah!”

“Christ, be gentle with the kid, will ya!?” Tony blurted out. “He’s got two holes the size of your damn fist in his stomach, go easy on him.”

It was an overreaction, sure. But it made him feel better. Right now, he’d take any bit of that he could get.

Bruce stayed neutral, refusing to intervene whereas Claire stepped towards him and met his gaze head-on.

“Mr. Stark, I didn’t come all the way from Harlem just so I could do a shitty job here,” she bluntly stated. “Now I’m going to give you the benefit of the doubt being that you’re clearly upset right now, but try to have some faith in us. We know what we’re doing.”

Tony narrowed his eyes, looking the woman up and down. He was positive he’d never seen her before, a day in his entire life. Light blue scrubs highlighted her caramel toned skin and her slick black hair was pulled back in a low ponytail, emphasizing the hard glare she proceeded to give him.

“Trust me,” Claire softly yet firmly pressed. “I’m in the business for people like Peter.”

For a moment, she almost reminded him of Pepper. Hot-headed, stubborn and strong. He arched an eyebrow — strong women like that were hard to come across.

“Tony, Claire Temple is good at what she does. A lot of enhanced seek her out when they need help.” Helen barely looked his way as she brought over a handful of packaged supplies. “Trust her.”

Bruce pulled up a chair next to Peter’s bed, gesturing for him to sit down. “And if you don’t trust
Tony absentmindedly watched as Claire laid out the supplies she needed on an instrument tray. The tiny glass jars of medication caught his eye, the red stripe wrapping around the vials an indicator of enhanced painkillers.

“Harlem, huh?” Tony muttered, slowly settling down into the hard, plastic chair. “You there when Brucey here managed to break Harlem?”

Claire ripped open the package to a syringe. She managed to screw the barrel to the hypodermic needle without once breaking her stare at him, the corner of her lips pulling up in a small grin.

“You think you can help me?” She avoided his question by leaning over, taking Tony’s hands and laying them down on Peter’s shoulder. “Here — hold him still, just like that. There you go, keep him nice and steady.”

By the time she was finished, Tony had both his palms resting on Peter’s one shoulder. The kid was facing him, though his face was hidden within the depths of the pillow, wet cries leaking into the cotton fabric. He wasn’t even sure if Peter was aware it was him at his side or not.

Claire must have read his thoughts. “Just talk to him.”

Tony bit back a sardonic laugh. And say what? ‘Sorry pip-squeak, this is all my fault, the guy after you only wanted my money and by the way, my ridiculously over-sized staff of scientists can’t figure out how to get morphine to work for you. This one’s on me buddy, my bad.’

He gripped Peter’s shoulder and bunched what part of the hospital gown laid around him. Hesitantly he looked down, deciding it was easy to watch Peter writhe in pain then look at the uncomfortably large needle Claire had just uncapped. Christ, how big was that thing? He didn’t even have a needle phobia, and yet somehow the long, extended size of that one left a twinge his gut.

A sudden adjustment of his body brought Peter’s face directly out from the pillow, his neck craning over with a harsh cry. With it came a sharp voice, cut and cold.

“Careful — careful!” Helen laid a large pillow underneath Peter’s injured leg. “Watch the rod, stabilize it.”

Tony found himself irrationally angry when he looked towards the end of the hospital bed, seeing staff delicately work with Peter’s broken leg and the silver metal embedded to the side of his calf.

“Why are you still using that medieval crap?” he snapped with a little more bite than necessary.

Helen looked up, shooting him a glare of pure exasperation. “I did have a regenerative cradle. It would have done wonders right about now.”

And that was the end of that argument.

Tony eyed the leg with a sense of remorse. The team of orthopedics mentioned that if all went well and his ‘quick healing’ kicked in, they could remove the rod within a couple weeks. Clearly, that was far down on their list of priorities right now but Tony hated that they practically strapped bracelets onto the kid’s broken wrists and couldn’t do something less invasive for his leg.

It hurt just to look at it.
No, that wouldn’t do. He needed to find a way to fix this.

“Tony,” Bruce firmly spoke up. “Talk to him.”

Tony hadn’t realized Peter was aware of his surroundings, his neck having craned to watch Claire as she began her work. Two loud snaps of his fingers and the kid turned his head back over towards him.

“Hey, look at me — don’t look at them, look at me,” Tony insisted. “Eyes on me, Parker. C’mon now.”

It didn’t take much for Peter’s glassy and puffy eyes to roll back in front of him. The movement was slow and sluggish. Once he let his head fall back onto the pillow, his eyes seemed to settle straight ahead.

“There ya go.” Tony hoped his smile didn’t look as awful as it felt. “I knew you weren’t that rebellious.”

Peter blinked. His eyelids slid down to half-mast, and his head seemed to sink further into the pillow, the echo of a groan escaping his lips.

Tony winced. He looked positively exhausted.

“Hey there, kiddo.”

For once in — how long had it been now? Tony shrugged off the details. For once in what felt like a lifetime Peter looked at him with recognition, letting out a shaky breath as he wearily blinked his eyes.

“...hey...” Peter rasped.

Tony cringed. His voice, barely a whisper above everyone else, sounded like sandpaper in a blender. Days of not talking combined with the rough abuse of intubation were not kind to his throat.

“Eek.” Tony patted his shoulder. “How about we save that voice for right now. You sound like a seventy-year-old chain smoker. No offense.”

He felt a modicum of relief when Peter’s lips tugged upward, a twitch that could almost be considered a smile. It felt oddly comforting to see him awake and mildly lucid, a grounding reminder that despite it all, he was still alive.

Peter inhaled, his body lifting with the action. He released his breath in two words. “...’m sorry.”

Tony frowned and shook his head. “You got nothing to be sorry for, Underoo’s.”

Peter’s face began to scrunch up, and Tony briefly looked up over his shoulder to see that Claire had started inserting that uncomfortably large needle into his back. He was quick to look away. It was yet another thing to add to his ‘things Peter will never go through again under my watch’ list.

“...should’ve...listened to you,” Peter swallowed dryly, struggling to speak. “Not go in...the building. No one...needed saved. I...me’sed up.”

The oxygen mask around his mouth fogged up with every strained breath he released. Tony was happy to provide a distraction, he really was, but Peter’s efforts in talking were too much of a
struggle and things were already on level ten-of-ten in rankings of how bad this situation could get.

“Yeah? Well let’s not focus on it right now,” he quickly dismissed. “We need to work on getting you better first, okay?”

Peter didn’t seem to want to listen to him, not that Tony was surprised by this. He licked his chapped lips, persistent on talking.

“...was...” he grimaced in timing with Claire administering a barrel full of medicine. “...was a trick.”

“You can tell me all about that later, Pete.” Tony gave himself credit for keeping his expression and voice neutral as Peter chewed on his bottom lip, his face twisting in pain. “I’ll be here. I’m not leaving.”

His one lid peered open, shortly followed by the other. Peter kept his eyes steady on him, throughout the entire procedure, throughout every moan and cringe that came with the pain and aches in his body.

The amount of trust emitting from him, the faith and conviction — it was a knee-jerk reaction for Tony to feel disturbed. He wanted so badly to tell Peter different, tell him ‘don’t trust me, that’s stupid. I’ll get you hurt.’

The words never formed.

In the back of his head, he told himself he was a coward. A selfish coward. Because as much as he wanted to leave, he also never wanted to step one foot away from the kid. And it was conflicting. It was dangerous.

Tony trying to get what he wanted — that was Stark selfishness, and that always ended poorly for everyone involved.

Peter’s eyes had closed, his breathing having fallen into a more steady, slow rhythm. It was easy to tell when the drugs kicked in. His muscles relaxed so dramatically that both the nurse and Tony holding him in place needed to strengthen their grip.

“...was scary.”

Looking over Peter’s body, Tony could see that Claire was wrapping up the procedure. She dumped used syringes and medicine vials aside on the nearest tray. He kept his one hand holding Peter’s shoulder still while the other moved to his forehead, brushing his hair away away from his eyes.

Tony wasn’t sure if it was the drugs that caused Peter to lean into his touch or something entirely else he wasn’t ready to confront yet. Whatever it was, he didn’t fight it.

“Yeah,” Tony said, tilting his head up to keep the burning tears forming in his eyes from leaking out. “Yeah, it was.”

The once angry machinery calmed down as Peter fell into a deep sleep. He murmured under his breath, a sound barely heard over the rumble of thunder outside, an achingly sweet portent of rain washing down from the skies.

Tony was sure he had heard him say, “thanks...mr. st’rk.”
He chalked that up to his own sleep deprivation.

Steve had fallen into a routine. Every hour he was awake, he checked up on Peter. The wrist-watch he wore set off an alarm ten minutes of, allowing him time to make his way over to the medical wing of the compound. FRIDAY had programmed it for him, seeing as the device was a little beyond what he was used to. It was a gift from Tony, of course.

He would have asked the man to help him with it, but Tony was a bit...preoccupied the past couple of days. Steve let him be.

He had just woken up and taken his shower when the beeping gained his attention. It didn’t take him long to toss on a pair of khakis and a black t-shirt before he made his way out of his quarters. The hallways to the infirmary led him to pass by large windows that fogged with the condensation of rain, the thunderstorm from outside drearily persistent.

The walk always gave him time to think, though he couldn’t say he appreciated that fact. Once the worst of the situation had dissipated, he found himself doing the best he could to occupy his time. It helped to stay busy.

Most of his efforts went into SHIELD. Scratch that, a lot of his efforts went into SHIELD. There was no denying that their impromptu rebellion stirred a lot of aggression with their superiors and the aftermath proved to be as difficult as he had expected.

The rest of his time, well...there wasn’t much else he could do but sit with his thoughts.

Steve found himself wishing he could be angry at Tony. He tried, desperately, he really did. But the same anger he felt when this all first started wouldn’t return. It eerily reminded him of decades ago when he lived under the impression that Bucky was gone — killed, an unfortunate victim of war. Even way back then, he couldn’t be angry at Peggy or the commanding officers that sent them on that mission.

If he felt anything for Tony right now, it was sympathy. He could relate to the situation, the pain of witnessing someone he truly cared about dying only to find out they were suffering from much, much worse. That was common ground for them, something they could cling to together. No, he wasn’t mad at Tony.

Now, the sick men who hurt his team — that was a different story. He was furious that they had the nerve, the gall, to hurt Peter. To hurt a kid. That was a seething fury of which he had never felt the likes of before. There was no amount of punching bags for him to break that anger.

It mildly surprised him to see that he wasn’t the only one affected. The entire team struggled with this one; even Vision seemed to have an unusual amount of empathy for Peter. Steve had a gut feeling Wanda had a lot to do with that. She always managed to explain things to him in a way that he understood. There was a link between those two that he’d never understand, and since she left to train with Strange, the android hadn’t emerged from his quarters. Most of them assumed he didn’t have a need to.

There was no denying that the boy really pulled on their heartstrings, and it wasn’t uncommon for someone else to be paying a visit to the medical wing themselves. He had encountered Sam,
Rhodey, and Clint a handful of times already.

Natasha, however, was someone he hadn’t expected to see.

Not long after Peter was declared stable, she retreated, something she did best. No one chased after her because they knew they wouldn’t be able to find her. When Natasha didn’t want to be found, she disappeared. There was never a trace to follow.

And yet here she was.

Steve furrowed his brows. He eyed her, standing by herself in front of the large window exposing the inside of Peter’s hospital room. Her back was straight and tight, her arms crossed over her chest. She didn’t look his way, not once, not even as he casually walked up to her and stood by her side.

Steve stuffed both his hands inside his khaki pockets. “He’s looking better.”

Surveying the insides of the room, Steve was happy to see Peter laying asleep in his bed. Unfortunately, he couldn’t testify if it was a peaceful sleep or not. Still, small blessings and all, the kid was out of it. His aunt, who he came to find out was a wonderfully kind woman with an abundance of trauma in her life, sat on a couch nearby. Things seemed calm, given the circumstances.

It took a double take for him to realize that Tony wasn’t present. He frowned. That was a first.

“Bruce removed the feeding and breathing tubes around three a.m.” Natasha didn’t break her stare, her eyes locked straight ahead. “They say his red blood cell count is increasing.”

Steve noticed. The bulky tubes obstructing his face were gone and his skin had a little more color to it, at least more than when he had arrived. It was slow progress, but at least they were making it.

“That’s good,” he said.

Natasha popped her lips. “They’re having more problems with the painkillers.”

Steve bowed his head. That...wasn’t good. He wondered if that’s why Tony wasn’t around. It was unusual, he had been glued to the kid’s side since they brought him back. If he was off helping Bruce and Cho with the drugs though, all the better. After all, Peter had a lot of great minds helping him.

“They’ll figure it out.”

Standing next to Natasha, he could feel a nail-biting tension flowing around them. If he had to pin a time he had ever seen her so exposed, it years ago when Fury had faked his death. That, and what had now occurred were the only two times he ever felt such an emotionally driven concern from her.

One way or another, everyone really was affected.

Steve tensed and shifted on his feet. “I know it’s none of my business —”

“Then stay out of it,” Natasha coldly snapped.

Steve pursed his lips and didn’t respond right away. He took in a deep breath, his sensitive sense of smell taking in the sterile air with slight burning sensation.
“Dmitri...he called you Natalia Romanova,” he paused, carefully choosing his next words. “That’s not a name listed in your dossier.”

Natasha remained stoic. “No. It’s not.”

“You told us you knew him back —”

“Why do you need to know, Rogers?” She finally looked his way. “What’s it going to change?”

Steve met her stare.

“Nothing,” he simply replied. “But let’s just say I have a hunch you knew him a lot more then you led us onto.”

Natasha’s expression was indifferent. “Even if I did, what difference will it make now?”

Steve shook his head and lowered his chin to his chest, finding himself huffing at her answer. There was a stab of disappointment in his gut.

“You know, I’m getting used to my teammates not telling me things.”

Natasha scoffed a bitter laugh. “You couldn’t have possibly thought I’d be the exception.”

“I don’t know what I thought you’d be,” Steve admitted. “All I know is that you’re not that person anymore, whoever it was and whatever association they had with Dmitri...that’s not you.”

He braced himself to look back at her, surprised to see she hadn’t turned away. Their eyes locked and she smiled, a grin that held nothing but sadness.

“That’s cute.” Natasha swallowed hard. “But it’s fairy-tale I don’t think even you believe in.”

“You’re too hard on yourself, Nat,” Steve insisted.

“Maybe.” Natasha shrugged, turning back to the window. “And maybe Bruce isn’t the only monster on the team.”

After a handful of minutes, Steve concluded that anything else he wanted to say would only add fuel to the fire. There was a time and a place for his leadership and right now just wasn’t it. A couple of days didn’t prove to be enough to clear the air between them all, not after everything that had happened.

Maybe if this had occurred before the Accords. Maybe.

He broke his steely gaze, settling back to look at Peter. Steve had seen first-hand injuries on the battlefield that would traumatize the average man. It was the dark side of war that most refused to acknowledge, something he tucked away and never spoke about. It was a part of him he had to live with, a detached coping mechanism that only got stronger with each incident he witnessed.

Peter…

Peter was different.

Peter was a kid.

And Natasha, well she was always a mystery he could never decipher. With every piece of her puzzle that he found, he seemed to lose two more. He didn’t know how he felt getting to know a bit
more about her.

He didn’t know how he felt about a lot of things lately.

“We’re being marshaled to SHIELD headquarters,” he suddenly spoke up.

Natasha arched an eyebrow, hugging herself tighter. “I thought this had become SHIELD headquarters.”

Steve’s lack of response said enough.

Natasha looked his way, gawking. “Really?”

He gave one concise shake of his head. “Not my decision.”

“Unbelievable.” She huffed exasperatedly, her jaw tightening. “The moment they form a new world security council and immediately they’re jumping our asses.”

Steve smirked, devoid of any humor. “Funny. That’s what I said.”

It was a hard-pressed position to be in, now that the Accords had been repealed and Ross wasn’t anywhere close to being their superior. Sure, Director Hill was tough as nails, but even she had bosses that sat above her.

Steve’s hip leaned against the wall, crossing his own arms over his chest with a tired sigh. Politics always made things more difficult.

Both of them were focused straight ahead when Natasha asked, “How long do we have?”

“Ninety-six hours.” Steve let a beat pass. “As of seventy-two hours ago.”

Natasha narrowed her eyes. “So a day, then?”

“Couldn’t find you, Nat,” he casually replied, his tone slightly accusatory. “How was I supposed to tell you?”

She stayed neutral. Both of them silently watched as the automatic doors on the other side of the room slid open, nurses quickly striding in and doing their job. May stayed seated at Peter’s side as they worked diligently around the hospital bed. Some checked vitals, others recorded data from the monitors and the rest prepped to change bandages on their patient.

Soon the high-tech glass windows would dim for privacy. There wasn’t much point in sticking around any longer.

“Tony know?” Natasha asked.

Steve pushed himself away from the wall, sidestepping her. “Tony’s not going.”

Natasha’s eyes fluttered rapidly with confused blinks. She spun on her heels to face him as he walked away.

“I don’t get the story behind that?”

Steve turned around, hands deep in his pockets when he shrugged. “What’s there to say? Only those involved were marshaled. Tony got lucky, he wasn’t there.”
Natasha was torn between grinning and letting her jaw fall unhinged to the floor. She settled for something in-between.

“You sly son of a bitch,” she muttered. “Isn’t lying a constitutional sin for you?”

Steve smirked. This time it held fond empathy, a trademark Rogers smile.

“Pack your bags, Romanoff.” He turned back around, continuing his walk down the corridor.

Natasha rolled her eyes and called out, “Can I not have been there?”

______________________________________________________

“It’s okay, Pete. You can let go.”

In and out. It was all he knew — the voices would come in and out, his mind would go in and out, and he wasn’t even sure where he would go when it happened. He felt detached, muddled, a wandering soul with no terrain to land on.

“You’re safe now. It’s okay to let go.”

He clung to those words. For the longest time, it was all he had to hold onto. For the longest time, he floated between the then and now, unsure of what was a dream and what was real.

When his mind finally re-connected with his body, it happened all at once. It felt like a crashing meteor plummeting to the earth, hard and fast, and the lack of control smothered him.

Peter felt trapped.

Not under a building, not to a wall, but trapped within a body he couldn’t move or function. Every breath he involuntary breathed sent agony radiating down his core to his every muscle, each inhale causing a scorched inundation of red pain to simmer in his stomach.

Peter moaned. He could feel it taper off in his chest, the keening never forceful enough to part from his lips. One after another they came, a string of groggy sounds loud in his own ears.

Distantly, he remembered when he first got his spider powers. After the mutation took place, after he was violently ill and swore up and down that he would die, he proceeded to spend two very long days locked up in his room. He jammed his earbuds tightly into his ears though no music played; he was just desperate to block out the noise, adding a pillow over his head and wishing — praying — that the world would go quiet.

Before he learned how to control his heightened senses, they controlled him. And it was hell.

This was like that. Only five hundred times worse.

Beeping, whirring, dripping, hissing — the sounds, the smells, the sights — it was all a constant presence. Each beep felt like a screw drilled into his head, the smell of chemicals burned his nose and he couldn’t open his eyes without the lights stabbing into his retinas. He felt as if he could taste the colors in the room, each and every one making him overwhelmingly sick.

He had once told Mr. Stark that his senses were dialed to eleven. This had to be eleven hundred. It wouldn’t stop, it wouldn’t go away.
Peter felt helpless to it all.

“You’re safe now.” The words were his only lifeline. He clung to them, tighter than ever.

Peter jerked awake, or at least jolted in the bed, unsure if he had ever fallen asleep in the first place. His back jostled off the bed and — sh! that hurt — the uncomfortable feeling of something up his nose began to bother him. It left a tickle in his nostril that made him want to sneeze.

His hands lazily reached up for it, sloppily attempting to yank on the intrusive tube.

“Don’t touch that, kid.” An exhausted voice slithered into his ears. It was familiar. Safe. “Trust me, you don’t want to pull it out. Been there, done that. It’s not all that fun.”

A painful groan rumbled in his chest, constricted, restricted. His hand reached for his face and callous fingers gripped his, the rough skin coarse against his own. He focused on the feeling. It was better than the persistent fire that lanced up and down his body, shock-waves controlling his every twitch.

The pain came and went in waves, in tides, some moments more pronounced than others. Things were moving. He felt dizzy, like he was floating, spinning around on a fast-moving Tilt-A-Whirl. A sheet of sweat sat on his body, feeling both hot and cold at the same time. The smells were raw, too clean and they set fire into his nostrils, or at least the one open nostril he had. The invading object sliding into his other made him want to throw up every time he dry swallowed.

*God,* just make it stop.

Memories came back to him in chunks. He was wet at one point. Drowning. Or was that a dream? His dreams blurred together with reality, forming a nightmare he couldn’t escape from. He was never sure if he cried in those dreams or in real life.

"...’m here, sweetie, it’s okay.” He heard May’s reassurance over the piercing machinery around him, soft around his ear. “Cry all you need to, I’m right here.”

Her voice came with a nervous energy, the type of worry that made him anxious. His intuition told him that her being upset was a bad thing, that she shouldn’t be so worried about him. But he wasn’t sure what he could do to fix that.

So he drifted. It was easier that way.

Time passed in scattered moments and Peter wasn’t sure how long each separated from the other. There was a lethargic feeling in his bones, a film behind his eyelids that told him he had been sleeping for a long time, that things weren’t happening all at once. It was the only grounding thing he could feel. Everything else happened in splintered stages.

He went to swallow and the dryness caused him to cough, no saliva resting in his mouth for him to work with. Without warning, the pain he had been feeling flared up to anew. The pounding in his ears went in sync with each beat of his heart, sometimes a steady flutter, other times a frantic throbbing.

“....hh, shh, it’s okay, honey. It’s okay. Here.” Something cold rested on his tongue. At contact he sunk into the mattress of the bed, unaware of how good the wetness felt in his mouth. “There you go, baby. You’re okay.”

His vision came in fragmented pictures, too bright to make out details. The lights burned the shadows out and it felt like his eyes were lagging, like the damaged computer monitor with broken
pixels that he once found from the dumpster. He’d make out one thing, one image and it’d freeze on a frame, surrounded by a blistering white light.

It was usually faces.

May. Doctor Banner. Many other people he didn’t know.

Mr. Stark.

“Easy Petey, easy.”

It was always pain that drew him back into awareness. The next time he moved, he let out of a guttural cry. The callous hand found his again, gripping it, tethering him to reality. Though the contact on his skin hurt, causing nerves to scream at the slightest pressure on bruises and broken bones, it also brought forth comfort.

“You’re safe, Underoo’s. No one’s going to hurt you, not on my watch.”

The voice penetrated any fear he had pullulating inside.

Peter painstakingly opened his eyes. His senses hadn’t let up, everything was still too bright and too harsh. But his eyes locked on the familiar picture, the familiar goatee and brown eyes staring down at him.

“You’re safe,” Tony whispered.

Something restrained him from pushing through the fog in his brain and holding onto consciousness was a feat enough. It was easy to close his eyes, let himself sink to the depths of unawareness. As long as the voice stayed present, it was easy to let go.

As long as he was there to remind him, Peter felt safe.

Chapter End Notes

I promise -- Tony stops the blame game before the end of this segment. I don't plan to drag that out too long. I'm not going to lie though, that nightmare does play a big part into his self-masochistic guilt trip in the next chapter. Chapter 24 concludes phase 4 and the next and final phase is a giant bag of cotton candy so we gotta have SOME angst before all that fluff, amIright?

I also gotta admit, I love writing the other characters almost as much as I love writing Irondad/Spiderson. Steve and Natasha were a blast to have in this chapter. But just an FYI, the Natasha & Dmitri story-line is concluded. I know I shouldn’t have to declare that — the writing should speak for itself, but I’ll admit I left things vaguely open for
the sake of being cryptic. That’s because I wanted to leave that B plot (C plot? *shrug*) up to the imagination of the readers. After all, Natasha has a mysterious background that remains unknown to a lot of characters. Who knows what involvement she actually had with Dmitri.

I will say — and this is not cannon to the story (unless you want to take it in that direction) there was a story line in the comics where Natasha was married. She was later told by the KGB that her husband was killed. Like I said, there’s no solidified conclusion to this one — the Black Widow remains a mystery.

Now -- GOD you guys are freaking amazing. Each update I'm blown away by your responses, comments, kudos -- the love you have for this fic really makes my heart swell with emotion. Thank you all so much for taking the time to show your appreciation, I really really really adore hearing what you think. I swear I wouldn't be here without you.

Stay tuned -- Tony gets to see Peter's Instagram page next :-P
The rain hadn’t let up all day.

Tony leaned heavily over the balcony, his chest resting against his forearms and his hands stuffed deep underneath his armpits. The sight ahead gave him a bird’s eye view of the compound’s hundred acres of land, the hallway of the facility — a bridge, at best, letting him oversee everything happening down below.

It was nice here, quiet. It was the best place to find some solitude.

The sky was gray and cloudy, and the absence of the sun left him feeling empty, almost distant. Below him, rain drizzled down on the grass and tarmac and the sound from it bounced off the steel walls surrounding him.

He silently observed the monotonous activity, watching as engineers worked on different planes and jets in the hangar bay while out in the fields, SHIELD soldiers continued to train despite the bleak weather. Life went on, all the way down to the landscapers that trimmed bushes and mowed the grass.

It was strange. The world continued to spin, all while Tony felt his world come to a sudden, crashing halt.

“Hey, you.”

Tony craned his head over his shoulder, slightly surprised the clicking of high-heels didn’t alert him to Pepper’s presence.

She smiled softly, approaching him with a red steel thermos in her hands. “FRIDAY told me I’d find you here.”

He hummed in response, not sure of what else to say. The sound of her heels came to a stop as stood side by side with him, only the pitter-patter of rain filling the space they occupied.

“Brought you the good stuff.” She extended the coffee thermos out to him. “Finca El Injerto
espresso, freshly brewed.”

“Miss. Potts, you are my savior.” Tony didn’t hesitate to take it into his hands, the heat enclosing
the steel sending goosebumps up and down his arms.

There was an ‘I know’ somewhere hanging between them that Pepper held off on, opting instead
for a tenderhearted smile. Any other time and he knew she wouldn’t let a beat pass, always quick
on her feet to match his snark, always one step ahead of his playful mockery. He wasn’t sure why
she stayed silent. Perhaps it was the dark bags hanging under his eyes, or maybe or the stress wired
deep around him. Whatever it was, he appreciated it.

He just wasn’t in the right mindset for quirky banter right now.

It was a quality in her that he didn’t just love, he was downright jealous of it. She always had the
right words for the right time and place. Him — well, he was lucky if he had a functioning filter
most days. She always found a way to make up for what he lacked.

Tony took a large gulp of coffee, thinking about how inadequate he was in comparison. Hell,
inadequate didn’t even begin to touch how novice he felt. After a handful of days, the kid was
finally coming too and the most he could manage to say was, ‘yeah, that was pretty scary.’

He scoffed at himself. For a man as suave as he was, it seemed like he and words couldn’t get
along anymore. Because holy hell and damn it to all, that was more than just scary. It was
downright terrifying, and talking about it meant re-living it, something Tony was far from ready to
do.

So he found solitude. At least up until now.

“I got word that the facility is officially out of lock-down,” Pepper announced, breaking the silence
between them. “I’m going to have to leave for Atlanta later tonight, probably around eight.”

“Atlanta?” Tony cringed. “Gross.”

Pepper smirked, letting out a friendly huff. “Yeah, well, some of us have actual work they need to
get done.”

He sighed, looking down below where his hands loosely cupped the thermos. While there was no
animosity in Pepper’s tone, Tony still couldn’t help but feel choked by conflict. The warmth
seeping through the steel was different from the musky humidity surrounding him. It seared into
his fingertips, not so hot to cause burns or blisters, just hot enough to keep him grounded. The air
was too musky to breathe, too humid, but at this point, anything was better than the sterile
atmosphere of the infirmary.

At the same time, guilt spread through his shoulders, sinking deep into his nerves. Pepper was
right; he hadn’t done anything productive since returning from —

Tony shuddered, taking a swig of the coffee. He knew he had been carelessly neglecting his duties
and responsibilities over the past handful of days. It went without saying that he’d be utterly lost
without her.

“Thanks, Pep.”

Pepper furrowed her brows. “You already had the espresso beans here —”

“No, no... not for the coffee. For keeping everything afloat while I’ve been...” He waved his hand in
the air, hoping the gesture would speak the words he couldn’t formulate.

Luckily for him, Pepper seemed to understand. She leaned over the balcony herself, just far enough that the metal railings couldn’t touch her white blazer, and she rested her hand on-top of his. For someone who wouldn’t describe himself as a ‘touchy-feely’ sort of person, the contact seemed to wash away any rigid tension that spread through his being like ink on a paper.

In the distance he could hear soldiers running, their boots slamming against the tarmac as they got closer to the building where he and Pepper stood. Water splashed up from the ground and even standing on the balcony high above them, Tony flinched. He was starting to wonder if the day would ever come where the concept of water didn’t bother him, didn’t taunt him with the reminder that he narrowly escaped a watery grave.

“You really care for him.” Pepper playfully jabbed her elbow into his side, jolting him out of his own thoughts. “You know, you didn’t have to hide him from me.”

“What are you talking about?” Tony looked over at her, confusion written vividly across his face. “I told you about him. You knew all about him.”

“Yeah, I knew about him. But I never got to meet him. The press conference was my one and only opportunity and after that, you...locked him away like you didn’t want to share him with anyone.” Pepper paused, pursing her lips in thought. “Which, coming from you isn’t all that surprising.”

Tony shook his head, returning his gaze to the steam rising from the open thermos. “Doesn’t matter. Once I fix this, once I make up for what happened...he’s going back to Queen’s and staying there. All this — the company being infiltrated like that, them using him against me...it’s too dangerous for him to stick around. I should have kept him at arm’s length to begin with.”

“That’s it?” Pepper exhaled a scoff that cut deep into his bones. “Just like that, you’re going to kick him to the curb?”

“I’m not ‘kicking him to the curb.’” Tony rolled his eyes. “He’ll keep his suit, he can keep doing his Spider-manning thing. I won’t stop any of that, that’s his business, his M.O. He did that before me, he’ll do it long after me.”

“But you’re going to abandon him?”

“I’m not going to — Christ, first Rhodey, now you.” Tony scrubbed at his forehead with the back of his hand. “Why am I suddenly the bad guy? It’s not like I’m tossing him to some county general hospital, you know. I’m not forgetting he existed. Hell, I’m doing my best to keep him alive, get him better, it’s not like I want to see him this way and —”

“Calm down,” Pepper stressed, craning her head forward to see him better. “You’re working yourself up, Tony. What’s this really all about?”

Tony sarcastically and dramatically shrugged his shoulders, turning to face her. “Oh, I don’t know, does a crazy, psychopathic Russian spy ring any bells? The sick bastard was given front row seats to everything involving my life, Pep. He saw me get close to Pete and it — it’s bad enough that’s already happened to you, I can’t...”

His voice began to waver and crack and, ‘Goddammit,’ Tony looked away with a loud attempt at clearing his throat. He was tired, so incredibly tired of being stressed to the point of nausea, being one push away from falling off the edge of a mountain he never wanted to climb.

A shaky hand ran over his mouth as he said, “That can’t happen with him. It can’t. He’s just a kid.”
It was surreal to think that only a few weeks ago he and the team were at each other’s throats about the very same issue. He had been so adamant that he’d protect the kid from anything like this happening, that’d he’d be fine running around as a superhero as long as Tony had his back.

It was his pride – always his pride, blinding him from the facts. He had gotten close to Peter. Getting close to someone always brought on trouble. He knew that, he knew that the moment he looked at the little twerp sleeping in his car and he chose to ignore it.

And Peter had to pay those consequences.

It wasn’t fair. Superpowers or not, Peter was still in high-school. Tony wasn’t so quick to forget that he was the one who not only once, but twice now turned down the offer of coming onboard the Avengers. He had every right to want to be a kid and Tony couldn’t take that away from him.

Pepper removed her hand from his, going to fold her arms over her chest. “So you think things will get better if you high-tail it out before you two get too close? You know, I recall something similar happening with me and I also don’t remember being too happy about it. It might be smart to re-think that idea.”

Tony leaned forward against the wet metal railings, feeling the dampness sink into his wrinkled AC/DC t-shirt.

“It is what it is. He’ll have to deal.”

“Tony, you’re being—”

“He almost died!” Tony shot up stiff as a board, facing her head on and he forced himself to dry swallow in an attempt to rid himself of the painful lump forming in his throat. “He almost died, Pep. I held him in my arms as he...”

A shiver rippled through his core and Tony had to look away, trying to focus on anything but the echoes of haunting memories that crudely invaded his mind. The smell of musty grass, the humidity in the air, the drizzle of rain — anything but the pleas, the cries and the screams.

Tony sniffed, swiping his thumb over his nose. “People like Dmitri won’t be able to hurt him if I stay out of his life. If it means I need to cut all ties to keep him safe, you can be damn well sure that’s what I plan on doing.”

Bringing the thermos to his mouth, he let the coffee scorch his throat as he drank gulp after gulp, desperate to settle his nerves. He was barely getting by telling himself things would get easier, better, that he’d go back to how things were before and then it wouldn’t be so difficult anymore.

Right now, it was the only thought that kept him together, like glue to a broken vase. If he couldn’t protect the kid at arms reach, it’d have to be done at a mile’s distance. Right now, he just wanted Peter to be safe.

That apparently couldn’t happen as long as he was around.

They’d deal with it. Eventually.

“You know,” Pepper visibly shifted her weight from one foot to the other. “You once told me that you wanted your legacy to be about more than just weapons and technology.”

Tony didn’t break his stare, eyes locked straight ahead. “Your point?”
Pepper stared at him, her eyebrow high in the air. It took a moment for things to click, to finally register what she was implying. The moment it hit him, Tony spun on his heels with comically large, wide eyes.

“Him?” His voice squeaked at the absurdity of the implication. “Pepper, he’s —”

She immediately held a hand in the air. “Wait a minute, hold on—”

“He’s got an aunt, he’s got his own life, he —”

“Hold on, you are jumping way ahead of things.” Pepper sighed. “Like you usually do.”

“Hey!” He pointed a finger her way. “I take offense to that.”

Pepper rolled her eyes. “Tony. Hear me out.”

“I always hear you out,” he insisted.

She cocked her head to the side. “Do you now?”

“I do.” Tony puffed out his chest and straightened his posture. “You don’t give me enough credit.”

Pepper stared him straight on. “So you’re not nervously rambling like a buffoon —”

“Not at all.”

“Because I brought up the slightest possibility of Peter taking on a bigger role in your life —”

Tony shook his head. “No clue what you’re talking about.”

“Similar to that of...I don’t know, a son?”

“He’s not my son,” Tony finally snapped, his voice dangerously low. “Okay? He’s not. He’s just some kid, some brat who got in way over his head and is, quite frankly, lucky that I came along to keep an eye on his scrawny pubescent ass.”

Pepper squinted suspiciously at him. “Really?”

“Yes.”

“Really?” she repeated.

“That’s what I said,” Tony reaffirmed.

“So making him that suit, all those protocols linked to FRIDAY — some of which I distinctly remember waking me up in the middle of the night —”

Tony wagged a finger. “Yeah, and I fixed that.”

“Assigning Happy to him?” Pepper titled her head to the side. “What about that?”

Tony shrugged. “Happy didn’t seem to mind.”

Pepper gawked, her jaw dropping to the floor. Tony couldn’t blame her, not even he believed that lie.

“What?” he defended. “I’m not making the kid take the train home all the damn time, and it’s only
fair that he hitches a ride when he comes up here — ”

“Yes! Let’s talk about that!” Pepper laughed, seeming more amused at his persistent denial than anything else. “All those date nights you canceled to work with him in the lab? That’s just…”

Tony kept a straight face as he answered, “Coincidence.”

Pepper’s expression burned into his skin hotter than the coffee’s thermos. Her face had fallen flat, mixed with an even amount of disbelief and disappointment.

“Tony,” she admonished, “come on.”

He gritted his teeth, relishing in the distraction of tension straining his jaw.

That was the thing with Pepper; she saw through every inch of his bullshit, every facade he tried to use as a mask. And as much as he loved her, as much as he genuinely adored her, she was also the reason why he hated people getting so close to him. Once they saw the real him, there was no going back.

That was too permanent for his liking.

“Why are you acting like it’s such a bad thing for you to get close to him?” Pepper asked, sympathy accenting her tone.

Tony tapped the thermos against the metal railing, the ‘clank clank clank’ resounding between them.

“Because Stark’s destroy.” His voice was sharp, cold, almost bitter. “We’re men made of iron, we decimate everything we touch, incapable of doing exactly what you’re insinuating.”

“Which is what?” Pepper’s eyebrows arched high to her hairline. “Loving somebody?”

Tony went to respond only to find the words die in his throat. He knew he didn’t have a leg to stand on, having dug himself into a hole too deep. He was smart enough to know that anything he said would put him in the position or either proving her right or downplaying their own relationship, neither of which he wanted to do.

He settled on staying quiet. His foot physically tapped against the floor as he bit back his snark.

Pepper’s touch returned, this time her hand gently cupping the back of his elbow. She leaned closer to him, caressing his exposed skin from his over-worn t-shirt.

“You’re not Howard. And he’s not a Stark. He’s a Parker,” she reminded. “One who could use a lot of advice, a lot of guidance from someone other than his aunt. Someone who understands him on the same level that you do.”

Tony closed his eyes, willing his own thoughts and remarks to stay at bay, looking anywhere but at her in a pitiful attempt to remain detached.

“You’ve always had your sights set on the big picture, Tony. The Avengers initiative, a nuke in the sky, putting a suit of armor around the world — you never think on a smaller scale.” Pepper shifted, leaning close enough to him that he could feel her breath against his skin. “Sometimes a difference is made by being there for just one person. Sometimes it’s not all about saving our world. It’s about saving theirs.”
His wrist-watch took away his response, the blinking and beeping gaining both their attention’s.

Tony tapped the smart-device once before answering, “Yeah, FRI?”

“**Boss,**” the voice came through. “**You requested that I informed you when Mr. Parker received another intrathecal injection of painkillers.**”

He paused, furrowing his brows.

“**Already? Claire what’s-hers-name said that dose would last twelve hours. It’s only been...**” He mentally did the math, sighing and squeezing his eyes shut when got to the answer. “**Great, six. Six hours. Where the hell is this new miracle drug they’re supposed to be giving him?**”

“**Would you like me to relay that question Doctor Cho and Doctor Banner?**”

“No, FRI, it was rhetorical.” Tony gripped the metal railings, lowering his head to his forearms as he muttered, “This is a goddamn cluster-fuck if I’ve ever seen one before.”

Pepper squeezed his elbow before pulling away. “Listen, you should know that if this is about the spy compromising the company, we’ll recover. I’m pretty sure Happy has already fired half of S.H.I.E.L.D. staff just out of precaution. But if this is really about you being afraid to take on a bigger role in Peter’s life, then you need to seriously think twice about what you plan on doing. Either way though, I’m sure whatever you do, you’ll make the right decision.”

“**Yeah?**” He arched an eyebrow and craned his neck to the side, resting his cheek against his arm. “**Why can’t you be that confident in me all the time, hm?**”

“**You just need a little guidance yourself.**” Pepper tapped a finger against his chest. “**A push.**”

As quickly as she had poked him, she leaned forward for a kiss, leaving a gentle mark against the scruff of his face.

The storm outside picked up, heavy enough that the approaching wind began to blow rain inside the hallway they stood in. Pepper walked away before her crisp white suit could suffer from the elements. Tony didn’t care one way or the other.

As she walked away, she made sure to look behind her while she said, “**Don’t be so afraid to get close to him, Tony.**”

Tony stood up straight and leaned his hip against the balcony railing with a sigh of defeat.

It wasn’t fair; there wasn’t an atlas for this. There were no guidelines he could follow, and every decision he made seemed to bite him in the ass. Now, along with his own subconscious, Rhodey’s ever-annoying and self-righteous presence and even May Parker stewing in his head, Pepper had managed to plant her own opinions where he couldn’t shake them.

As annoyed and frustrated as he felt, he still managed a smile, knowing full well what she was doing. It was just like Pepper to get inside his head like that. She had every intention of planting those seeds in his mind before she left the compound so he would spend days, if not weeks, repeating the conversation in his own head like a broken record.

Damn that woman knew him well.
Sipping the last of the coffee, he realized that he couldn’t deny her constant comfort. She was always there to act as his lifeline, always there to pull him from the depths before things got too bad, to rescue him from himself.

‘Rescue…’

Tony shook his head, bringing his wrist up to his mouth. “FRI, get me Banner and The Gallium Gang.”

He pulled himself away from the balcony as the rain picked up into a heavy downpour, the wind blowing forceful droplets in his direction. His foot tapped anxiously against the floor, the sound of pitter-patter echoing off the steel ceilings and seeming twice as loud in the empty corridor space.

An image finally popped up from his watch, a holographic live-feed of the one of the compound’s laboratory spreading out before him.

“Brucey,” he sing-song greeted.

Bruce barely looked up, his glasses low on the bridge of his nose as he answered, “We’re working on it, Tony.”

Tony couldn’t tell which he sounded more of — stressed, impatient or an unhealthy combination of the two. He leaned against the nearest and driest wall, propping his foot up behind him.

“ETA? Estimate? Give me something here, Banner.” Tony sighed. “FRIDAY just told me they’re sticking another needle in his spine. The kid’s becoming a living pincushion at this point.”

The news seemed to get Bruce’s attention. He looked up, startled, and pushed his wire-frame glasses up his nose with latex-gloved hands.

“Already? Jeeze that’s —” He shook his head, dismissing the obvious. “Soon, okay. We’ll have it soon.”

Tony wasn’t going to tell him that the answer wasn’t new information. The man was smart enough to know that himself. Instead, he settled on asking, “What’s the big hold up?”

Watching him from the live-feed, Tony saw as Bruce adjusted liquid inside two different glass beakers, one deep blue and the other cloudy white, and his focus was intent on his measurements rather than the conversation at hand.

“It’s…it’s complicated. We had to —” Bruce paused, setting down the beakers with a loud sigh. “Listen, we had to start from scratch.”

“You had to — what! ?” Tony gaped, his mouth hung open as he pushed himself off the wall with force. “What the hell, Banner! ? Are you telling me that you pissed away all this time just to throw everything out the window? Where’s Cho, put her on. I want to find out why I’m paying her clearly incompetent team an arm and leg for no goddamn reason.”

“Calm — calm down, Tony.” Bruce held two hands out, nearing close enough to the video screen that Tony could only see straight through the pale yellow latex gloves. “Helen’s doing everything she can to get this formula off the ground, you know that. But you’re forgetting that she’s also the primary physician assigned to Peter’s case. So to move things along, we decided to call in some reinforcements.”

“Reinforcements —” Tony didn’t bother hiding his frustration. “Great, reinforcements, and how’s...
“We needed someone with better knowledge and more hands-on experience with this type of situation,” Bruce explained. “You know we’ve been playing in the dark with Peter’s physiology.”

Tony physically bit his tongue, wishing it caused him more pain than the punch to his gut from Bruce’s statement. One look at the scientist and he could tell he wasn’t malicious but the intent, whether good or bad, was pointless. He was right. His insistent need to hide Peter away put them in this mess.

His shame burned hot red, and he forced himself to shake away the thought. Right now, his feelings didn’t matter. “Okay. And?”

Bruce stayed focused on multi-tasking. “Her name is Moira MacTaggert, she’s a fantastic geneticist and an expert in mutant affairs. She’s helping us understand Peter’s mutation on a whole new level. We were trying to enhance Cap’s formula, but something within his physiology is building a tolerance to it way too quickly. So we made a comparison with his blood and Steve’s, and it turns out both their liver enzymes are two completely different beasts. They produce similar amounts of ultra-rapid metabolizers, but it’s like night and day with how they function. We need to create something specifically for him, not piggyback off something else. Once we came to that conclusion, we started from scratch.”

“And it took someone else for you to realize that?” Tony scolded.

“Well, no, we-we knew that,” Bruce stammered, his tone caught between defensiveness and his own shame for the setback. “We were just trying to work around it. Steve’s painkiller was effective, after all.”

“Keyword there, Banner,” Tony snapped. “Was.”

“Don’t freak out so soon,” Bruce insisted. “Now that we’re able to take more frequent blood samples from Pete, we can progress at a faster rate. Moria’s already starting the second phase of a new drug. Once we find the right therapeutic levels, we should be able to start trial doses later tonight. I’m telling you, Tony, this woman is a genius when it comes to enhanced individuals. I’ve never seen someone so familiar with the mutant gene before. I’m confident we’ll figure this out.”

Bruce’s reassurance fell on deaf ears. A blanket of static cut through Tony’s train of thoughts, and he suffered a desperate attempt to string together an appropriate response. There wasn’t much he could say, if anything at all. This wasn’t his forte, it wasn’t his expertise, and as much as he wanted to help and progress things, he wasn’t any use to them.

He hated that. He hated standing around, doing nothing. Just by existing, he had become his own biggest nuisance.

‘Ugh,’ Tony thought, running a hand down the length of his face. The self-loathing part of him was trying to make an entrance and he just was not in the mood.

“Alright,” he settled on saying. “Keep me posted.”

His fingers went to tap off the device right as Bruce’s head shot up, so fast his glasses fell to the tip of his nose once again.

“Hey, hold up,” Bruce called out, setting down the beakers once more. “Helen mentioned something about you creating some sort of...nanite cast for Pete’s leg? That true?”
Tony cocked an eyebrow. “Nanite cast? Is that what she’s calling it?”

“You think you can actually do that?” Bruce pushed his glasses up his nose. “Invent healing nanobots for a bone fracture?”

Tony let out a heavy sigh, his free hand going to rub the back of his neck with a shrug.

“I know don’t, we’ll see. I’m tearing apart Mark 37 to utilize the remaining functioning nanites. I think we can get them to...I don’t know, do something subcutaneous that promotes tissue healing—I don’t know, Banner,” he rambled on, pacing through the empty hallway. “I could really use your help on it, so why don’t you get that painkiller up and running so we can figure something out together. Get the kid out of that medieval contraption sooner rather than later.”

Bruce hummed, his tone seemingly impressed.

“That’s a whole new level of medical bio-engineering, you know.” He diverted his eyes from the screen, his focus intent on his task at hand. “If you can pull that off.”

Tony rolled his eyes.

“C’mon Banner, you should know me better by now.” His hand reached over to his wrist-watch, ready to end the conversation the moment he answered, “I don’t do if’s.”

It was amazing how quickly he returned to his basic instincts. Gliding backward in his workshop chair, letting the wheels swivel across the smooth flooring, Tony hadn’t realized how much he needed the break from staying vigil at Peter’s bedside. Concertinaing on something different—inventing, fixing, brought a sense of peace to him he hadn’t felt in days.

It was nearing midnight when he finally left his lab. The nanites from his makeshift armor were finally completely disassembled and with FRIDAY running processing protocols to attach them onto what he’d later dub as being ‘new skin’, there wasn’t much left for him to do. Eventually, if all went well and his math was right—which it always was—he’d have a flexible sock-like device to slip around Peter’s leg and cause the kid as little pain as possible.

It was also amazing how quickly he passed by his own quarters, opting instead for the med bay he had become so accustomed to. Old habits die hard, he supposed.

He wasn’t surprised to see that May hadn’t left her post, curled up in the plush armchair at Peter’s beside. In her hands was a tablet that she scrolled through, her finger gliding up in the air every so often. It was late at night, and aside from the lights of monitors, computers and the small lamp near May’s side, the room was kept dim. It was actually a relief, a refresher to his strained eyes.

Tony zipped up his thin jacket on his way in, feeling the rush of cool air hit his skin as the automatic glass doors to the large hospital room slid open for him. He had created a routine by now—check the computers, check the charts, preoccupy himself in an attempt to furiously escape the grip of stress that clung to his every being. The only problem was that there wasn’t much added to the medical charts in the whopping handful of hours since he had left Peter’s bedside. For the remainder of the time he stood staring at screens he found himself tenderly rubbing his arm, the constant ache he had grown to live with grounding him to reality.
May broke the silence first, starting with an overly loud yawn that led straight into a garbled mess of words. “The stahereawallygrat.”

Tony looked over, an eyebrow arched high. She almost immediately caught onto his confusion, managing a small chuckle at herself.

“Sorry, it’s been a long day. I was just saying that the staff here are really great. They washed his hair today, cleaned him up a bit. He’s starting to look like himself again.” May ran a hand through Peter’s soft, brown locks as she spoke. “I got to talking with this nurse — Claire something? Nice lady. Says she deals with... ’special’ people like Peter often. She really thinks he’s going to pull through.”

Tony frowned. “Do you not?”

There was a pause, a gap from any conversation that lagged between them. May stared down at Peter, taking a moment to sweep her own hair off to her shoulder and fiddling with the ends that laid down by her waist.

“What are they going to do when they run out of ways to medicate him, Tony?” she asked. “They’re putting needles in his spine now, you know.”

“I know.” Tony stifled his sigh, careful not to let his frustrations rub off on her. “But trust me, they’re making progress. Banner and his team are getting close to making something that’ll knock the kid off his ass for days, I promise.”

May didn’t seem affected by his reassurance and he couldn’t blame her. It was empty, void of any hope, only a reflection of how tired he felt and nothing more.

Tony frowned at the silence that fell between them, staring straight ahead in deep thought. Even without the intubation, Peter still somehow managed to look worse. Even now, even after these crude procedures that put medicine directly into his spine, Peter’s eyes rolled restlessly beneath closed lids.

The kid wasn’t healing, not even on an average level. He wasn’t given the chance. It was common knowledge that rest meant recovery, and right now Peter was barely granted that sweet mercy. Hell, even in Afghanistan Tony was at least thrown a rag of chloroform.

He folded his arms over his chest, taking note that the recliner he had been occupying stayed open and untouched. Rather than heading there though, Tony settled in the chair directly across from May, an odd desire to get close to the kid itching at him. It was like binge-eating after a stressful day; he knew it was bad for him but damn it to all, right now he just didn’t care.

It was funny; Pepper encouraged him to stay close with Peter and Rhodey insisted he wouldn’t be able to go a day without seeing the twerp. He was beginning to wonder if the two were onto something after all.

May’s lighthearted scoff caught his attention.

“Kids,” she muttered, rolling her eyes. “Look at this.”

With both her hands she turned the Starkpad around to face him, the screen of the large tablet brightening the dim room. Tony leaned over the bed to get a better look, resting his forearms against the plastic guardrail of the hospital bed.

He furrowed his brows. “Is that —?”
“One dumb-ass teenager trying to put me in an early grave?” May nodded, briefly turning the tablet back around before showing Tony again. “Yep, that would be it. It’s amazing, really, that it took this long for him to get hurt. Back-flips, front-flips, jumping off the top of the roof flips...how he never broke a single bone is beyond me.”

“Huh,” Tony muttered, slightly amused at the photo. “When was that taken?”

May pursed her lips in thought. “Sometime last year, I think.”

His eyes burned, mostly from the lack of sleep, but still he stared at the picture, almost studying it. It wasn’t amazing, barely professional level, but he had to give the photographer credit. Good composition, great lighting, nearly perfect aperture settings — his gaze wandered to the top frame of the tablet, noticing the username of the Instagram page.

@queenspparker.

Of course the kid had social media. Still, it took that moment for Tony to realize this was the first time he had ever seen anything of Pete’s online. Government files, documents, school records, official registrations — he knew all about Peter before Berlin but never thought to see what the teen was doing elsewhere.

Generation gap, he guessed. After all, it wasn’t like he bothered with that nonsense himself. That’s what he paid a publicity team for.

His finger pointed to the screen. “And Peter took that photo himself?”

“Oh yeah, he was super into photography.” May handed him the Starkpad, and he leaned over to take it from her. “Ben got him this old and outdated DSLR for his eleventh birthday – you should have seen it, he went nuts with it. Even took some classes at school to get better at the whole thing.
Take a gander, his Instagram page was spammed with all kinds of stuff.”

Tony decided to do just that. His fingers scrolled through the multiple different posts on the social media page, the first handful being typical teenage nonsense — his friends, his family, sight-seeing, so on and so forth.

It wasn’t until he got further down and reached the much older dated posts that he took notice. His finger stopped scrolling so fast, examining each individual post with piqued interest.
“I didn’t know he had a knack for photography,” Tony softly stated. “I’ve seen him take photos with his phone but...never anything like this.”

“That’s because he stopped when Ben died.”

Tony froze, his finger mid-swipe when his stomach dropped.

“Oh,” he managed, his mouth going dry.

It was one thing to see photos of Peter and his mother; after all, Tony knew first-hand everything that had happened with the kid’s parents. Ben, though, was always a subject Peter never wanted to talk about. Being that Tony could relate, he never pushed it. It was a hard topic for him, he and his uncle were clearly close and that wound was still fresh.

But suddenly, looking through the old Instagram photos was less enticing, each holding a story of a much happier boy, one who held more sunshine to offer the world.

“I don’t think he wanted to touch the camera again. Too many memories,” May explained, hugging herself tightly. “Plus, you know...the whole Spider-man thing.”

“Right.” Tony cleared his throat, placing the tablet down to sit in his lap. “Maybe we can, uh...we can work on that. I’ve been thinking... it might help if I take a step back. Get him to focus less on
the superhero-ing gig and all.”

“Take a step back?” May raised her eyebrows and quickly shook her head. “Uh, that’s not the agreement we had, mister.”

Tony looked studiously through the pages of photos down below, pretending they interested him when in reality he struggled to find the right response to say.

“I know. But he needs to be a kid again, May. He needs to go back to this stuff, not...galloping around with self-sacrificing suicidal idiots like us.” Tony licked his lips, looking up at her with a dry smirk. “The idiot part applying to them, obviously. The self-sacrificing suicidal part me.”

May couldn’t find it in her to smile at his weak attempt at humor. She gripped her cardigan tighter around herself, sitting up taller in the plush armchair.

“I don’t disagree that he needs to prioritize, Tony. Pick and choose his battles, for sure, get a little better at following curfew, take a few weekends off. But we both know you’ll never be able to rid him entirely of this. I’ve spent the better part of this year learning to accept that — you wanted me to accept that. So where’s this all coming from?”

Tony looked down to his lap, barely lifting the Starkpad high enough for her to see over the guardrails of the hospital bed.

“This,” he dryly replied. “He was safer doing this kind of stuff. We’re not going to be the reason...I’m not going to be the reason he doesn’t get to see his college days. Besides, he’s a teenager. He’ll get over it.”

He brushed off the subject with a nonchalance that could only be obtained from having had the conversation multiple times before. Rhodey, Pepper, now May — the latter of which currently stared at him as if he had grown four heads and started speaking a foreign language.

She raised one eyebrow high in the air and squinted her other eye, all while slowly letting go of the tight hold on her cardigan.

“Ohkay,” she slowly started. “Then can I ask why the sudden change of heart? Why stop him now and not before?”

He kept his head bowed, and his eyes focused on the tablet, easily deflecting with a flat-toned statement of, “It’s for the best, May.”

“Mmmghhh...” Peter moaned, his head lolling against the pillows.

While May all but shot up from her chair, Tony kept his head bowed low, lifting only his eyes to make sure everything was okay. Even that proved to be a punch in his gut. They both had very, unfortunately, become accustomed to the occasional abrupt groans and whimpers from Peter. Still, the timing seemed to mock him, like the kid was listening in on the conversation himself.

“Shhh, shh, you’re okay sweetheart. It’s okay,” May reassured, her voice a low whisper as she brushed Peter’s hair away from his forehead. “Try and go back to sleep, baby. Shh, just sleep.”

It was truly a miracle that Tony bit his tongue and didn’t snap at her. Listening as Peter choked a cry against the cotton of his pillow, seeing as the kid grimaced so hard the oxygen mask resting against his face practically fell down — how the hell was he supposed to ‘just sleep’ like this?

He settled on shaking his head, returning his focus on the tablet. It was easier that way; keep his
mouth shut and there wouldn’t be a problem. As he did, May readjusted to a more comfortable position in her hair, all the while keeping one hand on Peter’s forearm.

“You know, losing Ben was hard on him.” May was quiet when she spoke up. Tony almost didn’t hear her, needing to look up and confirm that she did indeed say something and that he wasn’t losing his mind. “It changed him, it took something from him.”

She gently caressed Peter’s arm, small circles to avoid the tubes and catheters, and Tony waited patiently for her to continue. He couldn’t help but notice that she seemed to have aged ten years since this whole ordeal started, the lines around her mouth more profound, the bags under her eyes darker.

“But I have to admit, ever since you came into his life — really came into his life, ‘ice cream after his finals’ sort of thing…”

She gave him a look, one that saw past his front and made him vastly uncomfortable. He made a mental note to chastise Happy’s big mouth at a later date.

“He’s been more like himself again. There’s a side to him that’s returned, something I haven’t seen since Ben passed. It’s been nice.”

And then she said what Tony would have paid millions of dollars not to hear.

“He’s been happy with you around.”

Suddenly, in that very instant, every conversation he had with Rhodey and Pepper and anyone else that cared to listen to him didn’t matter anymore. Because while he had been dead-set on keeping Peter away from him, taking him out of the dangerous world of Iron Man and the likes, now….now…fuck.

Now he didn’t know what the hell to do.


Tony furrowed his brows, the vibrating tablet quickly gaining his attention. He quirked an eyebrow as he handed it back off to May.

“You, uh, you have an alarm going off?”

May fumbled to take the device in her hands, making it clear she was unsure of how exactly to turn off the alarm she had set.

“Ah, yes, jeeze, sorry. Just didn’t want to miss it.” She managed to figure it out before Tony could offer his help, immediately dropping the tablet down into her over-sized purse on the floor. “Time really does fly when you’re having fun, huh.”

“Miss what?” Tony asked.

“Midnight. It’s officially Peter’s birthday,” she answered, her smile playing a tug-of-war with her eyes. Her hand stayed on Peter’s forearm, gripping it softly as she turned to look at him. “Happy sweet sixteen, honey.”
The information slammed straight into him, his expression sobering deeper than he thought possible. Tony tried to force a smile, barely managing a pathetic half-tug on the corner of his lips.

“No shit,” he mumbled, letting his expression soften. As gently as someone would touch a newborn, he tapped his fist against Peter’s shoulder. “Happy birthday, spiderling.”

A muffled and incoherent moan mixed together with the whir of oxygen that seeped through the plastic mask on Peter’s face. It only managed to blend in with the surrounding machinery’s constant beeping and buzzing, no place for someone to celebrate their birthday, let alone their sixteenth.

Tony shook his head – it wasn’t fair. It wasn’t fair and damn it to all, he’d make up for it. One way or another, he’d find a way to give Peter what he deserved, and not just in a birthday celebration.

No, so much more.

He’d bring back that sunshine @queenspparker had going for him. It was only right of him to at least try. Somehow, someway, he’d find a way to keep Peter safe and happy. He felt he owed the kid at least that much.

So caught up in his thoughts, Tony barely noticed that his hip buzzed with the vibration of his own cell phone. He frowned, digging deep into his pockets to retrieve the device, glaring when he saw who was calling him at midnight of all hours.

“I’m sorry, I have to take this,” he said, pointing languidly to his cell phone.

May simply nodded as he stepped away, and he made sure to wait until the med bays doors slid shut before hitting answer on his phone.

“Rogers. Where you at?” Tony rested the phone against his shoulder, his arms crossed as he paced the brightly lit hallway. “Compound’s finally out of lock-down, I think its best we get Barton back to —”

“We’re not there, Tony.”

The voice was so quiet on the other end that Tony had to pause, taking a second to make sure he heard the man right. He immediately dropped his hunched shoulder, holding the cell closer to his ear with his own hand.

“Well jeeze, I didn’t realize you were so eager to leave,” he quipped, his sarcasm a heavy deflection. “I know it’s been a rough couple days but I sort of figured a hundred acres and a lap pool was enough space to stretch out your legs.”

The only thing he heard next was silence, thick and eerie with a slight bit of static coming through. Tony furrowed his brows, held out the phone to check it for signal, and returned it to his ear with a frown.

“Rogers?”

“Listen,” Steve’s voice was hushed, “May Parker mentioned that there were a few personal items of Peter’s she wanted to pick up from Queen’s. Now that the building is out of lock-down, please make sure she’s able to get that done.”

“Why —”
“Just...just make sure she’s taken care of,” Steve needlessly concluded.

“I plan to.” Tony let a beat pass. “Now, you want to tell me why SHIELD dropped the lock-down procedure to begin with?”

A heavy blanket of tension lingered between them, a lull from their voices leaving the faint background noises from wherever the hell Steve was at to become more audible. There was shuffling of feet, a slight echo from other voices, an overhead paging system — wherever it was, it was official. He could take a little bit of solace from that fact; at least they weren’t back on the Raft.

Tony shifted on his feet, his eyes narrowing though no one was around to see him. “Cut the cryptic silence, Rogers. What’s going on?”

“SHIELD dropped lockdown because they got what they needed from us,” he answered, his tone low and serious.

Tony rolled his eyes. “Which was what, exactly?”

“I made a promise to you, Tony. I plan to keep it.”

The realization hit him so hard he almost lost his breath. “Jesus, what...what did you tell them? Forget it, it doesn’t matter. Which headquarters are you at? I’ll meet you there.”

Strained yet firm, Steve bluntly answered, “No.”

“Rogers, I swear to God —”

“Tony, as far as they’re concerned, you weren’t involved in the rescue,” he elaborated. “You weren’t involved in anything. And if I have any say in this, it’ll be kept that way. Myself, Barton and Romanoff are handling damage control. Do us all a favor and don’t get involved.”

Tony stopped pacing, his head bowed low as he took in what was said. Clint, Natasha, Steve — he huffed a sigh as his mind quickly put together the puzzle pieces.

Of course; all three of them were official SHIELD agents. The rest of them were merely associated through the Avengers. If they were caught disobeying SHIELD orders, they could be blacklisted and burned for life. At best, one those three would get a black mark on their record. A much lighter sentence than prison for life.

Go figure, the star-spangled man-with-a-plan was at it again.

Tony swiped his nose and sniffed. “How bad?”

“One way or another, I think it’ll all blow over.” Steve’s tone seemed sincere, slightly optimistic. “They actually seem a little relieved that Peter’s death had been faked. Less paperwork for them, I’m sure. But the less you know, the better.”

Tony shook his head. “You guys shouldn’t be dealing with them by yourself. Let me come over there, I can talk them down, I can —”

“Tony,” he firmly interrupted. “You need to be with Peter right now. Stay there, it’s for the best.”

He needed to be with — Tony could have thrown his phone against a wall right then and there. What the hell was Rogers talking about saying he needed to be with —
Oh.

‘Christ.’ Tony dropped his shoulders with a sigh, his free hand going to rub at his forehead. Of course Steve wanted him to stay at the compound with Peter. Of course the man would put himself in the line of fire to ensure Tony got that time. If anyone was gung-ho about family, it was Steve fucking Rogers. And after all, this team was all the family that man had going for him.

Hell, if he was frank with himself, the team was the only family Tony had as well.

He sighed. Dysfunctional or not, maybe it was about time they started acting like the messed up family they were.

“When you think you’ll be back?” He cleared his throat, lacing his tone with a false sense of indifference. “You know, in case Barton’s wife starts spamming up my phone.”

There were a few seconds of silence. Tony kicked his Timberland sneakers against the squeaky clean infirmary floors, watching as the tread left faint scuff marks on the white tiles.

“I’m not too sure,” Steve answered. “I’ll try and keep in touch, though.”

He swallowed hard, deciding to keep his answer short. “Yeah. Do that.”

Tony stared absentmindedly at the ground, suddenly aware of how heavy his eyelids felt and how desperately he wanted to crawl into bed and sleep away the next two months. Or two years, at this rate.

“I gotta go, Tony. Give Peter my best wishes.”

“Yeah, of course.” Tony stood up straight, letting a false confidence flow through him. “Get well soon’s from Captain America, the kid will be thrilled.”

There were no formalities in goodbyes between the two of them. A ‘ding’ buzzed from his cell and that was that — Steve had hung up and the call was over.

Tony shook his head and stuffed his cell phone into his back pocket.

“Christ, I need a drink,” he murmured, his hand running down the length of his face.

Despite his desire for sleep and despite his craving for a tall glass of Scotch, Tony headed in the opposite direction of both his personal quarters and the common area to the facility. If he was going to do anything, it was going to be what was in his control.

He was back in his workshop before he knew it.

Chapter End Notes

Alright guys. That's it. I'm done. I can't do it anymore.

I've run out of angst. Just expect a shit-ton of fluff from this point forward.

Next chapter is my favorite. Tony doesn't get much say in platonic irondad/spiderson
cuddles. I'm done with words for right now though; wording is hard. I've worded a lot :-P
You all are just so amazing, guys. I really can’t say that enough. All your comments, feedbacks, kudos, bookmarks – it’s overwhelming. The love is truly felt and I appreciate every single comment, no matter how small. I’ve spent a lot of this month re-reading what you all have had to say to keep myself juiced and going, so seriously, don’t ever doubt your feedback.

While I apologize for the slight delay to this update (I hate going off schedule!) I hope you enjoy the chapter!

(also, I couldn’t resist the last punch of whump before going full fluff. It’s in my nature. It’s in my blood. It’s who I am. No apologies, no regrets)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"You're living on the edge, don't know wrong from right. They're breathing down your neck, you're running out of lives! And here...comes the...razors edge! Here...comes the...razors edge! The razors ed——!

— “Boss.”

The AC/DC blaring from the surround sound cut away suddenly, so abruptly that Tony found himself dropping the screwdriver hanging between his teeth. The tool clattered and bounced around on the metal desk below him.

“FRIDAY,” he called out with flat anger. “I don’t care if the President of the United States is about to walk into the room. If you don’t turn my music back on this instant —”

“There appears to be a problem in the infirmary, boss. Specifically where Mr. Parker is residing. Your immediate attention has been requested.”

Tony shot his head up, his eyes briefly flickering left and right while he took in what she said. It didn’t take long to pluck out the words ‘problem’ and ‘Parker’ and he practically jumped out of his chair with unspoken distress, dashing half-way out of the room before FRIDAY hadn’t even finished her announcement.

He barely managed to swipe his yellow-tinted smart glasses from the nearest table before running out of the workshop.
“What kind of problem?”

His feet pounded as he jogged through the hallways, his boots smacking against the marble floors with resounding effect, his shoulders bumping into personnel who didn’t bother to step out of his way.

Panic fluttered in his gut when she didn’t respond.

“FRI?” he impatiently repeated.

“One second, boss.” She spoke through the overhead PA system, startling a handful of unaware bystanders. “I’m in communication with Doctor Banner now regarding the situation.”

Tony slipped his wire-framed tech glasses onto his face, tapping the side of the device with the pad of his fingertips.

“Don’t bother. Patch him through to me.”

The left side of his glasses brought up a minimized video-screen, black at first as it rang through to the recipient. It didn’t take long before Bruce picked up, immediately greeting Tony with his index finger high in the air, signaling for him to wait.

That finger could have been a different, cruder gesture and Tony still would have ignored it.

“Banner,” he coldly greeted.

“Little busy here,” Bruce stressed. He was multitasking, his cell phone to his ear and his free hand placing lab vials inside a sealed plastic bag.

“Make time,” Tony retorted, quickly cutting through a pack of employees crowding his way. He found his hands on arms and shoulders of persons he pushed aside in an attempt to keep pace, the facilities afternoon activities leaving too many damn people in his path.

“Do you really want to piss me off right now, Tony?” Bruce snapped, hunching his shoulder high to hold the cell phone to his ear while he zipped up the plastic bag. “Helen, listen, this version hasn’t been tested yet, it’s — no, it’s — Moira says it’s theoretically safe but —...okay. Okay...okay! Five minutes. Ten tops. I know, I...— I speak Korean, you know.”

Tony was already in an elevator by the time Bruce finished his primary conversation, impatiently pushing the button to the floor he needed multiple times Hurryhurryhurryhurry! Only once the doors began to slide shut was he satisfied.

He crossed his arms over his chest and tapped his foot on the floor.

“I’m waiting.”

Bruce dropped his cell phone and drew in a deep breath, one that physically moved his body. As he pinched the bridge of his nose tightly, Tony decided to pretend he didn’t notice the tinge of green creep up from the man’s neck. He instead opted for keeping his mouth shut, focusing on red numbers from above, each changing as the elevator crept upwards in the building.

15th floor...16th floor...17th floor...18th floor...

“They called a rapid response code on Peter,” Bruce finally said.
'Shit.' Tony immediately felt his muscles begin to tense, dread coiling tight in the pit of his stomach. 

The bright, red numbers to the elevator suddenly weren’t moving quick enough for him, his pulse easily outmatching the machine with how fast his heart beat inside of his chest, hammering like a jackrabbit. He briefly debated calling on an Iron Man suit, or hacking into the facility systems and getting the elevator to move faster, or – or – something.

“What happened?” he settled on asking, his fingernails digging deep into the center of his palms.

“The painkiller stopped working — it isn’t — it isn’t effective, it’s not doing anything, not even intrathecally.” Bruce huffed and gulped, out of breath like he had run a marathon despite standing still in one place. “It’s too hard to say what this type of stress could do to his body. Hypertension from the unmanaged pain could cause cardiac arrest or a stroke or — we need to figure something out, and fast.”

“What’s your plan then?” Tony demanded.

Bruce held up the sealed plastic specimen bag. “To meet you there.”

As if on cue, the elevator doors dinged open at the same time his smart-glasses rid itself of the video call. Tony shuffled out as fast as he could manage, not even in the same hallway of the infirmary where Peter’s room was when he heard the shouts and cries coming from afar.

Appearances be damned, he was full on running at this point, his Timberland sneakers pounding against the tiled floor.

In reality, he could have easily waited for the sight that greeted him.

“I...I’m-can’t...I’m...I-I-...I’m...”

“Peter, sweetie, you gotta calm down. You’re hyperventilating, you need to take a deep breath, honey.”

“...’ant. Can’t. I...I can-...I...”

Practically skidding to a stop inside, Tony was amazed at how calm the staff was, given their circumstances. They worked patiently and diligently, almost wordlessly with a grace that seemed their actions were choreographed. Every nurse and tech acted with more composure than he could ever dream of having — of course, it didn’t help that he abandoned his composure back in his workshop, letting the heat of the moment take over. He stuck out like a sore thumb among the controlled chaos around him.

It was from Peter that the turmoil erupted from. The kid was wide-awake, hunched over on the half-risen hospital bed and paler than the sheets surrounding him. Staring straight ahead, Tony realized the poor kid was the source of every yelp, cry, shout and whimper he had heard, the eye to the storm overtaking the room. He stuck out like a sore thumb among the controlled chaos around him.

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“I...I...” Peter swallowed convulsively, the over-sized hospital gown slipping down his shoulders as he hunched further forward. “...’mgunnubesick.”

Tony stood a little taller, adrenaline soaring through him. Off to his side, he noticed Claire, the nurse looking to be cleaning up the discarded gauze, partially used biodine and different medical instruments. It didn't need to be said they were left behind from another failed injection of useless painkillers. He purposely overlooked the uncomfortably large needles she discarded on the tray.
“Can we get an emesis basin in here?” she called out.

A different nurse swung around with a metal kidney dish in her hands, and Tony quickly snatched it from her. He was quick to push past the flurry of activity, never once noticing that he left the nurse to stand empty-handed and seemingly dumbfounded. It only took him three broad steps to reach the far end of the room where Peter was.

“Hey, Underoo’s.” Tony hesitatingly laid down the emesis basin in Peter’s lap, his free hand going to rest on the kid’s semi-bare shoulder. “Looking a little rough around the edges there, bud.”

“Ngghhh...” Peter groaned.

‘Rough around the edges’ was putting it lightly. Tony grimaced; Peter was hunched forward in the bed, the baggy hospital gown draping off of him, his one arm weakly braced around his stomach while the other gripped the guardrail with surprising strength. His complex was frightening pale with only a twinge of pink highlighting his cheeks, and he rasped between choked-off cries.

“. ’m fi—...I’m f-fin-...” Peter heaved and gasped, failing to finish more than a few syllables at a time before his voice cracked and gave out. “. ’m fin-...fin— oh, god, ‘urts...hurts...”

Tony set his jaw, feeling his teeth grind against each other while sympathy swirled unrestrained in his chest. The kid only stopped his bone-piercing cries to gasp, dry-heave or manage a twisted mixture of the two. The sound was hoarse and overall heart-breaking, and Tony found himself subconsciously tightening his grip on Peter’s shoulder in hopes it provided some semblance of reassurance.

“Mr. Stark,” Claire spoke up, standing not too far across from him, peeling off her latex gloves. He looked up, his brows snapping together. “Ms. Temple.”

“Claire,” she corrected firmly, immediately following up with, “Doctor Cho instructed I not give him any more injections after the third attempt. Since you’re here, I’m...sorta hoping you...have a plan?”

Tony couldn’t decipher if her tone were more condescending or pessimistic. He blew out a slow breath and said, “I sure as hell hope so.”

It took less than two seconds of a pregnant silence before Claire scoffed in disbelief.

“Sweet Christmas,” she muttered, harshly tossing her used gloves into the nearest trash receptacle.

As Tony rubbed his palm in soft, circular motions on Peter’s shoulder, he made a mental note to ensure the nurse would be paid well for the headache they had put her through. Even he had to admit it was a cluster-fuck of a mess, and he wasn’t even directly involved in it.

For being Bruce’s recruit, she seemed able to put up with a lot of bullshit. He was at least thankful for that.

Peter’s harsh cry cut through his thoughts. “Nnnhh-ghh!”

He was quick to inch closer to the bed, his hip pressing harshly into the plastic safety rail.

Peter’s forehead creased, his eyes wide and screaming for help, the color gone and washed away from his face.

“Oh wow,” Peter gasped, his throat convulsing with each jarred swallow. “I — god. I f-f-eel…I feel real b-bad.”

Tony moved his hand to the small of Peter’s back. “Yeah, I bet. But I’m here, I’m going to fix this – we’re going to fix you up, you’ll be right as rain in no time.”

Something within his voice seemed to finally break through the persistent fog of pain that riddled Peter’s every sense.

‘Gotcha.’

The kid craned his neck over slowly, carefully, and repeatedly blinked as if he didn’t trust his own eyes.

“...Mr. Stark?” His face was scrunched up and his breathing harsh and heavy. The bright, fluorescent lights around them only highlighted the glossy wetness glistening in his eyes, and one more blink would just make them another casualty to the many streams of tears that lined down his flushed cheeks.

Tony forced a half-smile, the corner of his eyes crinkling. “The one and only, kiddo.”

The gurgle that arose from his throat only further splintered Tony’s heart. In a millisecond the kid turned his head away from him, finding panicked comfort in the makeshift bucket sitting in his lap.

Tony leaned forward, inching his face closer to Peter’s eyesight. “What can we do for you, Peter? What do you need?”

“Nnnhhh…bright,” Peter croaked, his voice crackling from disuse. “...head ‘urts.”

He shut his eyes and held them tight, two fat teardrops falling down from his lashes in the process.

“FRIDAY, dim the lights,” Tony instructed, his voice low and quiet.

The AI complied, the harsh lights dimming to a soft glow, only a few scarce overhead bulbs providing staff a way to see their way around the room.

Still, Peter violently shook his head, and for a moment Tony could have sworn the kid began to tint a Bruce Banner shade of green.

“I’m gonna throw up,” Peter warned weakly.

Tony didn’t miss a beat, quickly grabbing and positioning the metal kidney dish up under Peter’s chin.

Bile splashed down into the basin, one shudder at a time as Peter heaved harshly.

“S-sorry. S’rry.” he choked on his free breath, struggling to take air in. “M s’rry.”

Tony shook his head, both in disagreement and disbelief. Even in pain, the kid was the epitome of perfect manners.

“Got nothing to apologize for, kiddo,” he reassured as warmly as he could, keeping the basin under his chin and his free hand on the kid’s back.
“Sorry.” Peter shuddered with a gasp, choking as a dry-heave hitched in his throat. “S’r-sorry.”

“Hey, kid, you’re okay. Don’t apologize,” Tony interjected. “I don’t want to hear another ‘sorry’ out of you, capiche?”

“Mhm...” Peter groaned as he dribbled out a string of saliva, his face twisting up in disgust when it dripped into the dish below. “...gross.”

He shakily took the basin from Tony and held it himself, or at the very most tried to. The trembles coming from him made Tony nervous, the shaking too hard for someone in his condition.

Tony stood silently, trying not to stare or cringe as Peter heaved again, opting instead to cup the back of the kid’s neck with his open palm. Sweat rolled in thick beads down from his scalp and made his skin damp, yet Tony didn’t have an ounce of energy within him to care.

It was strange; he had never been like this before, never been able to handle moments like this. Too uncomfortable. Too personal. Pepper had once gotten sick in his presence, and the most comfort he could muster up was staying half-way across the room while DUM-E held her hair back. To think he felt that was immaculate behavior coming from him.

This? One hand on the nape of Peter’s neck as his other stroked his arm in slow, sweeping, rhythmic motions — this somehow came naturally for him.

This was bending the very definition of who he was.

This was scaring the living shit out of him.

Luckily, it wasn’t long before Bruce came racing into the room, squeezing through the automatic glass paneled doors before they had fully opened. He immediately went to remove something from the pocket of his lab-coat.

“Hypodermic syringes?” he asked, showing off the tiny medicine vial between his fingers as if to clarify the need for an answer.

“Left top drawer,” Claire bluntly answered.

He barely got to the supply cabinet before she recognized what he was doing, quick to grab his arm when he reached up to the top shelf.

“Whoa whoa, hold up there, Doc Green.” Claire held his forearm with a firm grip. “I just gave him three spider-boy size doses of your super-special enhanced painkiller. What the hell are you about to —”

“It’s the new formula.” Bruce scanned her face for evidence that it was okay to continue. Claire only quirked an eyebrow in response. “Helen gave it the okay and Moira says it won’t cause a reaction.”

Claire let go of her grip only to fold both her arms over her chest. “Has it been tested?”

Bruce looked between Peter and then back to the vial of medicine in his hand.

“It’s...about to be?”

Her eye-roll could be seen across the room from where Tony stood, watching the two with growing impatience.
“And what’s in it?”

Bruce paused, blinked, and looked down to the vial in his hand. “It’s, well, it’s-a cocktail, a-a mixture of things. Uhm, Dynorphin A with one-eight, Leumorphin— actually, there’s a wide range of opioid peptides, I think Moira actually created a new chemical in trying to suppress the arachidonic acid pathway in the prostaglandins. I guess you could say it’s close to Carfentanil? Though the structure of compound breakdown widely differs —”

“Wow,” Claire interrupted, her hand held in the air to stop him. “Okay, wait a damn minute, I’m going to go empty the supply of Narcan first.”

“Hey, can we stop procrastinating?” Tony argued. “This kid needs all the help he can get!”

“Tony, just...shhh!” Bruce hissed, finger pressed to his pursed lips. “Shhhh!”

Involuntarily, his eyebrows shot up.

“Did you just ‘shush’ me?” Tony looked to Claire as she left the room. “Did he just ‘shush’ me?”

She paid him no attention as she briskly walked out, aside from a few possible curses Tony chose to ignore. It was only when Bruce approached the other side of the bed that Tony realized where his aggravation came from — he had risen his voice.

A nurse had since already come and gone to retrieve the used emesis basin, and Peter now had both of his hands clamped over his ears, his head bowed low with incoherent grunts.


As if to further twist the knife in his gut, he managed to make out a “...s’kay.” between pained moans from Peter.

Bruce was multi-tasking between attaching a needle to the barrel of a syringe and eyeing the monitors ahead as he approached the bedside. Still, when he reached Peter, he focused his attention directly on the boy, gentle and quiet.

“Hey Pete, not doing so great, are you?”

Hearing Bruce talk, calm and patient, reminded Tony of A, how panicked he felt and B, how crucial it was to keep that panic in check. He had unraveled, he could sense it. Despite the flurry of activity in the room, everyone sans him remained calm. He needed to do the same, especially now, especially with Peter as far off as he was.

The kid was always like a sponge, soaking up the aura’s surrounding him. Now wasn’t the time for him to lose his cool.

Peter furrowed his brows and frowned, his glassy eyes looking over at Bruce with a grimace.

“...hey, Doctor Banner,” he croaked.

Shaking his head, Bruce uncapped the syringe and stuck it within the medicine vial, pulling on the plunger slowly to withdrawal the liquid.

“Now come on Pete, we went over this,” he said. “You call me Bruce.”

Peter managed a nod. “..’kay...s’rry.”
“That’s okay.” Bruce set the empty medicine vial aside and tapped twice on the side of the syringe to release any air, all while keeping his eyes focused on Peter. “Hey, you know, I took a look at that webbing of yours. It’s quite the stuff.”

“You hear that?” Tony kept his tone lighthearted, hard-pressed to distract Peter. “Even Bruce Banner is impressed with you, kiddo.”

Peter’s only response was a groan, his breathingragged and heavy, each inhale receiving a choked grunt that sounded more painful by the second. Tony didn’t have to imagine what type of pain he was in — he had been there before, each breath he took in that cave a stabbing agony.

His mouth set in a grim line and concern etched deep into the contours of his face — God, he had wanted so much better for Peter, and yet here he was, reliving all the similar horrors of his life.

“...I don’t...” Peter threw his head back, slamming straight back into the mountain of pillows behind his neck. “I’m not...feeling good.”

Tony frowned. He realized that in a poor attempt to control his pain, the kid was holding back on each agonized breath, to the point where the monitors had begun to beep and chirp with alarms.

“I know, but you gotta breathe, buddy,” Tony said. “You’re holding your breath, you have to breathe.”

Peter’s face was scrunched up in pain, and he let out a soft whimper. “...’urts. Hurts...to breathe.”

Tony winched in sympathy. “I bet it does.”

Bruce, thankfully, silenced the alarms from the wall mounted oxygen panel before laying a gentle hand on Peter’s other shoulder, bringing down the thin, green hospital gown with his grip.

“Okay Peter, we’re going to try something new for you, okay?” He was already cleaning the port to one of the many IV’s near Peter’s collarbone. “This might burn a little going in, but it should help make you feel better.”

If the injection of medicine did indeed bother him, Peter didn’t let it show. The entire time Bruce emptied the contents of the syringe through his IV, Peter stayed staring straight ahead, occasionally blinking and smacking his chapped lips.

“... whoa ...”

The effects were immediate, more-so than any other drug they had given the kid.

“Taste...funny,” Peter managed to mumble, his words thick and slurred. “Like...coconut.”

Every muscle in his body visibly loosened, one by one until he started drifting forward, to the point where Tony had to tighten his grip and keep him steady. Both him and Bruce gently pushed him back against the pillows of the bed, comfortably arranging his limbs for him.

And as Peter sagged into the comfort of the mattress, all tension drained from his muscles, Tony sagged in relief with him. The adrenaline surge left his body all at once.

He lifted a brow, waiting expectantly. “Feeling better?”

Peter wearily nodded, his lashes fluttering with little attempt to keep his eyes open. Each movement of his became slower until eventually, he found himself leaning to the side, his shoulder
resting heavily against Tony’s chest.

“There ya go, that’s it.” Helplessly, Tony found the corners of his mouth curling upward, and without a second thought he tangled his fingers into Peter’s sweat-dampened hair. The kid’s head lolled into his chest like a rag-doll, and it was only then Tony realized this was the closest he had been to Peter since…

It became quiet. The few nurses still in the room preoccupied themselves with their assigned tasks and the machinery surrounding them drastically quieted down, no longer the angry beasts they once were.

At that moment, everything seemed to melt away, as if the sounds and sights surrounding him ceased to exist. Words darted away from him, and as everyone else stopped talking, he found it unnecessary to converse himself. He focused on the gentle rise and fall of Peter’s chest, the soft breathing that escaped from his mouth, the peace that encompassed his face.

‘He’s okay.’ Fingers carded through Peter’s hair, lightly massaging his scalp without even realizing it. His heart fluttered in a soft beat as the kid fell lax. It was, without any doubt, the most calm he had seen from the kid in days.

It was easily the best thing he had seen in weeks.

His wandering fingers untangled from the soft, brown curls down to Peter’s cheek, the back of his hand stroking his relaxed facial features. With it, he brushed away the drying tears that smeared across his skin.

“Tony?”

His name was said with an audible clearing of someone’s throat. He shot his head up, comically surprised to see Bruce staring back at him, the corners of his lips twitching with a slight smirk.

“Did you hear me?” he asked.

Tony was mildly disturbed that he did not, in fact, recall hearing the man say anything. His forehead creased and he shook his head.

“I said you can go, finish whatever you were working on.” Bruce waved to the door behind him with one hand, the other fiddling with the blood pressure cuff strapped around Peter’s bicep. “We’re good here — I’ll draw up some labs in the next hour, check his peak and trough levels but… I think we finally got it.”

Those four words seemingly extinguished every ounce of concern, stress, and tension that had been bogging Tony down. He could have easily been a balloon swaying in the wind with how light he suddenly felt, dangerously so. His hand dropped from Peter, and he gripped the guard railings in an attempt to steady himself, his blood rushing to his head so fast it made him lightheaded.

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll, uh…” Tony patted the railings, letting go completely to walk away from the bed. “I’ll get back to work, then.”

Bruce hummed in response, maybe pushed his glasses back up the bridge of his nose – Tony wasn’t too sure. He had yet to fully turn around, walking backward and barely missing trolley carts and wandering staff in his inattentiveness.

Peter was out like a light, sound asleep. Tony was pretty sure the kid was snoring by now.
He took that as his cue to leave, turning to walk through the automatic doors only to pause the moment he reached them.

“You sure you got this?” he asked, a noticeable edge in his voice.

Bruce never looked his way as he responded, “I got this.”

Tony nodded, stepping outside with hands stuffed deep inside his jacket.

He made it four steps out of the med-bay before turning back around, striding through the doors once more with profound purpose and deep skepticism.

“You sure? ‘Cause you know I can sta-“

“Tony.” Bruce shot his head over, glaring.

Tony held his hands up placatingly. “I’m going. Jeeze. Kicked out of my own building.”

In his peripheral he watched Bruce chart down numbers and data, all the while Peter slept serenely, for once no stress outlining his features. The mere act of leaving had him feeling unhinged, an unsettling ball of anxiousness boiling hot in his gut.

Tony didn’t spare a glance back as he walked out of the room.

He knew he wouldn’t be able to leave had he bothered.

The walk back to his workshop was a blur, more a vague memory than an actual recollection of his actions. He stood idly once he walked inside and the doors shut behind him, staring ahead in the room without much thought of what to do.

He had been finding solace in his work the past couple days, a decent distraction that kept his thoughts at bay. Somehow though, everything surrounding him, all the work he had laid out in front of him — it only seemed to leave a bad taste in his mouth.

This wasn’t where he wanted to be. Not anymore, at least not right now.

He mentally stuffed away the thought. ‘Beggars can’t be choosers.’

“FRIDAY,” he spoke up. “Do me a favor.”

Her Irish-accented voice rang through the ceiling. “Yes, boss?”

Tony scrubbed a hand down his face as he collapsed into the nearest chair, wheeling half-way across the workshop before he came to a stop. “Get me updates on the kid. Every five minutes. I want to know what’s going on in there.”

His overt anxiety was met with a snarky response. “May I suggest that I provide an update when a change, if any, occurs?”

Tony rolled his eyes. “Okay, mom.”

He really couldn’t be too mad. After all, it was him that programmed the AI to be the way she was, and though she’d never fill the missing hole that JARVIS left behind, there were times she certainly got close to it.

With a gesture of his hand and a few swipes of holographic computer images, Tony pulled up the
schematics for the ‘new skin’ project he had been working on.

“Alright Parker,” Tony muttered, cracking his knuckles. “Let’s fix that leg of yours.”

His focus conveyed an intent to get things right, to start channeling his anxiety for something useful. Robotics, mechanics, calculations, inventing, fixing — it was his element, what he was best at. He had stopped making weapons for a reason. He swore he’d use his genius for something better, for inventions that would help people, not harm them. To fix problems, not cause them.

Working out the placement for nanites in the new leg brace and correct mathematics to make it function, Tony decided that it was about time he started living up to that promise.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Message</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11:44 PM</td>
<td>Stark Wifi</td>
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<tr>
<td>11:44 PM</td>
<td>Messages Happy Hogan</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thu, Apr 13th, 2:13pm</td>
<td>Hey</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thu, Apr 13th, 2:45pm</td>
<td>Nevermind. Fired.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thu, Apr 13th, 4:13pm</td>
<td>Gregory Kahl? Says he was friends with you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thu, Apr 13th, 4:55pm</td>
<td>Yeah I smell B.S too. Terminated.</td>
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There was a scuffle of movement as Tony blindly reached for his phone, his eyes burning focus into the computer screens ahead of him. He almost immediately regretted the decision to open the slew of text messages that awaited him.

His fingers padded out a response, half his attention on the phone while mostly focused on the
calculations written in front of him.

It wasn’t even a few seconds later when another *ding* resounded from the StarkPhone. The man always was a quick texter -- when he wanted to be.

Tony practically snorted at the incredulity of the text, his fingers gliding across the screen with precise speed.

Itap please stop firing everyone on SI staff.

Five months. We were infiltrated for five months. Better safe than sorry.

And Pepper gave me the okay.
Glancing at the time on the phone, Tony realized he had spent a better portion of the day in his workshop. He stood from his stool with a tired grunt and stretched his arms out in the air.

It was time for a change of scenery.

He multi-tasked on his way to his destination, one thumb tapping his touchscreen while he walked the mildly calm hallways of the compound. It was quiet, only night staff occupying the space, guards at their posts while most areas — training quarters, conference rooms — they were shut down for the evening. It was a completely different atmosphere than earlier in the afternoon, a bare skeleton staff keeping the place afloat.

Tony was in the elevator when the response came through.
The ride up to the med-bay was a lot calmer this time around. Tony wasn’t even paying attention as the elevator glided upward, the slow pace nothing more than an afterthought.

what are you two doing in queens?

don’t be taking advantage of the woman’s vulnerable state, Hap.
‘Hm,’ Tony tapped his foot on the ground just as the doors dinged open. He couldn’t argue with the statement — ‘Rogers did say something about that.’ A part of him was relieved that she felt confident enough to leave Peter during this entire mess, declaring an unspoken, implicit trust in Tony to make sure he was taken care of.

He figured he at least owed it to her to keep her updated while she was away.

Ha ha

She’s picking up some things from her apartment.

what things?

I’m a billionaire. Tell her I’ll buy her whatever she needs.

Personal things boss
Tony turned the corner and entered the med-bay with a smirk, finishing the conversation with one last text.

The infirmary seemed to have a different feel to it. The atmosphere was lighter, the tension greatly diminished. Even walking by Peter’s hospital room was less stressful, an act that generally made Tony want to curl up in a ball and hide away for days to come. Things had changed, he felt like he could breathe again, almost as if the weight of the world had been lifted off his shoulders.

The dopey-eyed teenager playing with wires and tubing that surrounded him probably had something to do with that.

Tony pulled back his shoulders as he walked through the automatic doors. Bruce stood at Peter’s bedside, focused intently on the needle he had between his fingers, injecting contents of a syringe through the central line embedded in Peter’s chest.

Peter was wrapping the wire of his heart monitor around his finger like some ditsy teenager playing
with the coiled cable of a telephone.

“How we doing in here?” Tony asked, approaching Bruce and patting him on the shoulder.

Bruce looked up and over at him, his glasses sliding down to the bridge of his nose.

“Good,” he said, nodding. “We’re...we’re good. Great actually, definitely on the right track. The adjustments are going well. Helen added some more sedative to the painkiller this afternoon, I’m actually going to try it out now. We’re hoping that the more he sleeps, the faster he’ll heal.”

The sight somehow gave Tony a different answer, seeing Bruce work directly with the IV’s leading to Peter’s heart making him uncharacteristically uncomfortable. He decided to cross to the other side of the bed, watching with a smirk as Peter’s groggy eyes followed him like a lost puppy.

“Yeah, right.” Tony pointed to the needle in Bruce’s hand. “Should you be doing that?”

Despite his uneasiness, Bruce seemed to be finishing up whatever he had been doing. With a shrug, he discarded the used needle in the nearest sharps bin.

“It’s fine,” he insisted. “I have steady hands.”

As if on cue, Bruce went to grab the empty medicine vial on the tray next to him, only for it to slip out of his grasp. Like some pathetic cartoon character he struggled to catch the tiny container, the glass bottle hoping between both his hands before ultimately falling and clattering around on the ground.

Tony quirked an eyebrow.

Bruce smiled sheepishly.

“That doesn’t count.”

“Sure. Whatever you say, Doc Green.” Tony gave an exaggerated wink in his direction that Bruce either didn’t see or decided not to pay any mind to. He had a feeling it was the latter.

His fingers fiddled with the plastic tubing hanging down from the multiple IV bags, and he barely missed a beat in conversation.

“Hey, now that you’re done playing scientist with the girls, can I pass off the new skin project to you?”

“Tony.” The dark bags under Bruce’s eyes suddenly seemed to stand out as he whined, “I want to sleep.”

Tony found it hard to argue with him. It had been rough couple weeks on everyone, but for Bruce, the past couple days were non-stop madness.

“I’ve reached a brick wall, I’m outta my field now,” he said. “You know bio-oganics better than anyone else.”

Bruce appeared tired, the whites of his eyes fissured by fine red cracks, and he rubbed his forehead with the back of his latex-gloved hands.

“Yeah, okay, I’ll...” he sighed, sounding defeated. “I’ll pick it up in the morning.”

“Thank you,” Tony said earnestly, the raw appreciation in his words seemingly deflating his entire
being, leaving him emotionally spent. He edged closer to Peter, clasping his palm against the kid’s gown-covered shoulder. “Parker, how you doing, hm?”

Peter didn’t look up from his lap, eyeing both his wrists with profound curiosity.

“When...whendidI...get Fitbits?” he hoarsely slurred, raising both his hands to show off the sleek and slim black bands.

Tony rolled his eyes. “Those aren’t Fitbits, dum dum.”

Peter tilted his head up to him, brown and glassy eyes wide with amazement.

“Theyir Starkbits?” he blurted out, tugging on the devices with sluggish and uncoordinated movements.

“Their state of the art bone stabilizing bracelets for fractured —” Tony grabbed Peter’s hand, grasping it within his own when the kid continued to yank and pull. “Stop playing with them! Christ.”

Bruce chuckled, wordlessly leaning over to untangle the wires of the pulse ox monitor clipped onto Peter’s index finger. The kid was in his own world, his attention enthralled at the technology strapped around his wrists, barely noticing as Bruce took his other hand and gently untangled the mess he created in his excitement.

“Wait,” Peter paused for a second, staring straight at Tony as he opened and closed his mouth like a wish out of water. “What happ’ned to my web-shoot’rs?”

“Those broke too,” Tony plainly explained.

“Aw man. They broke?” Peter blinked lazily, his lids nearly staying closed until a sudden thought had his eyes popping wide open again. “Wait, wha’ else broke?”

For the love of all things holy —

“Your wrists, kiddo.” Tony frowned, looking up over at Bruce. “How high is he right now?”

Bruce couldn’t help but smile, gesturing over his head and to the ceiling as if to answer ‘very’.

Tony shook his head with a chuckle; it was better than the alternative, for sure. He’d take loopy Peter over agonized Peter any day of the week. There was finally a silver lining appearing over the horizon, and he had no shame reveling in it.

“Like I said, we’re working on adding more sedative and reducing the chemicals that produce the fugue state. It’s a tricky balance, we’re monitoring his kidney and liver values closely to avoid any short term or long term effects...” Bruce removed his latex gloves with a snap. “But...it’s a starting point. We’re on a good trajectory of forward progress.”

“I miss my web-shoot’rs,” Peter whined.

It took every ounce of strength Tony had in him not to laugh. One look at Peter and the saucer-wide eyes and slow, drowsy blinking reminded him that his mental state wasn’t one-hundred percent there. Still, it was a breath of fresh air to hear the kid talk, and for once in what honestly felt like a lifetime not be in pain.

Yeah, he’d definitely take this Peter Parker any day of the week.
Tony used his free hand to pat the hand that he held, almost as an apology. “We’ll get you new ones.”

Peter moaned, “But I liked those.”

“Yeah?” Tony blew out a sigh, shifting his weight on his feet. “Well, I’ve made some great strides with that nanotech suit, the one you saw me working on over the summer? Why don’t you play around with some nanites for a new model when you get better, how does that sound? Yes?”

Peter gaped. “I can make web-shoot’rs out of nan’ites?”

Tony directed his gaze squarely at Peter, amazed at the child-like wonder that seeped from the kid’s very core, his eyes sparkling like it was Christmas morning.

It wasn’t just the drugs, no, this was beyond that. This was Peter. Because, while it had been days since he last saw it, the wonder that lit up his eyes was the same type of awe and fascination he’d see on their lab nights together, when they’d work on projects that any average teenager wouldn’t have the intelligence for.

But Peter was different. Peter had always been different.

And in one instant, in one blink, he saw just how different Peter was. One second he was looking at him, brown hair sticking up in a mess, skin dry and flushed, eyes wide with life albeit heavily medicated.

And then it was gone. He was back there, back in the base. Peter’s skin dripping wet, hair drenched and clinging to his forehead, blood dripping from his temple, clad in his Spider-man suit sans mask. Injured but not helpless, standing over the body of the man who had nearly killed him and —

Tony shook his head deliberately to release the vision, squeezing his grip on Peter’s hand.

“Kid, you can do whatever you want.” His tone did little to hide the affection in his words. As it was, those memories would haunt him for some time to come.

“Cool,” Peter said simply, blissfully unaware to the sudden shift in Tony’s demeanor. He nodded his head up and down until his movements came to a slow, grinding halt, eyes flickering in a losing battle to keep them open.

“I’mma...take anap’now,” he mumbled, eventually settling back against the mountain of pillows resting behind his head.

“Sounds good like a good plan,” Tony murmured. “Happy trails, kid.”

“...’thks...Mr. ‘ark...”

Tony eventually sighed, his head dipping low into a nod. “That’s what I’m here for, squirt.”

He was ninety percent sure Peter hadn’t heard him, the kids head already lollled to the side and his teeth visible when his mouth slacked open. Tony gave his hand one more pat before going to release his hold.

“What the —”

That couldn’t be right.
It took a handful of blinks and a shake of his head for Tony to realize his exhaustion hadn’t gotten the best of him. No, Peter’s hand was undoubtedly stuck to him, as sticky as damn flypaper. He shook and pulled, gentle at first with more force as time went on.

“Spiderling, let go.” Tony shook harder, Peter’s arm shaking like a wet noodle. “Seriously, let go, Pete.”

Bruce chuckled from where he stood, only stopping when Tony managed to give him a rather-exhausted looking stink-eye.

“You, uh,” Bruce cleared his throat tentatively, slipping off his glasses and cleaning them with the bottom of his shirt. “You hear from Natasha at all?”

“No. Won’t for a while. She’s with Rogers at national headquarters.” Tony huffed, using his other arm to try and yank Peter’s hand away. He pulled as hard as he felt comfortable and yet there was no detachment in sight. “This is unreal. I’m actually stuck to the kid right now, Banner.”

“National — w-wow. Uh, how, why...”

It took a moment for Tony to remember that the scientist had all but been locked up in his lab for the past couple days, so focused on getting Peter’s meds right that he hadn’t quite been involved with the team since their return from the base.

He shrugged. “No clue. They’re keeping it hush-hush.”

“Does this have to do with...” Bruce didn’t need to complete his thought, both of them looking to Peter as if it answered his question.

“Yeah.” Tony let out a deep exhalation, one that blew Peter’s hair away from his forehead, not that the kid noticed or cared. “It’s okay, though, I’ve already put in a few phone calls, talked to a few people. SHIELD will give them a good spanking, at most, slap on the wrist. They’ll be back before you even realize how long it’s been since you played hide the zucchini with Jessica Rabbit.”

Bruce flushed a hot red, a deep contrast to the green so normally found on his skin.

“No, we haven’t — we aren’t — that’s not —”

“You’re tip-toeing, big guy.” Tony mustered a smile, the best he could manage at the time. “And life is short. Go get what you want while you still can.”

“I don’t...every time get what I want,” Bruce said, dejectedly.

Tony stared down at Peter’s still, relaxed form with what he would adamantly deny, at all costs, was a fond look in his eyes. Clearly, the exhaustion had gotten the best of him, as Bruce gestured his glasses in his direction with a soft smile.

“You can, though,” he added.

“Hm?” Tony hummed, lacking articulate words.

Bruce quietly shrugged. “I know I’ve been gone for a while, Tony, but I think I still have a pretty good read on you.”

Tony’s eyes narrowed, and his jaw clenched. Bruce wasn’t the first or even the fifth person to pry into his personal life, and the amount of patience he had for the intrusion was boiling down into the
“You have no idea what you’re talking about,” Tony retorted sharply, exaggerating a grimace and lifting his hand, attached to Peter’s hand and subsequently his arm with it. The kid wasn’t remotely phased, completely knocked out. “And can we please focus on this problem right now? Go — get adhesive remover, some goo-be-gone, WD-40, something to get this kid off of me.”

Bruce seemed to back off under the scrutiny, though Tony could tell his anger and protectiveness had been noted. It was a brief moment of weakness that passed through him in a matter of seconds, still obvious to the human eye. Maybe had he blinked, the scientist could have easily missed the shift in character before he returned to his cool and collected self.

“Just give it a few minutes,” Bruce insisted. “His abilities will likely go dormant the more he relaxes.”

There was a brief quiescence between them, an unguarded moment of silence only broken by the language of medical equipment. With his one hand now indefinitely occupied, Tony’s inability to rub his other arm clearly became an aggravation, an old injury never having healed making its presence known. The skin around his eyes pulled taut with frustration.

“You two deserve each other, you know,” Bruce distracted, slipping his glasses into the pocket of his lab coat, looking at Tony with a sense of empathy. “You and Peter? You’re good for each other.”

Tony dropped his gaze. “Yeah, that’s what everyone seems to say.”

“You don’t agree?” Bruce eyed him, taking a beat before asking, “Or do you?”

Tony lifted his hand high, bringing Peter’s arm with it. His growing annoyance spoke the words he didn’t need to say.

“Huh. This is...fascinating.” Bruce crossed to his side of the bed, using his pencil to examine Tony and Peter’s hands without directly touching them. In hindsight, Tony wished he had done something similar, had he known the risks. “You know, I’ve been wondering how that works for him, the—the natural superglue, the stickiness. I wasn’t sure if he needed to focus on using it, or focus on not using it. Looks like it’s the latter.”

Tony rolled his eyes dramatically. “Great. So you drugged the kid up only to attach him to my hip for the next — what, eight to ten hours?”

“I’m sure he’ll let go soon. Besides, it’s not like you couldn’t use the sleep anyway.” Bruce gave what Tony was almost positive to be a smirk on his way out. “Sweet dreams to you both.”

Tony rubbed his eyes with his free hand, the one not currently attached to a clingy and doped up spider-kid, and he didn’t stop until he saw a multitude of colors beneath his closed lids. He couldn’t deny that the idea of sleep sounded genuinely heavenly. His exhaustion ran bone deep; he had lost track of how long it had been since he had gotten a full nights rest.

Three days? Six, maybe eight?

Ten years?

“Oh, Tony?”

He looked up, cocking an eyebrow with weak annoyance at the sight of Bruce still standing at the
entryway of the room, glass paneled doors already sliding open and waiting for his exit.

“I gotta say, whatever you have with Peter...whatever you want to call it...” Bruce met his eyes with a lopsided smile. “It looks good on you. It suits you.”

As he watched the man leave, his white lab coat rustling behind him, Tony had expected the comment to tighten the ever-growing knot that had been forming in his stomach. Somehow though, for reasons he was sure he would never fully understand, it only seemed to loosen that messed up contortion of emotion he had braiding and bunching inside of him.

The doors slid shut with a slight whoosh and he looked to the ceiling when the sensors dimmed the lights from above.

Tony sighed, kicking off his shoes while simultaneously lowering the plastic guard rail to the hospital bed.

“Alright...scoot over, spider-brat,” he muttered. “Looks like we’re bunk-mates for the night.”

There was no bite or heat to Tony’s words. He honestly couldn’t feel any less irritated if he had tried. Bruce was right, he could really use the sleep. And it wasn’t as if he hadn’t been waking up every couple hours to check on Peter anyway.

This would kill a couple birds with a repulsor beam, or something to that nature.

Seriously. He was tired.

Getting settled was less difficult than he initially anticipated. Peter was already resting on the far end of the slightly over-sized hospital bed, leaving plenty of room for Tony to lay down next to him. Honestly though, they could have been laying down on a slab of rock and Tony would have been comfortable, his lethargic muscles willing to take any rest they could get.

It took a moment for him to adjust, paying extra attention not to jostle the teen in any way that may cause him pain while still being mindful of his large frame occupying the once empty space. He laid down on the half-risen bed, not bothering to get under the blankets and sheets. They were more for Peter than for himself; he, at best, would only be here for a couple of hours.

Tony gave Peter a once over before snatching a pillow from behind his head, slipping it behind his back with an over-exaggerated grunt.

“I’m getting old, kid, and if I’m stuck here I might as well be comf—whoa!” Tony nearly jumped out of his skin when Peter tipped sideways, his body weight all but slamming into his shoulder. “Oh, jeeze, kiddo.”

He froze, mouth gaped open, his mind reeling to a halt.

Did that just...?

Tony’s eyes glanced from the nondetachable clasp he had on Peter’s hand, back up to where the kid slept against him, his head nestling into the crook of Tony’s neck, mouth slightly ajar and snoring lightly.

The brown curls tickled the bottom of his chin and Tony lifted his hand to adjust the nasal cannula around Peter’s face, the plastic having gone slightly askew against his nose.

Peter’s only response was a light sigh combined with a smack of his lips.
“Well.” Tony cleared his throat. “This is new.”

And boy was it ever.

Tony frowned, gazing at Peter for a moment, his heart soaring somewhere between his head-space and the ceiling. He had never been one for close contact like this, often not even with Pepper. Yet he didn’t dare move the kid — not for fear of waking him up, no, that was a concern long since gone. The steady drip drop from the IV bag across his way told him Peter would be out for a while, and after everything that had gone down the past couple days, he couldn’t be more thankful for it.

Tony’s free hand went to brush away the soft, brown locks from his forehead, pushing it back with his open palm. Peter seemed so relaxed, so comfortable leaning against him that he wanted nothing more than to relish in the peace that this brought them.

The cold chill to the room began to drift away, a foreign warmth taking its place, settling deep in Tony’s chest. It wasn’t from Peter — a brief glance to the monitors showed the kid had a normal temperature, no higher than ninety-seven degrees. Tony decided not to dwell it. He crossed his legs and positioned his hands — and the one attached to him — in his lap.

“Sweet dreams, Underroo’s,” he muttered, patting the hand that he held.

As if on cue, FRIDAY turned off the remaining few lights in the room. Tony had his eyes closed before she had even bothered, the overwhelming, leaden fatigue finally taking over. Only the glow from the monitors and the moonlight shining through the curtains highlighted the shadows of their environment.

The calm and mellow breathing from Peter was enough to relax him, each inhale and exhale bringing forth a catharsis he so desperately needed. Soon he found his own breathing evening out, slowly but surely syncing to the rhythm of Peter’s.


The machinery’s beeps, buzzing and chirping faded away into white noise, nothing more than a story that no longer needed to be told.

The kid was finally sleeping, his body finally given a chance to recover. Tony drifted with him, his pessimistic side reminding himself that this one victory wouldn’t erase the rest of their troubles. There was still what seemed to be an insurmountable amount of steps for them to take, steps they would have to take in increments, and it wouldn't be easy. And it wasn’t going to get any better overnight.

But for right now, with Peter’s head tucked towards his chest, his palm clasped around the teen’s much smaller hand and the curls of his hair resting against his chin, he slept.

For the first time since the cryptic note from Strange, the burning building, the freezing ocean waters — for the first time in days, his mind finally went quiet. And with it, Tony truly slept.

And it was the easily best sleep he’d ever gotten.
Happy swiped his employee badge to gain access to the compound, the _chirp chirp_ that followed unlocking the door.

“After you,” he insisted, holding it open for May.

She gave him a sloppy salute. “Why thank you, good sir.”

It was early morning by the time they both arrived back at the compound. The sun was rising over the large facility, and the light mocked them in unflattering ways, highlighting the dark bags sitting under their eyes.

May couldn’t be blamed for the entirety of their late-night outing; though she easily spent longer than anticipated digging through Peter’s belongings for what she needed, the drive alone was four hours round trip and the spontaneous stop to Happy’s favorite diner only added to their time.

She didn’t mind. It was nice finally seeing something besides the same four walls.

“Are you sure you don’t want to hit up the cafeteria before going back to the infirmary?” Happy asked as if reading her thoughts. He pointed his thumb behind his back, the two of them already starting to go their separate directions. “If you get there early enough, before the SHIELD trainees ran-sack the place, you can get the bagels while they're still fresh out of the oven.”

“Happy.” She shook her head with a laugh. “I’m good, really. I think I just want to curl up in a chair and take a nice, long nap.”

He shrugged. “Suit yourself. I’ll save you one, just in case.”

His wink didn’t go unnoticed. May chuckled, pulling up the strap of her purse as she walked away.

“And they said chivalry was dead.”

It had been a long enough week that, despite how large the facility was, she now knew the way to areas like the cafeteria and, of course, Peter’s personal quarters. Still, her feet took the same path she had memorized back to the med-bay. She didn’t have any need to go elsewhere; at least that’s what she thought.

Happy was half-way down the hall when he spun around, raising his voice to get her attention. “Hey, you wanted all that stuff in Peter’s room with you, right?”

May met his gaze. “Everything but the box,” she called out.

“Well, yeah, of course,” Happy said, remembering the conversation they had over hot coffee and greasy diner food. “I’ll take care of that tomorrow. Good?”

May nodded. “Good. Thanks, Happy.”

She hated leaving his company, but she wasn’t lying when she said that she wanted to sleep — sleep for hours, days if she could. Right now, she’d be grateful for just a nap. A normal sleep schedule didn’t mean anything anymore, not with Peter here, not as long as he was injured and recovering. Sleeping while the sun rose over the horizon was a mere act of survival, unusual for most but now a necessity for her.

Nurses quietly greeted her as she walked the halls of the infirmary and May waved back, only failing to greet a few when she took the time to throw her hair up into a sloppy bun. She couldn’t remember the last time she had washed it.
The effort was forgotten when she turned the corner that led to Peter’s room, her hands dropping from behind her head and her long, brown hair falling back down with neglect. She came to a sudden halt, frowning as she looked ahead with a cocked head and perplexed expression.

“Oh.”

May froze at the entryway, not even close enough for the automatic doors to slide open. The glass panels gave a clear sight to what laid inside, or, well — who laid inside.

While it had become normal to see Peter resting, asleep in the hospital bed within the room, seeing Tony lay side-by-side with him, her nephew using the billionaire as his own personal pillow — that was...more uncommon.

God, her life had gotten to be so bizarre.

It wasn’t long until she began to chuckle, her shoulders jostling up and shaking down the strap of her purse until she needed to fetch it from the crook of her elbow.

“Oh alright then,” she murmured to no one in particular.

She realized that after nearly a week in the compound she’d finally be utilizing space outside of the infirmary. It was a good thing Happy had showed her Peter’s quarters after all. Maybe it was for the best, she supposed. And not necessarily just for her.

She smiled, pulling out her cell phone and snapping a quick picture of the scene ahead of her. It was a close enough distance that, reviewing the impromptu photo, she could see Peter sleeping soundly against Tony’s chest as the older man used the crown of her nephew’s head for cushion.

It took two taps on her touchscreen to create a text message with the image attached, clicking the recipient she wanted to send it to from her contact list.

The message written was simple.
With the pad of her thumb she hit send, turning around to leave and let the two rest without any interruptions. Walking back through the hallways, she found that there was surprisingly less weight on her shoulders than when she first arrived.

Maybe she would stop and get a bagel after all.

Chapter End Notes

Boring nerd facts :(

Carfentanil is a scary drug and not to be messed with. It’s a structural analogue of Fentanyl. It’s 4,000 times more potent to heroin. As little as 2 mg of Carfentanil in one gram of heroin or cocaine is enough to potentially kill up to 50,000 people. On that note, Narcan works to treat the effects of an overdose. Peak and Trough levels are when lab techs monitor the highest concentration of a drug in the patient's bloodstream (peak) and the lowest level (trough) so the pharmacist can make any necessary adjustments to medication.

I, very likely, exaggerated the need for such a strong drug to work on Peter’s metabolism – Carfentanil is known to be used as elephant tranquilizers. But eh, comic books. Like I said back in chapter 18, I’m playing with Peter’s physiology til it breaks.
The science mumbo-jumbo is about as accurate as I could manage. I have not yet completed my degree in applied science sooooo….yeah.

Fun nerd facts!

The directors commentary of Infinity War goes on to discuss how Peter upgraded his webshooters himself between the time of Homecoming and Infinity War. However, they way they slap on his wrist just *screams* nanites to me, and I 100% head-cannon that he was able to use Stark Tech at his disposable being an "intern" for Tony. So, this was my way of including that bit in the story.

We’re 2 chapters away from concluding segment 4, which means we’re 2 chapters away from starting the 5th and final phase of this story. And I will scream with my dying breath --- !!!this was so much shorter in my head!!

Darling Peter returns next chapter and Tony finds out who that little punk of a kid was at the Stark Expo. I love all your feedback and look forward to hearing your thoughts and anything you’d like to see going forward for the final phase --- See you in the new year, fam! !

Thanks a MILLION to Shoyzz for the amazing artwork depicting May, Peter and Tony from this chapter!!!!

Shoyzz: "God, her life had gotten to be so bizarre."
Shoyzz: "Easily best sleep he’d ever gotten."
With Great Power

Chapter Notes

Fun nerd facts!

Doctor Strange advising Peter to pray is yanked from The Amazing Spider-Man vol 2 issue #46.

"Babo" means idiot in Korean and a huge thanks to sturwurstrash for providing this information! Especially seeing as Google Translate just sucks :-P

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Drip.

It was dark.

Drip drip.

And cold.

Drip.

He could see shadows, faces covered behind wisps of fog. Monsters hiding in the darkness.

“I am behind everything, Gluppy mal’chik.”

It was dark, cold, and wet. The shivers tore him apart, his nerves screaming in agony, his body trembling fiercely beyond his control. It hurt to breathe — too cold. Hurt to open his eyes — too
cold. It hurt to move, too...

Please...

Please...

“No one is coming for you, mal’chik-pauk.”

Please, I don’t...

“You will die here, alone and forgotten.”

Please.

I don’t want to die.

Blood flowed around him, his torso soaked in it, saturated in it. Thick blood, smelling heavily of copper, seeping out of him and onto his thighs, down to his knees, never stopping — the flow never stopping.

Even that turned cold, the brief warmth of his own life supply freezing at the contact of the ruins around him.

KkkkkrrrrrrreeeeaaaaKKK!

The walls squeaked, cried, ached from the pressures building around them. Or was that him making those sounds?

A star broke through the patches of clouds, bright and silver. The blanket of fog stood no chance in its path, the ribbons of mist parting way for the symbol of justice. It stood out to him like the Big Dipper in the sky — ‘follow it’, he thought, and he’d find his way home.

“Stay with me, soldier,” the star said, his tone strong yet soft. “Easy now, I got you, son.”

He felt his body wrapped him up in hope, in warmth, keeping him close until he couldn’t be held anymore.

BeepbeepbeepbeepBEEPBEEPBEEP.

Kreak — KREak — KREEAK.

“Peter, hey, come on — open your eyes!”
“This…this is real face of your enemy.”

“Queens! Catch!”

“Hey, hey, easy now.” The voice strained to be heard over the gushing waters that splashed around him, against him, cold and freezing and cold, cold, cold. “I got you. Easy, easy…”

He took what he swore would be his last breath.

“…BP dropping…transfusion…”

“can’t…risk…push…units…plasma…”

And then awoke to a machine breathing for him.

“…wearing off…already?”

“…ter.”

There was pressure in his stomach. Immense, hot, painful pressure, like a burning rod pushing through his core.

He tried to grunt, groan, moan, yell, shout, scream, do anything, do something —

“definitely…Doctor Wu…stop…”

He couldn’t move, he couldn’t make a sound. He was trapped, restrained, his muscles deadened and useless. He was finally frozen from the bitter, aching cold. Or was this something more?

“…waking up…”

“I’m wrist deep….intestines…get him…under…”

“…Peter…”

Piercing, deafening sounds overtook the commotion of people, screeching alarms that screamed the cries he was unable to release.

“heart rate…critical…losing…”

“…v-fib…paddles…”

“Peter.”

The voice brought a calming clarity in from the chaos. With it came sight, everything white, fulgent, so many lamps shining down on them with an intensity only matched by the sun. The voice belonged to a man who stood out among it all, his presence somehow more visible than anything else.

Yet he was transparent — see-through, clear as glass.

“Focus on me.” He couldn’t touch Peter, his hands too ghostly, too intangible. Yet he drifted closer, as close as they could get to each other. “Focus on the sound of my voice.”

The man was decked head to toe in green hospital scrubs, the lower half of his face covered with a papery mask that hid the lips speaking to him. What little of his hair sticking out from the
matching surgical cap was slicked back and silver, a dash of salt mixing in with the peppered black he could barely see.

The aqua colored eyes drilled into him, somehow speaking more than the words that echoed in the air, bouncing off the walls with weightlessness.

“Peter, it’s imperative that you focus on me,” the translucent, floating man said.

Peter could feel a gasp rattling in his chest, the out of body experience coursing terror through him. Frenziedly, he brought his trembling hands in front of his face to see they were just as translucent.

He was dead. He had to be dead, this was death and there was a body below him, strapped and tied down, tubes in and out of holes, covered in scarlet red and ‘oh my god, is that me? Is this a dream?’

“This isn’t a dream. But you will remember it just the same,” the man calmly, yet firmly explained. “This is called your astral form, and I’ve pulled you from your physical body until these doctors can get their drugs to work for you again.”

He never remembered asking the question aloud, unsure if he even had a tongue in his mouth to speak, but by some form of a miracle or magic, the man heard him. Peter didn’t realize just how badly he needed that until the reassurance calmed an approaching avalanche of anxiety that threatened to consume him.

The sounds never stopped, the screaming of machines and shouting from people only getting louder, angrier, threatening to split his eardrums open.

“Peter, you need to look at me.”

He hadn’t realized he was still staring at the body on the table until the man told him to look away. His body, hooked up to machines, dripping with his own blood that gushed out of him, poured from him, a broken vessel running him dry.

He looked to the man, the chill blue irises staring back at him. ‘I’m going to die, aren’t I. Oh god, I’m going to die.’

“You’re not going to die, Peter. You’re dying, but you’re not going to die,” he insisted. “You’re strong. You will survive this.”

Peter could feel his body — whatever this was, a form as translucent as a jellyfish — get hotter, crackling with an approaching burn. He looked back up at the man, eyes fearful.

‘How?’

The man floated them both away from the center of the storm, from the table surrounded by people, machines, objects, and his dying body. The light around them got brighter, painfully so, until even the pellucid man couldn’t be seen in the radiant burst of electricity.

“By focusing on me,” he instructed, his voice fading away into the distance. “And if you believe in it, you might want to consider praying.”

Hissss.

Click click.
He was choking.

“Peter — kid! Hey, you need to calm down — Peter!”

He couldn’t breathe, each inhale forced into his chest against his will. He tried to run, he couldn’t move his own limbs. He tried to open his eyes, he couldn’t see — it was too bright. Too bright, too loud — too loud, too loud!

“Peter — kiddo! You gotta stop fighting — Parker, damn it, stop!”

Please, please make it go away! The words never formed, grunts and gags of what could have been emerging in its place. He could feel his muscles convulse around the invading device, a slither of a tube snaked down his throat, each hisssss leading to a puff of unwarranted air that expanded his lungs.

He wanted to scream. He could barely groan.

“He’s combative, someone get the restraints —”

“No!” A female voice cut through the hysteria, shrill and laced with a foreign accent. “I will not tell you again, we are not restraining him!”

“Doctor Cho —”

“I am the ordering physician, I decided if he is to be restrained. Push another four hundred mg’s of enhanced analgesic and if I hear even one more person remotely entertain the idea of restraining —”

Her shouting was loud, sharp. It felt like a drill piercing inside his ear canal. He wondered why she was so angry until he realized she was the reason he couldn’t move — the pressure against him was her frail body joined with other multiple hands, all desperate to keep him still.

He realized the hysteria was from him.

He blinked and squinted and closed his eyes tight but nothing ever came into focus. It was too bright. Faces were encased with a halo of white, dangerous to look at, searing into his retinas. He could feel the warmth of his own tears coating his skin, streaming past his temples and into his hairline.

The smells were overwhelming, nauseating, every antiseptic and every cotton fiber of gauze burning in his nostrils and ‘please, make it stop!’

“— beyond ridiculous. I want it in his chart that he has prior history of restraint misuse that will lead to PTSD aggravation. I don’t want one more Babo suggesting we —”

“Done, okay? We can do that. Just...take a breath, Helen. Please.” He recognized that voice. He studied lectures in school containing that voice. Doctor Bruce Banner. “I’ll meet you down in the labs. We’ll figure something out for him.”

Everything dissipated into muffled, muted hum, sounds still present but not as alerting. It never felt like sleep. Even when he was out, when rest would come at times he felt numb from the core down, it never felt like sleep. In the moments where he didn’t feel pain, where it was just him and his mind, he begged for help. He begged for sleep.
“You’re safe, Underoo’s. No one’s going to hurt you, not under my watch.”

It was the only voice he could stand to hear in the midst of his boisterous surroundings. Even May, as much as he loved her, as bad as he felt for making her cry, was too loud. He begged for her to stay quiet, to please be quiet, even her sniffles nails against a chalkboard to his ears.

Mr. Stark’s voice never got that way. It was calm, low in volume, smooth and rich even when it rumbled and croaked.

“Mr...Mr. Stark?” he mumbled, words thick and slurred.

Two tiny light bulbs emitted a soft glow from the chest plate in front of him, the metal a dull gray and black, stripped of the vibrant red and gold that made Iron Man who he was.

His eyes slid in and out of focus, using what little strength he had left to look at the man holding him.

“Right here. I got you,” Mr. Stark answered, his words drowning out the duress of the sea. “It’s over now, I got you.”

It was always present. Even when he felt most alone, surrounded by strangers in scrubs, stripped of his dignity and strength, the voice that brought a constant cascade of safety was always there.

When he screamed for help until his throat tore raw, the agony unbearable, positive he would die from the pain —

“I’m here, Peter. I’m not leaving.” Mr. Stark locked eyes with him, his intent burning hot. “I’m not leaving.”

When he felt vulnerable, exposed, the long shaft of a needle intimidating as they went to inject medicine into him —

“You can tell me all about that later, Pete. I’ll be here. I’m not leaving.”

Memories drifted away from him like puzzle pieces floating in space. They were there, he knew it, but there was only so much he could focus on. It was as if his mental capacity had been greatly reduced since…

Since…

A spiraling vortex of memories assaulted him, just as a rush of liquid came flowing into his veins.

Peter grabbed the shield faster than Dmitri could react. “Gah-AHH!” With an anguished cry, he swung up, Vibranium metal hitting the man’s head.

Dmitri yanked his face up and over to him. “You are nothing, you hear me? You are pathetic, gluppy mal’chik. An infant pretending to be hero. You messed with wrong man, and you will die because of it.”

“Gluppy mal’chik,” the Russian accent made him flinch, breaking him out of his dazed shock. “You’re not supposed to be here.”

“Klum. Use your stuff to quiet him.” His voice was deep and snarly. “Now.”

“You’re behind this?” Peter asked, standing up.
“I am behind everything, boy,” the man hissed, his Russian accent thick and heavy on his tongue. “Now come with me.”

It all started in that warehouse, where a pile of ticking time bombs sat ready to explode. It felt like ages ago, like a distant dream from a faraway life.

Only now, instead of the heat from reassembled Chitarui heads, a different fire coursed through his nerves. The heat coiled into his muscles, starting at his neck until it spread all across his body. His skin flushed, his body felt weak and lightheaded and…

And the bright light finally faded away.

“There ya go.” Mr. Stark carded fingers through his hair, massaging away the throbbing that pestered inside his head. “That’s it.”

It was as if someone had finally found the dial to his senses and lowered the ever-increasing number back to its semi-normal eleven. He could breathe easy again, the scorched tundra of red pain in his stomach simmering away to a fizzle. The smells weren’t as strong, even Mr. Stark’s body wash a brief whiff as opposed to the overpowering scent it had once been.

The memories were no longer a concern, the medication coursing through his body like an eclipse to his mind.

“Sweet dreams, Underroo’s.”

Peter let himself depart from his body, drifting away, melting with each sound that passed by.

Click.

BEEP.

Click click.

It felt as if he were swaying, rocking to the motions of an unknown source. It was gentle, soothing. There was a current beneath his feet that swung him side to side, slowly, like the pendulum of a clock.

Click.

BEEP.

Click....cli...
The harsh, mechanical sounds of machinery faded into a choppy percussion of water, rolls of waves crashing and swooshing. Birds chirped in the distance, flocks of them, too far away to truly be an annoyance. The smell of sea salt hit his nostrils at full force and the warmth...my god, the warmth.

The cold that ate away at his bones finally fled at the sunshine basking down on him.

Peter opened his eyes, squinting at the setting sun that obstructed his sight. He put his hand over his brows, trying to better see the blob of colors in front of him.

Slowly, the glaring yellow and orange glow began to lighten and dim at the edges, each blink he gave way bringing focus back. The fuzz and blur of his surroundings cleared, revealing an older man standing in front of him, smiling kindly.

“Well,” he greeted, “would you look who it is.”

Peter stared ahead — gawked, his jaw slacked open, his brows furrowed with confusion. His hand, once held to his forehead to block the brightly colored sunset, fell down to his hip.

“Uncle Ben?”

Ben’s grin never wavered, winking as if knowing a secret Peter hadn’t been let in on. “Hey there, champ.”

A flutter of uneasy butterflies tossed in Peter’s stomach. Uncle Ben looked the same, his crew cut gray hair and neatly trimmed beard no different than the last time he’d seen the man, back the night he’d —

Peter looked down at his own hands, flexing his fingers, touching his skin, doing everything short of pinching himself to see if he was dreaming or not. Was he dead too? No, he couldn’t be. He couldn’t have, he didn’t remember ever — and he couldn’t leave Aunt May like that, not yet, not while she —

“You going to sit there all day or you going to help your old man with this sinker?” Ben asked, a smile in his voice.

For a brief moment, Peter found himself unable to tear his eyes away, even as Ben raised the fishing rod in his hand gesturing the need for assistance.

It wasn’t until a flock of birds flew overhead that he finally snapped out of it, his neck looking up, watching as the black birds chirped and soared through the sky. Their singing faded away, far in the distance.

Peter went to move, nearly falling out of his seat as he did. He looked down, noticing that he was sitting, perched on a wooden bench of an old, worn down fishing boat.

Ben’s fishing boat, he realized.

They had taken it out a handful of times, during the summer when the weather was nice. They never caught much fish but Ben insisted that was never the point. May would always laugh, saying Ben was the only man who went fishing to never actually fish. Peter never really understood what that meant.

He did a quick glance behind his back, the sight overseeing the Hudson River each way he looked,
stretching on for miles. On the ground was another fishing rod and a red kit labeled ‘Ben Parker’, open and full with baits and hooks.

“Right.” He barely managed a nod. “Right, yeah, of course.”

Ben had already gotten the other rod set up by the time Peter had the small, metal anchor settled around the fishing line. They exchanged poles; Peter returning Ben’s while Ben handed Peter his.

“Thanks, sport,” Ben said, grunting as he attached bait to his fishing line. “Pain in my ass, these things are.”

Peter stared at the rod handed to him, turning it over in his hands just enough to see the engraved initials ‘PP’ on the handle. He smiled, the corner of his lip turning upward. He remembered the day Ben took him shopping to get the dingy little fishing rod, the same year he admitted he had never fished before in his young life. It was subsequently the same year Ben and May also took him in.

He remembered his Uncle saying something along the lines of ‘Some brother of mine. Lived in the city too long and forgot his damn roots — we’re going fishing, boy.’

Fishing became a little hobby of theirs soon after, a time when Ben left the city to relax by the lakeside and get back in touch with nature. It wasn’t the nature part that Peter enjoyed, in fact, he hated the bugs and the cold and the smell of dead rotting fish — it was never his thing. But he’d never tell Ben. He enjoyed his company way too much to give it up.

So he suffered through the bug bites and sunburn and smell of gross fish, never regretting a moment of it as long as he got to spend time with his Uncle.

When he looked back up, Ben had already thrown his arm back and his line forward, the bait and anchor making a plop as it landed in the lake. Peter watched ripples spread out further and further in the water until eventually a calm returned and only the wind made small waves on the lake.

He threw his own rod back and cast his line out, creating a new set of ripples.

The old fishing boat swayed and bobbed against the water, gentle and smooth.

“It’s quiet here, ya know. It’s nice.” Ben turned to look at him, eyebrow arched high. “Has it been quiet for ya, Pete?”

Peter shrugged, fiddling with the handle of his fishing rod. “I guess.”

The thing with Ben, being a military man for so long, was that he never had to say anything to be heard. His expression could speak a thousand words.

Peter averted his gaze as he caught sight of that look, the one that said ‘Don’t be feeding me bullshit, son. I’ve got a full stomach as it is.’

“No,” he admitted, ducking his head low. “Not really.”

Ben’s frown deepened, leaving dark groves in his already aged skin. He looked back to the waters ahead of them. “You’ve been up to a lot since I’ve been gone. Taking care of May, taking care of Queens...you haven’t really been taking care of yourself there, bud.”

Peter tapped the fishing rod against the metal edges of the boat, clankclankclank filling the air between them.
“I’m trying. I am,” Peter stressed, somehow sounding both adamant and resigned at the same time. “It’s just...I’m screwing up so much, Ben. Every time I try to help I...”

A short silence fell between them and Ben arched a curious eyebrow.

“I ain’t a mind reader, Pete. You’re gunna have to finish that sentence.”

“Every time I try to help, I screw up!” Peter elaborated, abandoning his fishing rod to drag both hands down his face. “I thought I could work hard and...and eventually I’d get the hang of things. But no matter what I do, someone’s got a problem with it.”

“You really believe that?” Ben asked with a fond patience.

Peter threw his hands up in the air, exasperatedly.

“Of course I do! First I tried catching Mysterio and it just got me in trouble with Mr. Stark. I should have had him before anything got bad, in Times Square before he stole the chameleon helmet. Then I tried helping that lady in the burning building...” Peter exhaled sharply, sounding defeated, shaking his head. “There was no lady. I fell for their stupid trap and got kidnapped and — ugh! I can’t believe I let myself get kidnapped. It’s no wonder everyone treats me like such a kid — what Avenger gets themselves kidnapped? I’m such a dud, a friggin failure.”

Ben reeled his line back in, humming in disappointment at the eaten bait and no catch. He bent down to the fishing box, all the while looking at Peter.

“Well I can’t speak for everyone out there sport, but I can speak on what I see...” he said, straightening his back and placing the bait on his hook. “And it seems like you see yourself as a failure more than anyone else.”

Peter stood up and leaned over the boat’s edge, fishing pole long since forgotten. It’s not like they ever caught much fish out here anyway. Ben threw his line back into the water with little hope of catching even a guppy.

“Try telling that to Mr. Stark. He was so proud of me after we stopped Awesome Android...” Peter grimaced, slumping further over the boat. “I don’t know how I’m going to face him after this.”

“You face him like you do every other day,” Ben simply answered.

“This is different. This is...” Peter let his chin rest on his forearms, sighing. “I screwed up. Big time. I wouldn’t blame him if he took away my suit for good after this.”

Ben shook his head. “I don’t know much about this Mr. Stark now, but I can tell you a bit about yourself. This whole pity-partying thing going on here? We both know you’re better than that. Just because you messed up a little bit doesn’t discount all the other good deeds you’ve been up to. You’re human, Pete. And mistakes are what makes us human. Mistakes are what gives us the ability to grow and learn. You ain’t going to grow up if you don’t make a few mistakes along the way.”

Peter shot up, his back stiffening. “Yeah, well, what about great power? And responsibility? How can I afford to screw up when it’s my responsibility to use these powers for good? How can I make you proud if...”

Peter stopped, the lump in his throat growing painful, stealing his voice away. He looked back to the waters and blinked away the hot tears threatening to slip out of his eyes, slowly settling back down on the wooden bench of the boat.
Ben grew quiet, his jaw set in a way that Peter came to know as deep thought, the older man remembering a moment in time far long before he had even been born.

Finally, he sniffed, hard, looking over at Peter with a hint of a grin. “I ever tell you about Germany ’86, the year I almost compromised my entire squad—”

“Because you were afraid of rabbits, yeah yeah, I remember.” Peter chuckled, smiling wide enough to show his teeth. "May never let you live that story down."

He missed those times.

Peter’s hands somehow found their way back to his fishing rod and he fiddled with the loose line, remembering the evenings in the kitchen with both Ben and May, eating dinners and laughing at stories heard too many times and yet never enough — while he’d never trade his life as Spiderman, there was no denying a soft spot for the Peter Parker that never came to be. The normal Peter Parker, never bitten by that spider, surely never to be where he was right now, wherever this was. The desire was in vain, of course. It didn’t stop him from thinking the ‘what if’s.’

“You know what my commander always told me after that?” Ben asked, interrupting his thoughts and turning to look at him. “Fall down seven times. Get up eight.”

For a moment they locked eyes, Ben’s steely gaze boring into Peter’s, all too familiar, all too sentimental. A pang hit his chest with more force than any injury he’d ever felt combined, every fiber of his being screaming to stay there, to never leave the boat, to never go back to the life he had come to know.

But it was Ben that looked away, turning his eyes back to the vast rivers around them. His shoulders dropped with a heavy, relaxed sigh.

“It’s nice here. Nice and quiet.”

A flock of birds flew by suddenly, soaring over their heads, their movements so fast that wind ruffled straight through Peter’s hair. Ben’s crew cut remained unchanged, not a hair out of place.

Their chirping became loud, persistent, their singing reminding Peter of a warning, a timer that had been set off. He wasn’t sure why, but something told him the birds were a sign.

He dragged his gaze away from the sky and back towards Ben, his heart ready to pour out years of pent up emotion he had suppressed for so long, too long.

“Uncle Ben, I’m so sorry. That night, when we...I—”

Ben waved away the unspoken issue with a flick of his hand and an easy grin. “Just enjoy the peace and quiet while you have it, Pete.”

Peter struggled to close his mouth, to ignore his Uncle and ramble on until time wouldn’t allow him anymore, until his apologies couldn’t be heard by anyone but himself. This was his chance, after all, his chance to find peace after years of being held down with guilt and regret.

Ben’s grin lessened a fraction and he added, “After all, everything in life only last for a little while.”

The birds flew away, taking with them their song of nature. Peter slowly went to look back ahead, the sunset crisp along the waters, a large gilded orb that melted into the lakes horizon. The only sound was the gentle slap of water against the boat.
He nodded, his mouth closing, his jaw setting tight. Ben didn’t need an apology from him. And Peter needed to learn how to live with the emotions that an apology wouldn’t fix.

The sun had set, dimming until his surroundings were cloaked in darkness, the salt waters no longer a sight to behold. Peter sighed, closing his eyes. The darkness beneath his lids was no different than the darkness that enveloped him. The warmth of the sun and Ben’s presence was gone, and he was alone again.

The boat swayed. It bounced gently on the waves of the river, rocking him to a silent lullaby of discomfort. The underlying presence of pain wasn’t a problem; he had gotten used to the constant droning hum it would deliver. It had become the background noise of his days, rarely loud enough to drown out his thoughts, mostly a distraction.

His fingers grazed against the scratchy wooden plank he sat on, remembering the splinters he’d often get as a child from the same worn down timber. The fishing boat was old and one crack away from falling apart but Ben always insisted that the trips were never about catching fish to begin with.

‘I come here for the peace and quiet.’

The ringing of his own ears became his anthem, silence that he begged to stay, peace and quiet that he found himself regretfully drifting away from. It wasn’t long before the ambiance of the lakeside fell away completely.

The ringing only got louder, the droning hum more persistent. Exhaustion like he had never felt before swamped him all at once, flowing into him and weighing him down.

It was one sharp beep that cut through it all, slicing through the tether he had held onto for so long.

...EP.

...ick...click.

BEEP.

Chapter End Notes

Wow. Okay. Way behind on my updating schedule. I am so sorry you guys, some crap happened with the laptop and then crap happened in my life and it’s just been crap crap crap all around. Your comments, support and love for this fic are truly the only thing keeping me going right about now, in more ways than one. I cannot express my gratitude for all the comments and feedback and I know that's a broken record you're
tired of hearing but if I haven't personally responded to you know that I LOVE YOU. AND THANK YOU.

And the next chapter will be out very soon 'cause this was split from that and *omg just finish the fic already -- I know I want it done with too!*

*_*_
Peter blinked back to consciousness with a thunderous headache. The lights in the room were dimmed low, even squinting he could barely make out the tiles along the ceiling.

The ceiling? He furrowed his brows, realizing that he was looking up, that he was laying on his back in a bed slightly raised up a few degrees high. He didn’t need to be fully awake to know it wasn’t his decade-old, lumpy mattress and that this wasn’t his bedroom back in Queen’s, the ceiling tiles much too far away. The longer he stared at them the further they seemed to get, like a balloon floating out of reach.

He had to force himself to blink, the action ten times the effort he knew it should take. Peering his lids back open was a fight against gravity he couldn’t win and instead, his eyes stayed closed. The dancing colors he saw provided a brief moment of distraction.

“Mr. Parker.” A voice broke through his disorientation. “Finally decide to grace us with your presence?”

Peter grunted quietly in protest, a broken noise of distress, and opened his eyes to a groggy squint. His neck lolled to the side and he blinked not once, not twice, but three times to clear the cobwebs out of his vision, already grayed at the edges with a hazy pain. Even then, he wasn’t too sure that his eyes weren’t lying to him.

“Mr. Stark?” he rasped, the words coming out thick and muffled.

Tony arched an eyebrow. “You always say that like you’re surprised to see me.”
The first thing Peter noticed was how flippant Mr. Stark sounded, like this was a conversation they’d had many times before. And while Tony’s expression softened, Peter’s scrunched up with confusion. When did he — he didn’t remember ever — he shook his head, his neck heavy and stiff. A movement of a millimeter felt an impossible effort.

Tony leaned forward in the upholstered armchair placed next to his bed, resting both his elbows on his knees and lazily clasping his hands together. Rough, dark stubble coated the lower half of his face, an area normally kept well trimmed and neat. His casual attire of a wrinkled polo shirt and grease-stained jeans was a sharp contrast to the three-piece Armani suits Peter was used to seeing him dressed in.

“Where am I?” Peter blearily asked, lifting one hand to rub at the crust gluing his eyes shut.

He stopped when a stinging prick ran up the length of his arm, something pulling sharp on another thing that connected to something that had him hissing through clenched teeth.

Peter dry swallowed, catching sight of what caused the annoying sensation. ‘I.V’s?’ His eyes stared at thick tubes accessing every available vein up and down his body, the integrity of his skin violated and intruded.

“Upstate,” Tony answered, quick to get his attention. “Avengers facility.”

Peter did a quick look around the room — the enormous room that had to be easily three times the size of his own bedroom back in Queens. It looked like a hospital room, a very, incredibly fancy hospital room.

Straight in front of him, embedded within the wall was a huge flat-screen TV, and to the side of that was a long, plush sofa sitting flush against the bay window that took up half the wall. Curtains were drawn over the glass, hiding the view from outside. Peter had no doubt that it would be mind-blowing as well, though.

It was a giant leap from his over-night stay at Metro-General hospital when he was a kid. Having his tonsils removed and the ice-cream he received afterward was nothing compared to this.

He went to adjust himself in the bed, lift his back up a little higher and —

“Ah-ahck- ha!”

“Easy, easy,” Tony coaxed, leaning forward in his chair to keep Peter from moving — not that he had any plans to move, perfectly content with never adjusting any of his functional limbs ever again.

Moving was a bad idea, a very, very bad idea. Peter’s body locked up with stiff muscles, biting his tongue and holding his breath to keep every fiber of his being still.

"Take it slow, kiddo,” he heard a voice cut through the sharp, throbbing agony pulling at his joints. He barely managed a nod of his head, eyes clenched tightly as he waited for his body to stop screaming.

Peter decided then and there that they’d find him in this very spot for the remainder of his life, having never moved from this moment forward. Prom be damned, graduation a forgotten afterthought, his stomach churned at the idea of even getting out of bed, his mind yelling ‘Ow, ow, OW, mother-flipping-fudge OW!’

Second by second though, the pain faded back into a droning hum. Like a stress ball returning to its
natural shape, Peter could feel his body calming down, his nerves extinguishing the fiery wrath he had caused to himself.

Slowly, with each deliberate breath he took, he noted that pressure laid heavily against his chest. That was a new development. It was as if someone was pushing him back against the mattress, intent on keeping him as motionless as possible — he kept his internal monologue of withering away in the bed to himself, wisely deciding that talking would only make things worse.

The blinding white of pain diminished from his eyes and he saw that the arm belonged to Mr. Stark, the man’s expression flooded with concern.

Below that was the glimmer of silver, metal reflecting from the dim overhead lights above. It was attached to his leg, the limb exposed from the sheets and blankets.

Peter gawked, realizing with horror that there was metal attached to his leg. He wiggled his toes for good measure — yep, his leg alright.

“Careful. We’re going to get that removed soon.” Tony nodded to the broken leg that Peter couldn’t seem to take his eyes away from. “Until then you’re...ten percent walking robot. Dream come true, right?”

Tony’s forced laugh faded away in the melody of machines surrounding them.

Peter could feel the dazed look on his face, the incomprehensible confusion eating away at his mind. He had never broken a bone before in his life before and now here he was, staring at a leg that looked straight out of a science fiction movie.

The Winter Soldier’s metal arm suddenly didn’t seem so ‘cool’ anymore.

“What happened?” The words tumbled out of his mouth without a second thought, hoarse and crackling at the ends. Nausea that gurgled in his stomach suddenly made him feel flushed and hot and yet still cold — always cold.

“You took a hit,” Tony explained, his voice purposefully lacking any emotion, if not sounding a bit blasé. “You’ll shake it off.”

Peter blinked, digesting the information slowly. Bits and pieces of what happened were already starting to form and it took every ounce of strength he had to push them away from the forefront of his mind.

His hands trembled. He could scantily make out the tight, mildly uncomfortable bands strapped around his wrists, keeping both hands immobile from flexing. The feeling of tape tugged at his abdomen each time he breathed in, along with the scratchy cotton gauze covering his skin.

His head ached, his eyes hurt, his nose felt inflamed — the colors were too bright, the smells too strong. His senses hadn’t been so out of whack since the spider-bite.

He rubbed at his eyes with fingertips that hurt — because holy crap everything seemed to hurt — and at that moment Karen seemed to echo in his mind like he had unlocked a forgotten memory.

“Your enhanced senses struggled greatly to see through the man’s fog,” she had once said, what felt to be a millennia ago. “The strain appears to have given you a migraine.”

A migraine — he huffed, that was putting it subtly. His senses had been so incredibly dulled exposed to that fog and who knows for how long — days? Weeks? The question was on the tip of
his tongue, his mouth opening to ask Mr. Stark only to stop one breath short of speaking.

His memories were dusty, just beyond his reach. The most vivid moment he seemed to remember was fishing with Ben.

‘Ben.’ His shoulders slumped, his mouth falling slack. Real or not, he decided to cling to that moment above everything else. He wasn’t ready to cross the bridge that held clarity of reality, at least not yet.

When Tony realized he wasn’t going to say anything, the man settled back into his cushioned chair, folding his arms over his chest.

“I gotta say Parker, you’re something else. About as bad-ass as they come,” Tony went on, his words dissipating into an indiscernible hum. “You know, I assumed you had peaked with that building. That whole shindig of lifting ten tons off your back without so much as a crane for backup — no, you just had to go and one-up yourself, show off that extra pocket of gumption you got kicking about. You surprised the hell out of...”

Peter quickly realized he wasn’t able to pay attention. His eyes stared at Tony yet he looked right through him, his vision blurry, fuzzy. He struggled to maintain consciousness, trying to surface against a submersive force, a weight that tried to pull him into oblitative darkness.

Was it the drugs? Looking to the large bay window, he could see a flicker of moonlight spilling in through the drawn curtains, telling him it was late in the evening. Maybe that was it, maybe it was just late. Maybe he just needed to sleep.

Yet he couldn’t shake the odd feeling settling in his bones, the sense of inescapability that gripped him so tightly back in the base, feeling like he had never even left. He didn’t even remember leaving. Perhaps once he heard the story of their harrowing escape, he’d feel better. He’d be able to discern what was real, what was a dream and what was a nightmare.

Sitting there, clad in a one-size-too-big hospital gown, Peter realized right now it all felt like one horrible nightmare. He fiddled with the edges of the blankets and sheets on top of him, distantly and bitterly wondering if this was just another hallucination brought on by his captors.

“Let’s get something straight, spider-kid. The world thinks you’re dead. That warehouse that exploded? They think you were in it,” Mysterio smiled. "No one is coming for you. Not even Tony Stark.”

“Hey.” Tony snapped two fingers in front of his face. “Anyone home?”

Peter ducked his head, flushed with embarrassment. He felt the warm pressure of tears building in his eyes, quick to blink them away before anyone could notice.

“Y-yeah, uh...yeah, sorry. I’m just...”

He was breathing shallowly, he could feel it. And apparently Tony noticed it himself, resting a firm hand around his shoulder and placing his face directly in Peter’s view.

“You okay?” he asked, genuine concern lacing his tone. “You need me to get Cho, Banner, you need more painkillers —”

“No, I’m — I’m fine, I’m...” The nervous oscillations in his own voice surprised him. He fought against his emotions, roughly clearing his throat. “My senses are just...a little haywire right now.”
His voice cracked at the edges from the raw honesty he spoke. Everything was too overwhelming right now, the taste of antiseptic on his tongue, the smell of cotton against his nostrils, the plastic and metal, the beeping and buzzing — every coherent thought he tried to have was ripped away in the chaos of his senses.

He focused on Ben. He didn’t want to lose that memory, he didn’t want to remember anything else. He just wanted to be back there, back in a time when everything was fine.

“Well, let’s get you re-calibrated then.” Tony gave his shoulder three firm pats before pulling away. “Water? You need some water?”

Peter nodded. “Yeah.”

While Tony crossed the room to fill a cup with water, Peter decided to do a mental one-over of his body. Breathing hurt his stomach, that much he knew. It was razor deep, migrating from his back to his front and radiating across his abdomen. And though his wrists and leg throbbed and ached, nothing could top that constant, flooding pain from his core.

For a brief and fleeting moment, he considered testing his body’s limits, to see what other limbs would protest with unspeakable pain. Staring at the deep blue stain coloring the length of his leg though, he decided that any other injuries could happily wait.

It was haunting, seeing the bruising from where a metal rod lay embedded in his skin, in his muscle, penetrating through his bone. Like ink dropped onto wet paper it spread, from his knee to his ankle, an ominous storm cloud.

Peter fought to cover the sight with the soft hospital blanket, the newly gained perspective of his own vulnerability bringing forth a different weight to the situation. His hands fumbled as he tried to gather sheets over blankets over wires and drainage bags that got caught up in his haste to hide the offending limb.

It was at that moment Tony returned, immediately setting down a plain white styrofoam cup on the nearest end table to help him.

“Hey, it’s fine. I mean it, we’re going to get that fixed up,” he said, giving one halfhearted attempt at evening out the wrinkles on the sheet. “We’ve been busy giving your healing factor a push in the right direction but that’s our next priority. You’re fine, Peter.”

His emphasis on the word *fine* almost had Peter laughing. He settled on silently nodding instead.

What was he supposed to say — that he was scared? Why was he scared — he was safe, he was at the Avenger’s compound and he was *safe*. There was no reason to tell Mr. Stark that he was afraid, that he felt a crushing sense of doom clawing at his chest — *I don’t want to die* front and center in his mind, despite the heart monitor telling him he was alive and fine.

He was *fine*.

Right?

Peter tucked the dark thoughts away as he tucked the bed-sheet around his leg, covering the gnarly looking injury away and out of sight. As he did, he noticed the dark, grimy brown that stained the tips of his nails. Beneath the tubes, IV’s and clear medical tape that wrinkled his skin he could see blood caked underneath his fingernails.

His blood, he reminded himself.
He should be grateful, right? He was still alive. But back there — back in the base — it was dark. While he could feel his blood he never really saw it. Here, it was all visible to the naked eye.

Suddenly, looking at himself made everything all too tangible. He couldn’t shake the feeling of shock. His mind felt like sludge trying to rattle its way loose, and he wasn’t sure if it was from the drugs pumping through the IV’s or the sudden, coherent awareness that he almost died.

This wasn’t a hallucination. This was real. And Ned had said it once before but it never really hit him until now — he could have died.

Peter quickly stuffed his hand underneath the blanket. He couldn’t quite let the events of what happened take shape yet.

“Is my Aunt here?” he choked out, shifting slightly on the bed.

Tony nodded, looking to the ceiling as he spoke, “FRIDAY?”

“Already alerted her, boss.” The AI was quieter than usual. Peter could have sworn she was being sensitive to his current circumstances, sounding more like Karen with an emotion he knew she couldn’t possibly have. “She’s on her way over.”

Peter muttered a ‘thanks’, leaning over to grab a hold of the water cup next to him. The task was seemingly more difficult without the basic ability to flex his wrist. Once in his grasp, he managed two small sips of water before deciding the taste of styrofoam was too overpowering to handle.

He never even noticed when Mr. Stark took the cup out of his hands. He was already letting his head rest against the pillow behind his neck, closing his eyes tighter than usual, willing himself not to ponder needlessly on his own mortality.

‘You’re fine. You’re fine. You’re fine,’ he kept telling himself, pushing away the obvious.

Time passed between them one slow second before the next, punctuated only by constant beeps and the dull hum of the myriad of machines.

After what seemed like a thousand beeps, Tony spoke up. “You with me there, Pete?”

Peter cleared his throat, wanting so desperately to have his voice back. It felt as if he had swallowed one of those flaming swords, the soft tissue to his larynx feeling both cut and burned.

“Yeah, I’m-sorry. I’m just...tired?” He nodded, eyes still closed as if convincing himself of the very words he spoke. “Feel like I might fall asleep again.”

“Yeah, well, don’t fight it,” Tony encouraged. “You need all the rest you can get.”

The mere effort of trying to stay awake sent a harsh shudder through his muscles, and he was unsure if it was from the cold or increasingly deep ache in his body.

“Right, right,” he managed around the awful choked lump in his throat. “I just...want to see May first.”

His voice slurred a bit at the end, coated with drowsiness. Peter hadn’t realized how long he had been fighting off sleep until that moment when his eyelids sluggishly drooped closed.

Luckily, it was right when he was sure he would fall asleep again that the automatic doors to the room swooshed open. Peter wearily opened his eyes and Tony looked up at the newcomer with a
tight-lipped smile.

“Well, speak of the devil —”

“Look at you!” May crossed the distance of the room in record-breaking speed, gathering Peter in her arms faster than he could take in her sudden presence. “Oh honey, it is so good to see you awake.”

The pressure in his chest eased a little bit as May wrapped him up in a hug, the scent of her perfume calming, warm vanilla nearly masking the scent of sterile antiseptic.

“Hi, May,” he languidly greeted.

“Hi yourself, tough guy,” she said half into his ear, half into his hair.

Peter barely managed an arm around her back, his movements slow and uncoordinated. As he did, Tony stood from his chair with a tired grunt hidden beneath the clearing of his throat.

“I’ll give you two some privacy,” he said, walking past them both.

May pulled away and Peter shook his head, tired eyes half-mast and brows creased.

“You don’t have to — it’s fine, Mr. Stark, really —”

“Nonsense,” Tony insisted, dodging Peter’s diversion with ease. “I’ve taken up enough of your time.”

Tony flashed a hint of a smile, making for the exit and only stopping before the doors would open for him. He spun on his heels with a finger pointed squarely at Peter.

“Parker, rest up, is that clear? I expect a full recitement of Pi next I see you.”

The automatic doors slid open with another airy hum. Tony disappeared somewhere out in the hallway, his departure taking with him the ringing of his cell phone. Only his shadow was visible as he stopped somewhere a few feet away from the doors leading inside, having whipped out his phone to handle business like the busy man Peter knew he was.

Peter looked to that shadow and back at May with knitted brows. “I...I don’t think I can —”

“He’s joking.” May ran her fingers through his hair, shaking her head. “And no, he’s not very funny. I’m telling you kiddo, the past week with that man has been—”

“Week!?” Peter’s shout fell out of his mouth as a croak, his eyes widening. “Week? It’s — it’s been a week?”

“Hey hey, calm down,” May stressed, keeping her fingers in his hair and continuing to brush through the curls with slow, soft motions. “Don’t go freaking out on me. You know I freak out when you freak out.”

Peter could see May had resorted to what she did best — mitigating. Her sloppy bun, over-sized cardigan, and puffy, swollen eyes told him a different story, though. She had been freaking out and he hadn’t even been around to witness it.

Even worse, he was the cause of it.

His hands bunched tightly in the sheets below him.
“Sorry. Sorry, I just...” He swallowed thickly, goosebumps fleeing up and down his arm. “It’s been a week? I...I...”

He went to adjust himself again and was cruelly reminded that his body did not want to be moved right now. Peter visibly winced, trying his best to breathe past the pain despite breathing being the very thing causing the pain.

“I’m so, so sorry, May,” he managed, hands fumbling to adjust the nasal cannula strapped around his face. There was a sudden need to feel the coolness entering his lungs, to believe he was breathing, to believe he was alive.

“Hey, whoa,” she interjected, calm and persuasive. “Why you apologizing?”

Peter bit his lower lip, hesitant to respond. He had always grown up knowing two things — Uncle Ben stayed calm, cool as a cucumber while Aunt May was tough as nails, a strong woman inside and out. He knew that for her to be crying, it had to come with the conjunction of something major. Losing family. Losing a loved one.

He may not fully remember what happened to him, but he knew one thing for certain — an upset May was a bad thing.

“I can’t believe I...that I put you through so much, that I let this happen because I promised I’d be careful as Spider-man and I wasn’t and now you—”

“Okay, take a breath there, bug boy.” May moved her hands to his shoulders, holding her grip firm. “It’s okay, this was way out of your control. I’m not mad. I’m just —”

She interrupted her own words to lean in and kiss him on the cheek, making an audible ‘mhpf!’ sound with it. “I’m just so glad you’re okay.”

Peter kept his head low, staring at the sheets rather than looking at May. He hadn’t seen her look so rough around the edges since Ben passed. He shifted uneasily, the need to sleep suddenly replaced with an overwhelming desire to curl in a ball and cry for days, weeks, months. Yet he couldn’t even curl in a ball if he wanted to right now, his own body incapable of handling such contortion.

As irrational as the thought was, Peter found himself angry for having that option taken from him. He wasn’t sure where the abrupt, foolish emotions were coming from — it wasn’t like him to think this way, this wasn’t like him at all.

‘Yeah, well, it’s not like you to get kidnapped and nearly killed either, Parker. Way to go on that one.’

Peter pressed the heels of his hands firmly against his eyes, desperate to keep the burning, unshed tears at bay. God, he really screwed up this time. He hadn’t seen her look so rough around the edges since Ben passed. He shifted uneasily, the need to sleep suddenly replaced with an overwhelming desire to curl in a ball and cry for days, weeks, months. Yet he couldn’t even curl in a ball if he wanted to right now, his own body incapable of handling such contortion.

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‘Yeah, well, it’s not like you to get kidnapped and nearly killed either, Parker. Way to go on that one.’

Peter pressed the heels of his hands firmly against his eyes, desperate to keep the burning, unshed tears at bay. God, he really screwed up this time. This was on a whole other playing field from the incident at Times Square, from letting Mysterio steal the chameleon helmet. This was embarrassingly huge, way beyond the Ferry. He had no clue how he was going to prove himself again after this.

“Peter?” May watched him carefully, squeezing her grip. “Talk to me, you’re scaring me.”

“I’m just...really upset that I made you worry.” Peter hated hearing his voice waver with weakness, wet with tears he hadn’t let loose. “I don’t like it when you’re upset.”

“I’m not upset, kiddie. But I think you are.” May couldn’t have been any softer, her tone delicate,
reassuring. “What’s going on? Talk to me, it’s just you and me. Lay it out.”

It was as if she plucked the damaging thoughts straight out of his mind, like she knew exactly what he had been thinking. May was always great like that, he realized. They didn’t have the connection he had with Uncle Ben, but they had something different, something unique. Though she wasn’t his birth mother he’d never hesitate to consider her his mom.

He opened his mouth to reply, insist he was fine, that he was okay. Instead, a harsh cry got caught in his throat, strangling his words.

May sighed. “Oh, honey —”

“I’m f-f-fine,” Peter insisted, hands covering his face. “I’m—”

He wished he hadn’t tried to respond to her in the first place. Like a rubber band pulled back taut before being let go, he found himself snapping, breaking. His cries were loud, smothered only by the palms of his hands.

“I’m s-sorry!” he sobbed, his words muffled. “I’m-sorry-s—”

He latched onto May’s voice as she brought him close to her chest, her familiar and old cardigan a grounding feeling against his skin.

“Shh, shh, honey it’s okay,” May cajoled, as if she had been prepared for the moment all along. “It’s okay.”

Out in the hallway, Tony had still been looking at his phone’s text messages when he heard it. It had happened that quickly, one cry tearing off into two, choking off into more. It hit his ears with piercing gravity. By knee-jerk reaction he began to walk away, head down low, dodging the corners only by habit.

This wasn’t a moment for him to bear witness to. It felt private. Intensely private.

Tony wasn’t dumb, he could see the anxiety riddling Peter, the distant look in his eyes and the small muscle in his chin working, quivering. The tension had been palpable and after all the kid had gone through he certainly deserved a break-down or two, or six. It was no surprise he waited for the comfort of his aunt until he had one.

An ember of jealousy ignited in his chest at the odd desire to have been there instead. It wasn’t his place or his time. He said it once before and he’d say it again — they weren’t there yet.

On the way to the elevators, Tony saw a familiar figure walking towards him from the other side of the hallway. He hesitated on pressing the elevator button door as he locked eyes with the woman, noting that she had done the same with him.

“Mr. Stark.” Helen’s steps were stead-fast and purposeful as she approached him.

“Doctor Cho,” Tony greeted in return, taking a step away from the elevator and towards her.

She was in front of him within seconds, her high-heels doing nothing to slow her down.

“You should know that I just got out of a meeting discussing Peter’s condition with the orthopedic and wound care teams. We believe a couple weeks here at the compound’s infirmary will serve his purpose for recovery. He’s already healing at a phenomenal rate, I think a few physical therapy
sessions and he’ll be good to go,” Helen explained, going on to hold a finger up in the air.
“However, while he’s here —”

“Run every and any test your heart desires,” Tony finished, keeping his chin held high. “He’s yours to poke and prod — in the best sense, of course.”

“Of course.” Helen fiddled with the tablet in both her hands, her manicured fingernails digging into the protective case. “I wanted to apologize. I’m sorry that I yelled at you.”

Tony nodded, stuffing his hands deep in his jeans pockets. “I’m sorry I gave you a reason to yell at me.”

The response earned him a small, faint smile from Helen. She bowed her head as she brushed past Tony’s shoulder and continued down the hallway, her shoes clicking against the marble floors. It wasn’t until she was a handful of steps away from him that she stopped, suddenly twirling on her heels.

“Oh, Tony?”

He turned to face her, his shoulders pulled back tightly.

She shook her head. “Never mind.”

Tony removed one hand from his pant pocket, gesturing it to her. “No no, you’ve more than earned it. What’s on your mind?”

Helen clutched the tablet close to her chest. “It’s...really none of my business.”

Tony smirked. “Everyone and their mother has been prying into my business as of late. Have yourself a gander.”

His voice was finally starting to regain some semblance of who he was, the suave and calm Tony Stark lacing each word he spoke.

Helen took that as her go-ahead to approach him, still clutching the tablet close to her body and dodging his direct stare by looking at the floor below.

“It’s just...” she started cautiously, measured. “I want you to be prepared for what’s ahead. For what’s in store for Peter. Being there for someone else’s recovery...it isn’t easy, you know. It takes more than just money and resources. It...requires a fierce commitment of sorts. Just make sure you’ll be able to do that for him.”

While her gaze locked intently on the ground, Tony hadn’t broken his stare with her. When she finally looked his way she was greeted to his eyes boring into hers, appreciative and thoughtful. The moment’s intensity beat out any uncomfortable tension between them.

“Thank you, Helen,” he said with a nod. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Helen tucked a strand of her black hair behind her ear and nodded herself, quick to walk away.

Tony considered her words as he stepped into the elevator, his thumb absentmindedly hitting the button leading to his workshop below. He scoffed, ‘a fierce commitment.’ That was a far cry his stagnant plan to distance himself Peter.

Empathize on the word stagnant, of course. He rubbed at the nape of his neck as slipped through
the still parting doors of the elevator, knowing full well he hadn’t done a damn thing to leave the kid, all talk and no action. And to think he positively hated people like that, the type who spoke trash but did nothing to back it up.

It was a thought he stored away for another time. Tony walked into his workshop with heavy steps, unable to hold back the heavy sigh when he sat down at the table where the red and blue Spider-man suit lay out, inside out with wires exposed.

He had been putting this off for too long. Pepper had the suit cleaned days ago, returning it to him where it laid untouched and in desperate need for repairs. With Bruce working on the new skin project for Peter’s leg, he didn’t have any excuses left.

“You have taken quite the hit, sweetie,” Tony muttered, pulling on a cable that he delicately, and with great hesitation, plugged into the suit’s mainframe.

It took longer than he was content with for the suit to come to life. His designs were meant to be immediate, fast, to start-up within milliseconds. By the time the suit connected with the monitor ahead, it had been a minute and a half.

The screen lit up with binary code and a soft, feminine voice came playing through the monitor speakers.

“Mr. Stark. It’s good to hear from you again,” Karen — the name Peter had given his AI — greeted. “May I ask what happened?”

Tony felt a small twitch of a smile pull at his lips. While he greatly missed JARVIS, he had Vision around to fill the void left behind from the loss of his first AI. And he adored FRIDAY’s smooth and pleasant Irish accent, designed to keep him calm in stressful situations.

But Karen was designed after his mother.

He didn’t get to hear her often — for the best, it wasn’t productive for him, stirring memories he didn’t think he’d ever fully recover from. When designing the suit he used a sample of his mother’s voice in hopes that it would nurture Peter, to prevent him from becoming cold and heartless in a business that wore down the good in someone’s heart.

He leaned back in his chair, savoring the warm flutter that settled in his chest.

“I was actually hoping you could tell me, Karen. Pull up the black box, please. Show the latest recording on the Baby Monitor.”

The binary code littering the computer monitor was replaced with live footage. It was full of static at first, flickering white distortion slowly clearing away bit by bit.

His growing sense of panic at what he’d see was quickly replaced with confusion, baffled at the sight of Peter’s reflection staring back at him — and the camera — from a full-length mirror.

“Hi. Hey,” Peter spoke aloud to the mirror, rubbing his hands together nervously. “Is this thing on?”

Tony quirked an eyebrow, unable to resist the smirk at how incredibly ridiculous the kid looked. The Spider-man mask covered his face while the rest of him was casually dressed — tan slacks and a t-shirt that read ‘I make horrible science puns but only Periodically.’

“Good morning, Peter,” Karen’s voice filtered through. “How was your final exam?”
Peter waved her off. “Oh, I haven’t taken that yet. That’s later today. I just wanted to practice a few things before I go to school.”

“Practice?”

Peter jumped from one foot to the next. “Yeah! So, Falcon — Mr. Wilson, I mean — Sam, he, uh, he and the others showed me these dance moves last weekend. I’ve been practicing them and want to see how they look. Okay, ready? One, two —”

Tony barked a laugh so loud it startled himself.

“You’re moves are very good, Peter!”

“Yeah? You think? Okay, check this out.”

He lowered his chin to his chest, shaking his head, huffing with laughter. It was — quite frankly, embarrassing to watch the footage. He hadn’t gotten such a good laugh from the Baby Monitor Program since the kid decided to impersonate Thor in his bathroom mirror with a meat hammer.

Tony ran his hand over the length of his chin, fondly remembering the night Peter spoke of. Jesus, how could he forget? The team had been at their best that night, playing childish high-school games, getting to know each other better, getting to know Peter better — hell, Natasha and the kid even danced ballerina moves in front of them all.

If he had known then how quickly things would have gone south...

“I apologize, Mr. Stark. The data systems have struggled to catch up on the correct calendar date,” Karen announced, skipping through the bedroom footage and fast-forwarding through the rest. “I have found the latest footage recorded through the Baby Monitor Program, would you like me to play it?”

The computer monitor paused suddenly, and he was quick to slide back into the rhythm of the task.


On cue, the footage played.

“Mr. Stark?” Peter shouted, his voice yelling over the wooden beams that collapsed to the ground. “Mr. Stark, what’s going on!?”

Tony steeled himself as the playing image appeared before him, the inside of a burning building causing his pulse to swell in a steady war drum on his temples.

Flames twirled around like enticing monsters through the lens of the Spider-man mask and suddenly Tony was back there again, he could feel it, he could smell the burning wood and pitch black smoke that filled his lungs with blazing ash.

But it stopped. As suddenly as the flames sizzled in view, the footage cut into static. Tony leaned forward, intrigued, clasping his hands together and letting his chin rest against his knuckles.

It would be minutes that he watched the technological snow flicker across the monitor, too consumed with his own memories to tell Karen to fast-forward. When the video began to play live footage once more, it came in the appearance of dissipating fog, slowly clearing the way of the mask’s lens.
“Kid, get out of there, now!” Tony’s own voice yelled through the coms, recorded from within. “Peter, NOW!”

The lens stared directly at a looming pile of Chitauri, tampered and re-assembled alien tech that glowed a scorching hot red.

“I can’t — I can’t!” The person wearing the mask yelled, sounding like Peter, acting in a panic. The eyes never looked away from the ticking time bombs. “I’m stuck, I — you gotta help me, Tony, I’m stuck!”

The footage froze at the exact moment the mask was removed, mid-air as it fell to the ground.

“**It would appear that my systems somehow went offline at this moment,**” Karen softly said, her tone oddly emphatic. “**That’s the last recording I have.**”

Tony knew the building would explode a second later. He knew the man impersonating Peter would have been teleported away before ever becoming victim to its deathly, blistering flames. He knew all this information would come later as hindsight and he hated, absolutely hated that he fell for their trick.

“I’m stuck, I — you gotta help me, Tony, I’m stuck!”

It replayed in his mind on a loop despite the fact that the screen ahead had frozen, the last frame of the footage a still-image that taunted him.

The mask fell mid-throw and the lens captured sight of Dmitri, his head covered in the pristine white Chameleon helmet, masking his identity.

Tony stared at him, at the helmet — his creation, and he sighed.

“I wish I had figured it out sooner, kid,” he muttered.

Hindsight was twenty-twenty, after all, and a useless tool at that. Though the monitor showed Dmitri in his prime, Tony savored the last image he had of the man, beaten to a pulp, drowning in the sea waters he tried to use to his own advantage. He hadn’t felt such hatred for someone since flying to Gulmira and giving those terrorists exactly what they deserved.

The doors *swooshing* open warned him to a new presence before he could be surprised.

“Boss?”

Tony smacked his index finger on the keyboard, quick to turn off the monitors and the footage that played.

He then promptly spun around in his chair. “Thought I wasn’t your boss anymore?”

Happy stopped in his tracks, shooting Tony an aggravated look. He readjusted the cardboard box that he held against his chest before walking closer.

Tony pointed a finger his way. “Hey, whatever happened with that casket? You return it?”

Happy shook his head rather exasperatedly. “No, Tony, I didn’t return the casket.”

Tony hummed in thought, tapping his foot on the floor to match each step Happy took towards him.
“What should I do with it?”

“I don’t know. Donate it?” Happy plopped the cardboard box down in front of him, purposefully avoiding the Spider-man suit that laid out on the table. “May wanted you to have this. It’s some things she brought back from Queens, says it important you get it.”

Tony feigned shock. “May? What happened to ‘the kid’s aunt?’ You’re on first-name basis with her now?”

Happy turned to leave, aggressively massaging his temples. “Why are you so annoying?”

“It’s my hobby,” Tony called out, wheeling his chair closer to the box.

“Find a new one.”

Happy didn’t waste any time leaving the workshop, clearly annoyed at having to run the errand to begin with. Tony had a gut feeling the irritation was more about being told he couldn’t legally fire so much of the SI staff without probable cause, because yes, he did listen to Pepper when she spoke about her day.

Either way, he’d catch up with the man later and figure out what to do with the casket another day. Donating it didn’t sound too bad of an idea.

Tony flipped open the sides of the box with ease, immediately greeted with the aromatic scent similar to old books and dusty paper. The box wasn’t big, maybe a little larger than a shoe box. With one fluid motion, he flipped it upside down, laying the contents on the table below.

He furrowed his brows; it only contained paper. Tony spread the belongings out with both his hands, noting that it was an array of different items — photographs, children’s drawings, and school reports.

“What’s going through your mind here, Ms. Parker...” he mumbled to himself, picking up the first heavy-weight construction paper that caught his eye.

It was a drawing of Iron Man, the suit flying in the skies, hopefully done by a child from the way it was crudely sketched. Tony cocked his head to the side wondering why the hell the color red had been replaced with hot pink. He flipped it over briefly, noting the scribbled signature of ‘Peter Parker’ on the back, before turning it around again and examining the work.

He remembered, not too long after the New York incident, his home address was flooded with drawings of the like. Pepper took it upon herself to handle the newly acquired influx amount of mail, always insisting she enjoyed looking at the drawings. Tony never considered that for as many as they received, there had to be an equal amount never mailed out.

On the bottom and in pink crayon were the words “Ned took my red crayon. Iron Man is supposed to be red!” and next to that — in red crayon, “Ha-ha! All your red crayons belong to me!”

The handwriting on both was nearly indecipherable.

Tony shuffled through a handful of childish drawings, slightly amused at just how fascinated the kid was with Iron Man at such a young age. The more he looked through them though and he quickly realized it wasn’t just him the kid looked up to — Captain America, Hawkeye, Hulk, Black Widow, they all got the crayon treatment at some point.

Tony absentmindedly wondered if Ben and May were the type who pushed him to trash the
A quick glance from the corner of his eye caught sight of the Spider-man suit, answering the question for him.

He traded the elementary grade drawings for what was marked “Peter Parker 6th grade report: Why the Avengers are my heroes.” It was given a B minus, grammar and spelling mistakes circled with red pen and a remark in the upper corner from the teacher praising his efforts.

A bundled stack of four-by-six photographs seemed to be the last of the boxes contents, kept in a worn and falling apart drug-store envelope for same day prints. Tony shimmied the items out, only to notice they were kept together with a paperclip. He could feel on the very back of the stack was a piece of folded notebook paper, hidden beneath the array of photos.

He removed the paperclip and began shuffling through them, all seemingly taken around the same time. In fact, a good handful was just of a young kid wearing some cheap Iron Man merch, the toy helmet barely fitting his small head.

Tony stopped shuffling when one photo in particular caught his attention, showcasing a young Parker family. May, with whom Tony correctly assumed was Ben, stood side-by-side. In front of them both was a much smaller Peter, grinning wildly into the camera.

His brow scrunched up in a suspicious frown. He recognized the background in the photo, where they stood. It was hard not to, it was a very memorable night. Stark Expo 2010. That had to make the kid, what? Tony mentally did the math, coming to the age of eight. The little Peter he stared at was eight years old.

Tony ran his finger along the photograph, half the gloss lost due to age, the edges bent and the bottom corner torn. Something more tugged at his memory.

He laid the photos out, letting the piece of notebook paper sit to the side. The photos seemed to be kept together as a set, all taken of this one family trip. The young kid wearing cheap Iron Man merch, hoodie and fingerless gloves with the toy helmet too big for his head — Tony realized it was Peter.

He picked up the photo. ‘Wow, kid was scrawny even back then.’

Tony pursed his lips, humming. The thought ate away at him, the memory on the tip of his tongue. There was more to this, there had to be. It wasn’t that the Parker’s had gone to a Stark Expo — though he, of course, wished it hadn’t been that Stark Expo.

So much had happened that year with nearly dying, nearly losing both Pepper and Rhodey in his life, dealing with SHIELD using Natasha to spy on him — nearly dying, that served to be mentioned twice. For a fleeting moment he almost gave up, sure he wouldn’t be able to recall such a tiny detail in the mass of events that had occurred.

He leaned back in his chair, defeated, sighing. God, what a shitshow of a night. His head fell back and he stared up at the ceiling, recalling the disastrous monstrosity that was Stark Expo 2010. Those damn Hammer drones sent out to target Iron Man; they were lucky no one else managed to get seriously hurt in that cluster fu —

“Nice work, kid.”
Tony shot forward in the chair.

The photograph of Peter laid on-top of the scattered prints, Iron Man helmet barely fitting his small head.

“Huh,” he found himself saying aloud, staring at the picture with his jaw slacked open.

It was an inappreciable moment in time, surely only stored away because his problems nearly got a child killed. He knew that he’d never put the two and two together had it not been for those photos, telling him a story he hadn’t realized he needed to hear.

The scrap piece of notebook paper called out to him. Tony snatched it a bit too hastily, suddenly needing to know what the last item would tell him.

It was folded three times in and Tony had to shake it flat once opened. His eyes scanned the cursive handwriting, his heart beating heavily in his chest.

“Tony,

One way or another, you’ve always been in his life. The only difference now is you have a chance to make that count.

I trust you’ll do the right thing.

May Parker.”

His eyes darted from the note to the stack of photos behind it. Tony slowly relaxed in his chair, never tearing his eyesight from either of the two.

Recalling that memory was like watching another life rip open before him at the seams, a time where he only lived to feed his ego and feed it well. He realized back then that allowing his pride to dominate, coddling it as a mechanism of self-protection, was nothing more than allowing weakness to masquerade as strength.

The photo surprised him, shaking loose latent feelings he hadn’t realized were even there. A paternal aspiration everyone had made clear to him but he had so adamantly denied. Here he was, trying to determine how best to structure the boundary of his relationship with Peter and meanwhile, it had already been created for him. Like a line scratched out in the sand reclaimed by the shifting tides, the choice was already made.

‘Fine,’ he thought, smacking his lips and folding his arms over his chest. ‘Time to regroup.’

He could still negative this. He could still make this work.

Besides, back in the base, he would have done anything for a second chance, a breath of opportunity to start again. To give Peter everything he needed, the whole world, the life he deserved. The photos provided a new outlook, a window where he had originally thought there was a wall. He saw that he had the power to be the architect to his own life, to build reality to the desires he always wanted.

He had that now. What was he to do with it?

Tony cracked a smile.

Whatever it was, whatever it required, he was ready for what came next.
And that concludes the fourth segment.

I just wanted to give a big thanks to everyone supporting this fic. I haven't had the time to personally respond to a lot of comments recently but I want you all to know that your words of encouragement are really helping me through a tiring time. I feel so thankful and blessed to have made it so far into this story. I'm so happy that it's enjoyed by others. The response is more than I could have ever asked for and you all are truly amazing, every single one of you.

Final chapters ahead, ya'll.

See you there.
“We’re all set here in the operating room. Transport is about to bring him down now, better hurry if you want to wish him good luck.”

Tony blew a sigh through his cheeks, weaving in and out of the crowds that filled the busy hallways of the compound. His cell phone was tucked tightly between his shoulder and neck while his free hand tossed a dark blue stress ball in the air, repeatedly catching it like the act was second nature.

“You sure it’s ready to go?” he nervously asked.

Bruce chuckled on the other line. “Never seen you so apprehension about your own tech before, Tony.”

He caught the stress ball and squeezed it tightly. “Banner —”

“Listen,” Bruce started. “The ‘new skin’ passed every test with flying colors. You wanted the external fixation device off his leg, right? Now’s as good of a time as any.”

The large floor-to-ceiling windows he passed by in the hallways glared the afternoon sun against his face, briefly making him regret leaving his workshop in the first place. Tony quickly whipped out his yellow-tinted, wire-framed glasses from his blazer pocket and slid them over his eyes.

“Question of the rhetorical variety —”

“No,” Bruce sharply interrupted.

Tony pulled a face. “Hey! As a physician —”

“I don’t have an M.D.”

“As someone with seven PhD’s—”

“I’m a gamma physicist, Tony,” Bruce stressed. “But even with the medical credentials I have, we both know this invention is a large leap in biomedical advancements. You’re worrying for nothing. We’ll remove the external fixation rod and slip the nanite wrap around his leg and it’ll do exactly what you designed it to — promote tissue healing and cartilaginous callus formation.”

“Right. Sounds like a piece of cake.” Tony’s words failed to convey any hint of confidence, the rubber ball in his hand already squeezed down to half its size.

“He’ll be fine,” Bruce reassured. “Not to mention, if this does what we want it to, it could do wonders within the health care industry. I gotta say, it’s…it’s quite impressive.”

Tony turned the corner with a huff. “Yeah, well, I suppose it’s only fitting I right the wrongs of my last invention with something worthwhile.”

Cutting through a pack of SHIELD trainees, Tony was quick to catch sight of a familiar teammate standing amidst the blue-uniformed soldiers. “Let me know how it goes when you’re all done,
“Okay?” he said, quick to wrap up the conversation.

Bruce let out a hum, ending the call with a prompt, “Will do.”

Stuffing his phone down into his pant pockets, Tony proceeded to place two fingers against the tips of his lips, letting out a sharp whistle that pierced through the air.

“Hey, Wilson!”

Sam looked over his shoulder, stopping his conversation with some no-name face Tony had never seen before and was sure he’d never see again. It was one of the disadvantages of sharing the Avengers facility with SHIELD — trainees came and went faster than his money at a local charity event.

A beat passed where Sam said his goodbyes to the fresh-faced soldier, reluctantly approaching Tony with arms folded tightly over his chest.

“You know,” Sam huffed a breath of annoyance, sternly stating, “I’m not some dog for you to call over, Stark.”

Tony patted him on the back. “No, you’re a bird. Follow me, walk and talk.”

Though Sam heavily rolled his eyes, he did just that, crossing through the crowd and stepping into the nearest elevator together. Sam wasn’t surprised at the floor number Tony chose, equally unsurprised when he hurried to close the elevator doors before anyone else could step in.

“Hey!” A voice called out breathlessly.

Sam stepped forward. “Hold the —”

“Oh no,” Tony’s voice was monotone and sarcastically flat, his finger repeatedly pressing the close door button. “Can’t stop it. Sorry, better catch the next one.”

The doors slid shut and an aggravated curse could be heard as the elevator began to whir into motion, gracefully riding them up the building.

Sam stared at Tony, eyes narrowed with a mixture of aversion and annoyance.

Tony shrugged, deadpanned. “What?”

Huffing with disbelief, Sam shook his head and turned back to the doors in front of them. He wasn’t surprised at the behavior, all too characteristic of the Tony Stark he knew. The billionaire had gone back to hiding behind a pair of flashy sunglasses and wearing a blue blazer that covered — wait, was he wearing a t-shirt with a kitten on it?

Sam pursed his lips and relented, dropping a bit of the tension that resided in his shoulders. Despite the air of cockiness the man had, he tried to tell himself Tony wasn’t all too bad at the end of the day. Even if it was Steve’s voice in his head insisting it.

Speaking of — Sam kept his eyes locked straight ahead as he asked, “You hear anything from Steve and the others?”

Tony shook his head. “Nope, not a peep. Why, you worried?”

Sam scoffed. “The last thing I heard was that they were detained at SHIELD national headquarters after taking the blame for something we all decided to do. Yeah, I might be a little concerned.”
“Eh, all wish-wash,” Tony dismissed with a wave of his hand. “Rogers is like an endangered species, Fury would never lay a hand on him.”

The elevator dinged and the doors split open to the floor Sam expected them to arrive at, the crisp blue med-bay walls and sharp antiseptic smells instantly greeting them.

“What do you want, Stark?” he asked, sounding distinctly unimpressed as they both exited the elevator.

Tony stuffed his hands deeper into his pant pockets. “I need your expertise. Cap said you’re good with trauma, PTSD, all that good stuff?”

Sam nodded. “Yeah, I’ve dipped my toes in it before. Who’s asking?”

“No one specifically,” Tony strained to sound nonchalant as they took a corner. “But between you and me, I think the kid might be having some trouble dealing.”

Though Tony remained vague, Sam didn’t need to ask for specifics. It had barely been two weeks since Peter was back but he was far from surprised to hear there might be difficulty in dealing with the aftermath.

Hell, Sam needed to hear the story a few times over just to grasp the finer details. He couldn’t imagine dealing with something so intense, especially at Peter’s young age.

Still, he threw caution to the wind. “What makes you say that?”

“Call it intuition.” Tony warily said, barely managing to side-step a nurse that quickly cut between the two of them.

Sam hummed in response. “Well, you would know first-hand what it’s like being kidnapped and held hostage.”

Tony blew out a deep breath, keeping his strides long and fast through the infirmary halls.

“He’s putting on a good front. Or maybe it hasn’t hit him yet, I don’t know, maybe both.” Tony stopped so abruptly that Sam needed to walk back a few steps to stay by his side. “I need a favor.”

The request was so sudden that Sam didn’t have time to hide his look of surprise. He turned to face Tony, tilting his chin up with suspicion.

“Depends on the favor.”

Tony rolled his eyes and shook his head, specifically nodding down the hall. Sam realized then that they were standing a few feet away from Peter’s med-bay room, a hustle of nurses inside blocking their pathway from entering.

“Help him?” Tony’s tone had taken on a different sense of priority, sounding more sincere than Sam had heard him speak in days. “Guide him through this. Give him some...voice of reason or whatever you call it. Kid’s good with looking out for the little guy but someone needs to look out for him too.”

Sam furrowed his brows. “You think that’s going to be a problem for him? PTSD?”

It was a hard pill to swallow, clearly one Tony didn’t want to address. He shook his head, shrugged and excessively cleared his throat as he stared down the hall.
“No idea, just want to be prepared.” His voice was ragged, strained with stress.

Despite their differences and conflicts in the past, Sam didn’t have it in him to stay callous, no matter what his personal stance was with the man. He forced a tight smile and nodded.

“I’ll do what I can.” Sam pointed a sharp finger towards Tony. “But I’m doing it for Peter, not for you.”

To Sam’s surprise, Tony removed the wire-framed glasses from his face and tucked them back into his blazer pocket.

“I would hope as much,” he earnestly said, thumb pointing down the hall to the hustle of activity that came emerging from Peter’s room. “You going to wish him good luck?”

Sam looked over Tony’s shoulder, watching as numerous different techs in scrubs began to wheel the hospital bed out of the med-bay.

He smiled and held Tony’s gaze for a brief moment. “I think he’s got plenty of good vibes coming from you and his Aunt.”

Tony nodded, as if to say ‘suit yourself’ before they both departed in opposite directions, Sam disappearing somewhere down the hall.

He made a mental note to follow up about the situation at another time — for now, he focused on approaching the departing gurney with as much composure as he could manage. With luck, he caught sight of a familiar head of hair peeking through the crowd of medical staff.

“Ms. Parker,” Tony called out.

May shot her head up at the sound, removing one of the two hands she had gripping the gurney’s railings to wave him over.

At first unsure about getting any closer to the scene, Tony managed to wiggle his way through the crowd and stand at the top of the bed where Peter laid. He watched the kid’s hazy brown eyes drift back and forth like a loose ping-pong ball, eyeing the busy activity around with him both wonderment and confusion.

“...wha’s goin’ on?” Peter asked, his voice thick and mildly incoherent.

Tony smirked, following the moving gurney down the hall while May patted her nephew’s arm.

“They already gave him something to help relax him. He’s just a bit confused,” May whispered his way before she turned back to Peter. “You’re fine honey, we’re getting that super uncomfortable metal out of your leg, remember?”

Peter sluggishly blinked. “...’s my leg better?”

“Not quite, tough guy,” May chuckled, rubbing his arm with reassurance. “But Tony has something that’s way more comfortable for you, remember?”

Peter eyed May curiously. “He does?”

She nodded, giving him an encouraging thumbs up.

Peter lazily smiled, the grin all teeth. “...mr. ’tark ‘s the best.”
May failed at suppressing her laugh, one that Tony hadn’t realized was because of him. It wasn’t until he noticed that his jaw was hanging loose and his openly exposed eyes had widened comically that he moved quickly to recover, looking away to where she couldn’t see him.

Still, May smiled in his direction.

“Yeah,” she softly agreed, walking along the gurney with her eyes set on Tony. “Yeah, he is.”

Tony ducked his head low, realizing that Peter was so out of it he didn’t even know who was standing near the top his head. He stayed quiet as they wheeled the gurney down the halls, only stopping as they came to the double doors that led down into the operating rooms.

May gave his arm one more supportive squeeze before calling out, “I’ll be there when you wake up sweetie, okay?”

Both were almost positive Peter didn’t hear her as they wheeled him away, the gurney eventually disappearing behind automatic doors that slid shut with an air hum.

Tony and May stood side-by-side as they watched through clear-glass doors.

“Helen says that after this he’ll have another week in recovery, a week or so in P.T and then he’ll be good to go.” Tony spared her a glance. “Back in your trustworthy hands once again.”

“Damn,” May cursed with a snap of her fingers. “And here I was getting used to not having to cook every night.”

Tony managed to stifle his laugh and disguise it under a poorly received cough. “You cook every night?”

“Ya know,” May went on to say, folding both her arms over her chest. “It’s amazing how you can follow a recipe to the tee and it still turns out bad.”

Tony kept his walnut date loaf comments to himself, deciding that no matter how carefree the conversation, there was no safety in joking about a woman’s cooking. Pepper Potts lesson number fifty-six.

“So what's the deal, Tony Stark?” May asked, her tone more easy-going than he had heard in days, her hip playfully swinging into his. “We doing this or not?”

Tony frowned and blinked. “Huh?”

May arched an amused eyebrow, turning on her heels to casually and slowly walk away. Tony matched her pace, no hurry to leave and no other place to be.

“You pawning him back off to me or are we going to manage some poorly structured semblance of support in his life?” May’s question came with a quiet smile.

Tony shrugged, hands reaching deep into his pant pockets. “Be honest May, do you really want me in his life? After all that’s happen?”

They walked down the hall together, one slow step after another. And though Tony appreciated her thoughtfulness and persistence — the drawings she gave him still sitting in his workshop as a harsh reminder to keep his pestering anxiety at bay — he couldn’t help but remain a skeptic. It was in his nature, his blood. Even now, after all they had gone through, it was still easier to run away than stay.
Thankfully there were people like May nearby to put a stop to that. She hummed loudly, with exaggerated consideration.

“I don’t know, you could be useful,” she drawled out, blithely. “Besides, I think he listens to you more than he listens to me.”

This time, Tony did laugh. “If that’s the case then I’m deeply disturbed by how little he listens to you.”

“Yeah, well, you know how it is.” May sighed, wrapping her arms tightly around herself. “I honestly think it’s just a woman thing. Even when Ben was around, he always listened to him more. I think he just needs that fatherly figure in his life, you know?”

Tony stopped suddenly and May cracked a smile, staring down at her shoes.

“God, you are not subtle, are you?” His smile bled out the bite in his words and May finally looked at him, losing her composure just as she thought she would.

“Tell you what,” she managed around the chuckling. “I’ll make an agreement with you.”

Tony bit his lower lip somewhat comically. “Mhmm, I’m not allowed to make those without Pepper around to pre-approve.”

“You keep him protected, the best that you can — unforeseen circumstances aside, and I have no problems letting him continue…whatever this is.” May pointed a finger in the air. “On one condition.”

Tony arched his eyebrow expectantly, waiting for her to finish.

The finger she held up changed directions, gesturing emphatically towards his chest. “You are responsible for buying his backpacks from this point forward.”

Tony was momentarily stunned.

“That’s…it?”

She gave a curt nod. “That’s it.”

For a moment, he was at a loss for words. All things considered, her request was on the very bottom of things he’d consider unreasonable. Here he was ready and willing to get the kid a full ride through college — who was he kidding, he was still planning to do that, MIT or not. And all she wanted was a few school supplies?

Consider him getting off easy.

“Okay then,” he finally answered, hand extended out to her. “Shake on it, Mrs. Parker?”

She unwrapped her arms from around her waist, giving him a firm handshake that he accepted, patting the cusp of her elbow in return. Not even a few seconds later and they resumed their leisurely walk down the corridor.

“I know I’ve been preoccupied with the new skin for the kid, but you been okay?” he asked, considerate to look at her when he spoke. “You been taken care of here?”

May nodded, though she seemed slightly unsure of herself. “Yeah. Yeah, I mean, if I’m honest I’m a bit out of my element here…this place is huge.”
“Almost as big as Tony’s ego.”

Both spun around at the same time, caught off guard by the sudden presence behind them.

Tony was the first to recover, glaring daggers in Rhodey’s direction.

“I resent that,” he whined, affronted.

“I couldn’t help but overhear, May.” Rhodey stepped forward, purposefully ignoring Tony’s childish cry. “I’m heading down to the cafeteria for some lunch, would you like to join me?”

May smiled warmly and nodded at his invitation. “That’d be fantastic, James. Thank you.”

“James —” Tony looked between the two with a sense of feigned confusion. “Who’s James?”

“Very funny, Tony,” Rhodey said, his legs braces whirring softly in the quiet med-bay hallway. He led the way with his arm wrapped around the small of May’s back.

Watching them walk away, Tony cupped two hands over his mouth as he called out, “Bring her back by ten!”

He could practically see the visible annoyance from Rhodey’s posture, making him crack an amused grin. The two had barely gotten down the hallway though when May turned around to face him.

“Oh, Tony! I forgot to mention. The backpacks?” She quirked an eyebrow at him and smirked. “You might want to shop clearance, seeing as Peter loses his about twice a week.”

Tony blinked, baffled by what clearly was not a joke and yet in every way should have been. His eyes narrowed a bit when he realized the woman was dead-serious, never once turning around to laugh, chuckle, or give any indication that he hadn’t just made a huge mistake.

Rhodey and May departed past a corner and Tony stood frozen, confused at her admission.

“How the hell...” he trailed off, flabbergasted.

Needless to say, he stored away future plans to lecture a certain irresponsible teenager about not losing personal property. And possibly buy a stock of Hello Kitty backpacks, depending on how gracious he was feeling at the time.

Who was he kidding? He had texted Pepper about the Hello Kitty backpacks before even leaving the infirmary.

When Tony had mentioned Banner and his team was going to make something to ‘knock the kid off his ass for days’, he didn’t think it would happen so literally.

“Are we sure he’s not in a coma?” His question only received a heated side-glare from Helen, one that he chose to innocently ignore.

“I mean, in all honesty Tony, it’s a good thing,” Bruce said from across the room, logging different vitals and numbers on the electronic chart in his hands. “It could also just be a part of his
physiology, his body’s way of conserving energy that needs to be spent on his healing factor. Either way, he’s improving at a phenomenally fantastic rate. I wouldn’t be complaining.”

Tony wasn’t — complaining, that was. They had gotten the metal off the kid’s leg without a hitch and all that was left was an undetermined period of convalescence. And besides, Bruce had warned them that the newly created painkillers would produce side effects they weren’t aware of.

But sleeping? The kid was clonked out, no noise too loud to wake him up, no amount of jostling enough to stir him. At one point Bruce had accidentally dropped his tablet on the kid’s chest — “Steady hands my ass, Banner.” — and the kid barely made a sound. Tony didn’t think it was physically possible to sleep so damn much.

Perched on the ledge of the bay window, a spot that had become his semi-permanent make-shift workspace, Tony let out a sigh. He resumed focus on his own tablet, the only thing providing him any source of entertainment, if he could go as far to call it such. Pepper had pawned off a good amount of Stark Industries business for him to get around to, and after a few failed attempts he discovered there was no pawing it back off. He had the emails in his inbox as proof.

Still, if he had known he’d end up this bored, he wouldn’t have agreed to babysit in the first place.

“It wouldn’t be babysitting,” May stressed, bent over as she gathered belongings into her purse.

“What’s your rent cost?” Tony already had his phone out, mobile bank account opened and ready to go. “I’ll pay it for the next six months.”

May rolled her eyes. “Tony —”

“The next year. The next two years,” he offered to no avail, his eyes watching as the woman began to cross out of the room. “C’mon May, you don’t need to go back to work so soon. Your kid needs you here, let me help however I can.”

“You want to help?” She swung her purse over her shoulder, one eyebrow arched high in a way that reminded him way too much of Pepper. And he didn’t mess with Pepper for a reason. “Be here with him. Because I don’t need your money to pay our rent. I need you to help watch him for me while I go earn my money to pay my own rent.”

Tony pocketed his phone away, the hand then going to run down the length of his chin. He couldn’t argue with her — if there was one revelation he had over the past couple weeks, it was where Peter got his stubbornness from. No matter how many suave, professional business tactics he used, May always stood her ground.

She stopped short of the exit, doors swishing open for her as she turned back to face him.

“I know you want to help, Tony. I appreciate it,” she said, sincerity lacing her tone. “But being there for Peter means being there when the storm has settled. There’s no Damage Control or clean up crew you can send for this one. You just have to be present.”

And that’s how he found himself on babysitting duty.

Okay, so maybe calling it babysitting was being over-dramatic, but what was he supposed to call it when Pepper had blocked his attempts at leaving the compound? The woman even got low and dirty by using Rhodey against him, his friend practically stalking his every move to make sure he didn’t leave the building.

Tony adjusted himself on the window ledge, index finger deftly scrolling on the touch screen of
his tablet. Of course, if he really wanted to, he could find a way out. He knew it, they knew it, there wasn’t anything physically keeping him bound to the facility.

What could he say, with a place a hundred acres large and a lap pool, there wasn’t much of a reason to leave.

That’s what he told himself, anyway. Because he wouldn’t admit to a single soul that he was babysitting a sleeping rugrat.

It had been so long since Peter was last awake — truly awake, not doped-up mumbling about Lego’s awake, that Tony almost didn’t notice when he began to stir. He didn’t hide his surprise when he saw first hand those brown Bambi eyes flutter open, looking around the room with a sense of confusion.

He eyed the kid for a moment, making sure his movements showed coherency, not mere shifting and adjusting before falling back asleep. Sure enough, Peter’s arm flailed out to the guardrail, gripping the plastic and lifting himself higher on the already slightly raised bed.

The look of shock when he caught sight of Tony, perched in the bay window of the infirmary room, was enough to make the billionaire grin.

“Mr. Stark?” Peter half-greeted and half-groaned, sounding way too similar to what Tony expected a teenager being woken up on a weekend morning would sound like. Grumpy and slightly pathetic.

“Ahhh,” Tony said, setting his tablet aside. “Sleeping beauty finally awakens.”

Two balled, closed fists rubbed furiously at his eyes as Peter adjusted himself on the bed, slow and cautious movements a testament to his injuries.

“You been watching me sleep this whole time?” he asked, clearing his throat and giving a lopsided smile. “‘Cause I gotta be real with you, Mr. Stark. That’s kinda creepy.”

Tony shook his head, five different layers of exhaustion masked behind a half-hearted smirk. “Kid, my legs would be suffering from some irreversible muscle atrophy if I just sat around and watched you sleep. You have been out. Like a light.”

Peter froze, seemingly both surprised and relieved at the information.

“For real?”

Tony nodded, hopping off the window ledge and leaving his tablet behind. “Trust me, you more than needed some serious R & R.”

Peter couldn’t disagree with him. He ran his hands down his face, patting at his cheeks to make himself feel a little more awake.

While his mind felt foggy and a bit fuzzy, he had to admit that he felt immensely better. His muscles weren’t crying in agony anymore, now a dull ache and tenderness that spoke to him each time he moved. His head wasn’t screaming with a piercing buzz and he relished in the effect of not feeling like a fire was burning up in his core.

As if reading his thoughts, Tony wagged his index finger up and down Peter’s body, eyebrow arched with concern. “You good? Senses all in check?”

Peter thought for a moment, mentally checking himself over before nodding. “Yeah, I think
so...wow!

His eyes widened and for a moment Tony panicked, stepping faster to cross the distance of the room.

“What? What is it?”

“Mr. Stark, no offense...” Peter slowly started to say, gulping hard. “You look like crap.”

Tony stopped and laughed. He wholeheartedly laughed, head thrown back with a belly-deep cackle that made him glad Peter’s senses were no longer heightened in the way they had been.

Peter frowned. “What’s funny?”

“Kid, if you think I look like crap, you should really look in a mirror,” Tony commented smugly.

Peter chuckled and shrugged. “Eh, I have an excuse.”

“Yeah? So do I.” Tony took long strides up to his bedside, arms folded over his chest. “I’m pretty sure this whole fiasco has put ten years on me. I’m going gray ‘cause of you, ya know.”

Peter scoffed, waving him off. “You were graying long before me.”

Tony cocked his head to the side. "Oh, so now he has a mouth?”

Peter grinned sheepishly and Tony approached him with a sense of false sternness.

“Watch it, Parker,” he warned. “I swear, you’re going to be the death of me.”

“Nah, it’ll probably be your cholesterol or something,” Peter joked cheekily.

“You are insufferable.” Tony’s insult was matched with an eye-wrinkling smile, and as he found himself nearing Peter’s bed, he wagged a non-threatening finger at the kid. “This time, and this time only, you get a pass on being a smart-ass.”

Tony collapsed into the upholstered armchair at Peter’s beside, slouching without care. Instinctively his fingers reached to unbutton the blazer jacket that he wasn’t wearing, his nails grazing against the cotton of his polo shirt instead. He settled his hands in his lap, knotting his fingers together to distract himself.

“You scared the devil out of me, kid,” he found himself softly admitting, changing the atmosphere in the room all but immediately.

Peter nodded, swallowing hard.

“I know. I’m...I’m sorry.” Peter waved his hand in the air, the most he could without the flexibility of his wrists. The sleek, black bracelets stood out among the crisp white bed sheets around him. “For...you know.”

Tony studied him for a moment, trying to decipher the exact meaning behind the sudden apology.

“Can’t say that I do,” he flatly stated, his fingers drumming along the armrest of the chair. “It’s been a hell of a couple weeks around here so you’re going to have to narrow that broad statement down some.”

Peter turned his head the other way, the tension in his jaw showing from the grinding of his teeth.
“This all happened because of me. I shouldn’t have disobeyed orders out there. You and Mr. Rogers both told not to go into that building and I...I shouldn’t have gone into that building.”

Tony bit back his sigh, going instead to absentmindedly rub at his left arm. Though he had a gut feeling the topic would eventually come up, things had been so crazy he had almost forgotten about the catalyst to their chaos, the event that started all of this.

It was no surprise Peter still remembered. The kid was too similar to him, they were much too alike. Which meant they shared the same self-destructive, guilt harboring tendencies as well.

“Yeah, well, it’s not all your fault.” Tony sat up straighter in the chair, this time letting out his sigh. “It’s not your fault at all, actually. So don’t sweat it.”

Peter shook his head, hands wringing together. “If I hadn’t fallen for that trap they wouldn’t have —”

“Not all true,” Tony interrupted.

Peter turned his head around, eyes locking with Tony’s.

“What happened, Mr. Stark?” he quietly asked, chewing his lower lip nervously.

Tony had retold the events countless times over, to May, to Rhodey, to Pepper — but he never fathomed the intensity of dread, the tight knot that formed in his gut, all at the concept of telling Peter. Still, he didn’t want to be the solitary keeper of their story; it belonged to them both.

“It’s a hell of a tale, kiddo.” Tony considered shifting the responsibility for another day. He ended up asking, “You sure you’re up for hearing it?”

Peter nodded vigorously, almost seeming excited.

“Well...” Tony sat forward in the chair, gesturing his hand out to Peter. “Take some of the stress off me. What do you remember?”

There was a pause as Peter let the question settle, thinking it over with the same intense concentration he would have in Decathlon practice. His brown eyes darted back and forth as he tried to recall the memories that were hidden beneath a near-death experience and mixed with heavy medications and incoherence. It really had been a long couple of weeks.

“The burning building.” His voice broke through the tense silence. “It being a trap...there were all these Chitauri heads about to explode, and Mysterio and Dmitri were there and — Dmitri was this Russian guy who —”

“Yeah, I’m familiar,” Tony explained.

Peter nodded, enthusiastically interested. “Oh, okay, cool, cool.”

He didn’t continue. Instead, he stared at Tony, eyes wide and expectant, silently urging him to explore the answers he hadn’t been aware of.

Tony held an open palm in the air. “Hold your horses, I’ll tell you. Finish your side first.”

“Right, uhm, okay, so...what was next...what was...” Peter clucked his tongue and tapped his loosely curled fist against his chin. “Right! They chloroformed me. I woke up in that evil lair of theirs —”
“Evil lair?” Tony barked a laugh. “You watch too many movies, Parker. It was a piss-poor built and abandoned facility that OsCorp didn’t want anyone to find out about.”

Peter scoffed out a ‘pshh’, insisting, “Totally an evil lair.”

“Whatever floats your boat.” Tony leaned back into the chair, crossing one leg over the other. “That must have been some hell of chloroform to knock you out. Some of my top tier scientists have struggled days on end just to get basic painkillers working for you.”

Peter’s fingers began to fidget with the edges of the blanket laid out across his lap, finding tears in the seams and pulling on strings without even looking at his hands.

Tony did, however, and as he stared at those hands he noted the sudden bout of anxiety that riddled Peter’s nerves. It was hard not too, he had seen it in himself too many times before.

“Well, I think it was more than just chloroform. It made me...” The flood of shame and fear that tinted his voice came and went before Tony could call him out on it. “They had me against the wall. I couldn’t break the bands and they said they were using some experimental metal to hold me —”

“Adamantium,” Tony finished, the words escaping his mouth before he could stop himself. Call it one of his flaws, it was too difficult not to butt in when he knew something others didn’t.

Peter eagerly sat up. “Dude, how do you know all this?”

Tony gestured another open palm in the air, signaling for him to be patient.

“Keep going.”

Peter sighed. He leaned back against the bed, his right arm gently and loosely wrapping around his midsection in hopes it would quell the pang of his injuries.

“Mysterio, he used this...this gas on me. My arms were pinned, I couldn’t get the gas mask off. I think it knocked me out for a while. It was...” Peter’s voice dipped low, quiet. “I kept hallucinating. It was scary.”

Peter ducked his head, cheeks reddening with what Tony assumed could only be embarrassment. He felt his blood pressure rising a bit higher, his heart rate spiking in a way that made his left arm twinge and tingle.

He remembered back in Germany when Peter referred to a sixty-five-foot tall Ant-Man as ‘scary.’ Suddenly this held so much more weight. They drugged the kid — his kid. Anger that Tony hadn’t felt in days suddenly surged through him with a renewed fire.

“I’m sorry, Pete,” he said, soft and sympathetic.

Peter nodded, staying quiet.

Tony clasped his hands together, fingers entwined and his thumbs rolling over each other as a nervous habit. “Do you remember anything after that?”

“Yes,” Peter admitted, looking over towards Tony. “Yeah, I got out.”

Tony cocked an eyebrow in surprise. “You did?”

“Well, I got free,” Peter corrected, adjusting himself slightly in bed and wincing at his own
movements. “I pulled myself away from the wall. I couldn’t break the straps but I could break the
steel it was attached to. Once I broke away I tried to run but then...then I got stuck in this fun-house.
It was this —”

“No need to explain.” Tony internally cursed his big mouth, quick to add, “Keep going.”

“Come on, I want to hear your side now,” Peter insisted in lieu of continuing. “How do you know
all this, Mr. Stark? What happened when you guys found me? How did you find me? Did you—”

“Finish first,” Tony sternly instructed.

Peter casually waved him off. “Eh, I got free, Dmitri caught me, I guess you found me after that.
What was the fun-house? How’d he do that? Was it more nanites? ‘Cause that would be so co—”

“Kid.”

Tony’s tone said more than his words needed to. Emphatic yet remorseful, resigned at the
knowledge of what had occurred, of what they had gone through.

Peter found himself shrinking against the mattress of the bed, suddenly feeling more exposed than
he initially had with a mere hospital gown covering him up. There was no hiding from something
Mr. Stark clearly already knew.

“Dmitri caught me,” he managed, his voice turbulent at the edges.

Peter fidgeted with his hands, keeping his head low where Mr. Stark couldn’t see his eyes. The
way he bit into his lower lip didn’t go unnoticed, his bottom teeth digging deep into the soft pink
tissue.

“I tried fighting him off, but...” Peter tapped his fingers into the open palm of his left hand. “I
just...I couldn’t. And we were underwater, it wasn’t like I could outrun him...” His voice remained
hollow, resonating with memories he clearly didn’t want to remember.

Tony felt his heart rate spiking again, only this time it almost burned in his chest, self-hatred
kicking into overdrive for not getting there sooner. When he realized Peter had nothing more to
say, he asked the one pressing question that had been on his mind for days.

“So how’d you get shish-kebabed?” Tony had his legs uncrossed by now, leaning forward to better
hear Peter’s hushed answers.

“My spider-sense wouldn’t work,” Peter answered, stiffly, each word tense. “It was that fog they
used, just like at Times Square, it...it muted my spider-sense. I didn’t see him coming. I didn’t...”

Peter didn’t finish. He couldn’t, his breaths were suddenly coming in harsh and deep, his chest
rising and falling with such effect that his anxiety practically pulsed from his very being.

It was so acutely visible that Tony leaned forward, fast to respond with a firm hand on the kid’s
shoulder.

“Hey, hey, it’s okay,” Tony assured, tightening his grip. “You’re okay now.”

Despite his words, Peter shook his head. “I thought I was going to die, Mr. Stark.”

The response was so blunt and honest, Tony didn’t know what to say.

He counted his blessings that he didn’t blurt out ‘thought you were going to die, too’ and ‘well, you
They both were silent as Peter took a moment, needing a solid minute to untangle himself from the thoughts and emotions that drained his energy. Tony remained patient, letting the tension clear away naturally, slowly, one second at a time.

“When I woke up, I was pinned against the wall again,” he explained, back to wringing his hands together. “I couldn’t… I couldn’t move. I couldn’t do anything. I couldn’t save myself.”

For a long while, Peter didn’t say anything else. Tony let the moment be his, aware of how hard it could be to get the basic sentences out when they held so much weight, so much negativity. When Peter did finally speak though, Tony would have paid millions for it to be anything but what he said.

“So much for being better than you.”

Tony’s hand fell from Peter’s shoulder, his forehead creased, his head shaking. “Peter—”

“It gets blurry after that,” Peter was quick to interrupt, his voice oddly soft and fragile. “Mr. Rogers was there? It was loud…and cold…and very wet…we were swimming? It’s… it’s jumbled.”

Tony leaned back into his chair, fingers drumming on the armrest again. If that was the extent of Peter’s memories then he had an entire novels worth of information to fill him in on. He let out a long sigh, momentarily reluctant only at the sheer impossibility of finding a starting point of events.

“Maybe I can clear it up for you.” Folding his arms across his chest, he began with, “For starters, Dmitri? Spy.”

Peter rolled his eyes so hard Tony was worried they’d pop out of their sockets. “Of course he was! That is so stereotypical.”

“He had infiltrated Stark Industries about six months ago,” Tony explained. "That’s how he knew about the Chameleon helmet, he had broken into my database and stolen the blueprint files.”

Peter frowned, confusion causing his muscles to tense up. “But I thought Mysterio stole the helmet?”

Tony tilted his head, his expression answering it all. Both him and Peter would agree that the look said ‘Do you really think that purple-caped dumb-ass could do more than tie his own shoes?’

“Nuh-uh!” Peter’s jaw dropped, his voice pitching an octave higher than normal. “They were working together?”

Tony gave a sharp nod. “Mysterio, a.k.a Francis Klum, was in cahoots with Dmitri on the whole thing.”

“I don’t get it,” Peter admitted, slowly shaking his head. “What was their plan?”

Tony looked down, trying his best to ignore the tight knot that began to form in his gut. He wondered how many times Peter had to ask himself that question, bound by captors who didn’t necessarily even want him, rather used him.

Like Sam had said, he knew all too well what that felt like.
He rubbed the nape of his neck as he stared at his feet, struggling to spit out the honest truth of the situation.

“They wanted me dead,” Tony finally answered.

Peter had a look that could only be classified as absolutely puzzled.

“Then why’d they man-nap me?”

Tony shot his head up, eyes wide and bewildered.

"Man-nap?"

“Yeah, I'm spider-man," Peter clarified. "Not spider-kid."

Tony gave a short huff of laughter. “Agree to disagree.”

Peter slowly ran his fingers through his tangled, bed-headed hair. Even with the beat that fell between them, he couldn’t seem to understand the information that was passed on.

“I’m—I’m super sorry, Mr. Stark, but I’m so confused. They said they were using me for leverage or—or collateral or something. What does that have to do with you? What did that have to do with me?”

Though Tony hadn’t thought about that specific part for days now, he had a response roaring and waiting to go.

‘Don’t know, who knows, glad to have you back though!’

He let his chin rest against his hand, absentmindedly tapping his thumb against his jaw. Keeping the truth hidden wouldn’t do them any good, no matter how uncomfortable it made him feel. Tony knew he owed it to them both to respect the reality behind what occurred.

If anything, he owed it to Rogers. After all, the man was off God-knows-where spinning a whole different tale to the big-dogs at headquarters about what had happened.

He made a mental note to chastise the good American soldier for lying, whenever the hell he decided to return.

"They thought...they thought that taking what was closest to me...would destroy me,” Tony explained, his words having texture, somehow sticking to his throat. “Maybe I’d off myself, who knows. Then Dmitri could slip in and take over the company, with my face of course. He wanted the money — they both did.”

The raw honesty seemed to catch Peter by surprise. He stared at Tony with shock and awe, pausing for a moment as if to wait for the ‘Just kidding! They were HYDRA agents on a mission and you got unlucky. Go figure.’

When it never came, his expression only seemed to fall more somber.

“Whoa,” Peter finally managed.

“Whoo,” Peter finally managed.

“‘That’s just the tip of the iceberg, kid,” Tony dryly stated. "Wait til I tell you all about the real magical wizard. Who you owe a thank you, by the way. He’s the reason we got out of that dump. Otherwise you, me and good ‘ol Captain America would be swimming with the fishes right about now.”
“What happened? I mean, to Mysterio and Dmitri?” Peter rushed to ask.


Peter didn’t push for more of an answer. It was hard to say why, maybe it was because of the flash of darkness he saw cross along Tony’s eyes, or simply from the harsh realization of what had happened. He stayed quiet, seemingly content with the explanation.

Tony knew he wasn’t dumb though, the exact opposite in fact. The kid was smart as hell and even heavily medicated, he could put the two and two together. A moment passed where Tony could see the truth dawn in his eyes. He hated knowing that a part of his innocence was lost in that moment, gone at the death of two men, criminals or not.

Peter looked at him with hesitation. “They said you thought I was dead? Was that true?”

Tony could tell it was something he had been dreading to hear. Peter’s muscles visibly tensed up, his shoulders pulled tightly and the crease along his forehead somehow deepening. Not to mention, his voice became so quiet Tony almost couldn’t hear him.

He knew the Ferry incident, albeit months ago, still hung heavily over the kid’s head. Tony had naively hoped his words back then wouldn’t ring to their current situation. The way Peter carried himself though, it told him there wouldn’t be any escaping that moment for some time to come.

“Unfortunately.” Tony affirmed, suddenly sounding painfully tired as he avoided Peter’s gaze. “Worst two days of my life.”

Peter paused, the air between them heavy with an unspoken torment.

“I’m sorry.”

“I have heard more apologies from you this past week than the entirety of my life twice over,” Tony tried hard not to sound annoyed. “What could you possibly be sorry for this time?”

“Dying…” Peter said, his fingers using exaggerated quotation marks on the word. “Putting that on your conscience and all…I didn’t mean to…I’m sorry.”

Tony found himself staring at the wall straight ahead, lost in his thoughts and at a loss for words. He anticipated the moment coming up but never truly prepared for it, dodging reality like the procrastinator of emotions he was.

Putting that on your conscience — Christ this kid knew how to get under his skin. Had he known then that his words would be used against him in this way, he’d never have said them.

Problem was, he had never expected to get so close to Peter back then. It was his past-self screwing over his future-self, as per usual.

Tony swallowed his guilt, repressing it for a later time and an audience who could better handle it. A freshly recovered from near-death teenager was no victim to unload his problems out on.

“Don’t give it a second thought, kid. I’m not even upset about it.”

Peter sat up straighter in bed. “Does that mean everyone else thought I was dead too? Do they still think I’m dead? Did I have a funeral? Did Flash show up —”

“Cool your jets there, spiderling.” Tony had to practically push Peter back against the mattress to
still him, any attempt he had at playing it cool failing stupendously. “You’ve been out of it for a while but you were only missing for a couple days. We never spread word, never posted an obituary. Your aunt was the only one to be told.”

Peter suddenly paled at the knowledge, burying his face into his hands with muffled words that could barely be made out. “Oh man, she must be — I can’t — I can’t believe I put her through that!”

“You didn’t do anything, Pete,” Tony remarked with a protective sternness. “Shit happens. I’m just glad we were able to start looking for you as soon as we did.”

Peter looked up, skeptical. "I—I don’t think I understand, though. If you thought I was dead...why were you looking for me?"

“I’ll tell you what.” Tony cleared his throat and swiped at his nose with his thumb. "You got a question, just answer it with ‘magical wizard.’ Nine times out of ten, you’ll be right.”

The anecdote held more truth to it than Peter would ever know.

“I wanna meet him,” Peter drawled out, his voice brightening.

Tony shook his head and rolled his eyes. “I’m sure you do.”

"Does he have magic like Wanda?” The spark of excitement returned as Peter smiled ear-to-ear. "Cause that would be so cool !”

Tony gave a tight-lipped grin, having been so wrapped up in the recovery of their rescue mission that he almost forgot about their newest Avenger.

“Speaking of the witch, she’s with him now.” He tried to remember what Steve had told him the night that she left, managing to answer with, “Training or some nonsense.”

Peter’s bottom lip stuck out with a pout. “Aw man! I die and miss all the fun stuff.”

“Kid...” Tony exasperatedly dragged his hands down the length of his face. “You’re going to be the death of me.”

"You already said that,” Peter flatly replied.

Tony’s jaw slackled disbelievingly. “I take back that pass on being a smart-ass.”

“Uh-uh!” Peter squawked coyly. “I earned that fair and square.”

“No you did not,” Tony calmly explained. “That is something that is gifted, not earned.”

“Even worse then! You can’t take back a gift.” It was Peter’s turn to a wag a finger in his direction, faking indigence with a look Tony was sure he had reserved for any time his spider-butt got into trouble. “A gift is a gift for a reason, Mr. Stark.”

Tony shrugged. “I’m not too sure about that. I’ll have my legal team look into it.”

Peter laughed and Tony couldn’t help but chuckle with him, the moment carefree and void of the suffocating stress he had been consumed with over the past couple of weeks. It was nice, a little breather from the pressures of the real world he had been struggling to deal with.

Even as he went on to explain the finer details of their rescue mission, the room lacked any tension.
It helped greatly that Peter wasn’t immune to the pure star-struck wonderment at hearing Tony’s stories, listening intently to how they had increased the tensile strength on his web fluid, how a magical wizard got them in and out of the place, and most of all —

“You finished the nano-suit!?” he exclaimed, nearly jumping out of bed with excitement. “Can I see it!?”

“Sorry, bud.” Tony gave a small shake of his head, his finger lazily pointing down to Peter’s leg. “It’s on you.”

Peter frowned, looking down at his leg before back up at Tony. “What?”

“What was left of it — used it for that sock you’re wearing,” Tony explained. “It’s a nanite cast, designed to promote bone healing. I’m sure Bruce will be thrilled to show you the x-rays of how mangled your leg was. He said it was in eight pieces or something, shattered like a stale piece of peanut brittle.”

Peter didn’t seem to be paying attention. As Tony rambled on, he removed the blanket that covered his leg to better stare at the thick black and silver device that he wore around his calf. It was every sense of the word futuristic, conforming around his leg from the knee down, fitting snugly like his suit. If he stared at it long enough, he could see lights run up the length of the sleeve every so often.

“No way,” Peter lamented, looking over at Tony sadly. “But you put so much work into that!”

Despite Peter’s protest and remorse for the forsaken project, Tony couldn’t muster up a will to care.

“Well, you’re more important,” he answered honestly. “Besides, I can make another suit. I can’t make another Peter Parker.”

Tony hadn’t meant to create a moment between them, the words having slipped out before he realized what he was saying. Peter stared at him, at first confused and slightly startled, before he slowly let himself relax and smile.

It was a look so warm, Tony was sure it could melt even the coldest of hearts. While he couldn’t take the words back, he quickly realized that he didn’t even want to. He tried to remember the photos he had sitting in his workshop, to remember that as uncomfortable as the emotion felt, that he wanted this.

And besides, Peter didn’t seem to be fighting it. Kid was glowing brighter than the sun.

Still, Tony had a reservoir of how many sappy moments he could handle and there was a slender red-head woman he needed to store some emotion away for.

He cleared his throat and slapped both hands on his knees, standing up with a grunt.

"Listen, I’ve started to make some repairs to your suit. It’ll be out of commission for a while — like you,” The way Tony stressed the fact didn’t go unnoticed, Peter already seeming bummed out at the idea of being bedridden. “Until it’s up and running again I took your girl and programmed her alongside FRIDAY. For security reasons, she’ll only respond to me, you and May. Your own personal servant, enjoy it while it lasts.”

Peter didn’t seem to catch onto what Tony was saying, his brows furrowed with confusion as he watched the man head for the exit. He was about ask him to clarify when suddenly, a familiar
voice rang through the ceilings.

“Hello, Peter.”

A twinkle of excitement glinted in Peter’s eyes, a spark Tony hadn’t seen in way too long.

“Hey, Karen!” he beamed, starting up at the ceiling despite there not being a physical entity to look at. It reminded Tony all too much of a child looking to the skies above, amazed at the mere sight of the stars in space.

“You two behave now, is that clear?” Tony joked, stopping short of the exit when the doors split open for him. “I don’t want to hear complaints from the nurses that this room is noisy with dirty high-school gossip.”

“That should not be a problem, Mr. Stark,” Karen coolly responded. “Peter has not spoken much regarding school since informing me of his crush on — ”

“Ah-ah-ah, Karen! Dude!” Peter squeaked, willing himself to sink into the mattress of the bed.

Tony chuckled from across the room, unfortunately breaking his illusion that he could hide beneath the pillows and blankets surrounding him.

"Get some rest, kid. You have quite a recovery ahead of you.”

As Peter turned to look at him, Tony was helpless to the toothy grin he received, a smile that no amount of his money could buy.

“Thanks, Mr. Stark,” Peter said, hand motioning to the ceiling. “You didn’t have to...thanks.”

Standing at the doorway, Tony suddenly felt the compulsive urge to say more, to push for more. They had barely scratched the surface of previous events and still had so much more to discuss, time they needed to spend creating a map for the roads ahead of them.

But seeing Peter smile, overjoyed at the simple sound of his AI — Tony didn’t have the strength to take that moment of happiness away. The struggles of life could wait, if only for another day. The kid could be happy for right now. He deserved that much.

Tony nodded, giving a faint wink back at him. “That’s what I’m here for.”

Peter watched him casually leave through the automatic doors of the infirmary room and kept his eyes locked there long after he departed, out into the hallways and where he couldn’t be seen anymore. It wasn’t until Karen spoke again that he finally tore his gaze away.

“How are you feeling, Peter?”

Peter glanced up to the ceiling by habit, the voice coming through the speakers in the walls and catching his attention.

“Better,” he answered. He kept it to himself that he felt childish for wanting Mr. Stark to stay. The man was busy, after all, and had spent plenty of time around him already. Luckily, he had been given something else to occupy his time. “Ah man, it’s good to hear your voice again.”

“Yours as well. I was very worried about you,” Karen answered.
Peter brought his blanket further up his chest, brows furrowed as he asked, “Can you even get worried? Like, as an AI and all.”

“I am programmed to be more alert and aware of sensitive situations when the time is called upon. Mr. Stark has informed me of the recent events and as such, those features have been activated.”

Peter nodded. “Cool, cool. Hey, remember that creepy Bond villain guy?” He fiddled with the edges of his blanket, pulling at the seams. “Totally kicked his ass.”

“So I’ve been informed. I’m very proud of you, Peter.”

Karen’s voice was full of pride, reminding Peter a lot of his aunt. He wasn’t sure how Mr. Stark managed to create an AI with such eerily real emotion, but he sure didn’t mind.

“Ah, thanks.” Peter ducked his head low, hiding his blush from no one but himself. “You’re awesome, Karen.”

A warm comfort he hadn’t feel in days seemed to wash over him at once. It was odd how Karen had become one of his closest friends over the past year, even though she wasn’t a real person. For a moment back there, he had been worried she was destroyed, lost in the flames of fire. Hearing her voice managed to bring back some semblance of normal to his day, something he hadn’t realized he so desperately needed right now.

“How did you do on your midterm finals?”

Peter frowned, suddenly remembering the tests he bailed on weeks ago. “Oh...yeah, I guess May’s gonna have to talk to the school or something. I was busy being dead and all.”

“Mr. Stark has informed me your death was not actually real.”

Peter chuckled, her naive answer fitting to her personality. It was certainly the clueless, robotic AI that he had come to know so well.

“Yeah, it wasn’t,” Peter admitted, grinning as he looked to the ceiling. “But it’s kinda fun to say.”

“Well, I for one am happy that you are not actually dead,” Karen responded. “After all, YOLO.”

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Chapter End Notes

Oh wow, look at that. I referenced something from 185k words ago.

Jeezepezylouisyholymoly, you guys. Thank you so much for following along through this roller coaster ride. Your patience for this is astounding! It was very...strange writing this chapter, because although this has been outlined from the very beginning, I never expected the fic to hit this length. It’s pretty bad when you start considering
eliminating dialogue because it’s referencing something from “so long ago.”

So, anyway. If you frequent my Tumblr, I’ve answered a few questions regarding the progression of Peter’s PTSD in this fic. A handful of you awesome peeps have (rightfully) questioned how/if Peter’s mental recovery will take place with so few chapters left in the story.

To make it short, it kinda won’t. It’ll be addressed over the final chapters, more than once. As everything in this story, it’s a slow progression – I really strive hard to make everything feel and seem natural. If you’re worried that he’s just suddenly going to “be over it”, he won’t. If you’re worried that he’s going to suddenly fall into a deep dark pit of depression, he won’t. Either way, ultimately, Peter’s mental recovery in dealing with all that happened won’t be handled here in this fic.

That’s all I’m going to say about that.

Long over-due conversations are taking place and no one will not be excluded from that. Bald eagles cry at the return of a certain someone next chapter.
Growing Pains

Chapter Notes

Fun nerd facts!

In the newer Spider-man comics, J Jonah Jameson does actually podcast as opposed to being involved with the Daily Bugle.

I know a lot of people don't consider Michelle Jones to be MJ (I'm one of them, surprisingly enough) However, what I've gathered from the Far From Home trailer is that the MCU will be sticking to their guns to in calling her MJ. I do not see her as a replacement for Mary Jane nor do I consider her a new version of Mary Jane. I do consider her to be Michelle Jones. But for the sake of continuity, I rolled with the nickname. Not that it affects this story in any way whatsoever.

Also, my timeline from Peter’s MCU canon birth-date (August) is clearly different from this story (April). In my defense, he has no canon birth-date in the comics and the Far From Home trailer came out way after this was written.

I love you guys so friggin much. I hope there's still an audience here as we come to an end -- let me know what your thoughts are, I live for feedback!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There was a continual stream of people in and out of Peter’s infirmary room over the course of the following week. Tony had gotten used to seeing different staff members of the like popping their head in for necessary tasks; nurses for wound care, techs for lab work, therapists for P.T — it
wasn’t a surprise to see someone else occupying the room alongside the recuperating kid.

Seeing Steve Rogers, however — that was a surprise.

Tony came to a sudden halt as the sliding doors spread open for him, barely managing to keep his jaw from slacking open. It may have been early in the morning, and he may be far from a morning person to begin with, but he had gotten enough sleep last night to know that his eyes weren’t deceiving him.

Sure enough, Steve looked up from his seat at Peter’s bedside and gave an acknowledging nod.

“He’s pretty out of it, from what I can tell.” Steve’s words were hushed in tone. “I had faith you guys would figure that out.”

In the half-minute that it took him to absorb the surprising sight, Tony went from frozen in the doorway to quickly shaking himself of his stupor, sauntering into the room with a false sense of indifference. Instead of heading for the empty chair across from Steve, he stationed himself where multiple monitors lined up flush against the wall, fixating his attention on the medical records filed away.

“Should have told me you were coming back. Would have thrown you a party,” he dryly stated, typing on the keyboard, distancing himself for as long as possible.

Steve managed a small smile. “That’s why I didn’t tell you.”

“Oh cut the crap, Rogers.” Tony craned his neck, ensuring that Steve could see his dramatic eye roll. “I’ve seen your dancing can-can girls from the forties. You love to put on a good show.”

Steve’s chuckle practically broke through the growing tension in the room, nearly eliminating it entirely. Tony glanced at him from the corner of his eye, noticing that his smile seemed a little less forced this time around, more natural, dare he say relaxed.

At the very most it gave him a sense of what to expect, what type of atmosphere was about to lay its groundwork between them. He was already caught off guard by the man’s sudden and unannounced return, not to mention it had been weeks since they spoke to each other. And it wasn’t like their last days spent together were picking daisies from the garden.

Tony found himself clicking away on the keyboard in front of him, reviewing information he already knew or could easily assume. Anything that kept him distracted.

It didn’t take long for him to notice that his presence had made little to no difference for Steve. The soldier stayed seated in the plush, upholstered armchair at Peter’s bedside, his focus was unbreakable on the teenager that was so out of it Tony was sure an air horn couldn’t wake him up. Blissfully asleep and heavily medicated at that, a tell-tale sign from large, red sticker slapped on the front of his IV bag, pumping drugs intravenously through his body.

Tony glanced at the clock near the bottom of the computer monitor; it would be a couple more hours before the kid would wake up. They had only been using the heavy stuff to get him through the night, that and rough patches of physical therapy. Looking to the bay window, the sun had barely started to rise, a pinkish-orange glow cascading into the dimly lit room.

“He looks a lot better,” Steve finally commented.

Tony jerked his head away from the window and towards Steve. He looked the man up and down, examining him. Despite the fact that he seemed well put together, barely a hint of a five o’clock
shadow on his face and his shoulders taunt like he could run a marathon, the half moon crevices resting underneath his eyes didn’t go unnoticed.

“I made a promise to you, Tony. I plan to keep it.”

Tony cursed internally, blowing a sigh through his cheeks that he liked to believe released what frustration he had boiling inside. It was unlikely, but it at least got him moving. A few clicks of the mouse — delete this, delete that — he was quick to wipe away any traces of his access on the computers before reluctantly approaching Peter’s bedside.

“He’s doing a lot better,” Tony engaged, folding his arms over his chest. He was sure to stand a few feet away from the empty chair on the opposite side of the bed, across from where Steve sat. “It got close there for a while but...he pulled through.”

Steve hadn’t looked away from Peter, a worn, hardened emotion coating his expression. “He’s tough.”

Tony nodded. “Like you wouldn’t believe.”

Whether it was exhaustion at play or something more, Steve kept his focus on Peter, his glare somehow both intense and fragile at the same time.

It was his eyes that gave it away for Tony. Something more laid beneath the surface, something that flashed beneath the fierce arctic blues containing an untold story begging to be heard. Something haunting, remorseful.

If Tony didn’t recognize it in himself, he probably would have never even caught sight of it.

“You need to be with Peter right now. Stay there, it’s for the best.”

He had been replaying that conversation in his head for weeks now, over-analyzing it in a way he did most things. Yet he never considered what he’d say when Rogers returned. He rubbed harshly at the nape of his neck — that was poor planning on his part.

Tony bit the bullet and sat down across from Steve, though not before pulling the chair back a few inches. The distance helped him with...whatever this was. Insecurity? Shame? He shrugged it off for another time never to be dealt with.

“So not that I don’t normally take glutinous pleasure when SHIELD gives you a time out, because trust me, I do —”

“We’re fine,” Steve abruptly cut in. “Everything’s fine.”

Tony arched an eyebrow. “When are things ever ‘fine’ with SHIELD?”

For the brief moment that followed, Steve was silent. His lips parted with words that died on his tongue, his mouth running dry as he struggled to form a sentence. If his hesitance caused any suspicion on Tony’s end, the man didn’t let it show.

Finally, he shrugged, his movements slightly tight. “What’s there to say? They wanted to hear a story, we gave them one.”

The corner of Tony’s mouth curled up despite the deep-seated tension churning within in. “You, Cap? The man who always plays by the rules went off and told bald-face lies?”
“Yeah, well...” Steve tore himself away from his inner musings, looking at Tony with a weathered smirk. “Sometimes the rules aren’t made with the best interest in mind.”

Tony laid his hands down in his lap, fingers entwining as he leaned back into his chair.

“So the three musketeers got away scot-free then?” he asked flatly, lifting one leg up and letting it rest on the bottom frame of the hospital bed.

Steve felt a quiet, exasperated smile pulling at his lips. “Would you believe that they already had a Doctor Strange on their radar? We went in thinking magic would be the hardest part to convince them of. I guess after Asgardian God’s and enhanced individuals, nothing surprises them anymore.”

“Huh,” Tony acknowledged, giving a noncommittal shrug. “Go figure.”

Steve crossed his arms over his chest, mimicking Tony’s body language. “Calling in a favor with Fury certainly helped.”

Tony tried to play dumb, keeping his expression neutral up until the moment Steve quirked a coy eyebrow.

“What can I say?” Tony gestured his arms out in presentation, managing to sound and appear completely unapologetic. “I’m not one to sit back and watch the shit-show, I like to be a part of it.”

Steve shook his head with a tired chuckle, his gaze once again falling down to where Peter rested. Tony darted his eyes between the two, caught off guard by the soldier’s sudden fascination in what he considered to be a snooze-fest of a sight. Emphasis on snooze-fest — Peter was clonked out. If there was one thing Tony found to be the most boring thing in the world, it was Stark Industries board meetings and a sleeping Peter Parker.

He was close to making a joke about it, something about crossing the line of concern and creepy. He decided against it when that something flashed across Steve’s eyes again. What was that? Guilt? Commiseration?

There wasn’t a chance to ask about it. Steve uncrossed his arms from his chest, looking Tony square in the eye with a sense of pity he had become all too familiar with.

“Then you should know that Fury is going to want Peter registered under SHIELD’s directory of mutants.”

“What?” Tony straightened immediately, both feet planting on the ground as if he was about to shoot up from his chair and storm out of the room in protest. “Whoa whoa, wait, what? No, the kid’s not — he’s not running under SHIELD’s wing of propaganda, he —”

“Not immediately,” Steve interrupted, taking notice of Tony’s abrupt change in mood. “Legally, they can’t force anything on Peter until he’s eighteen. You know that. His identity can stay secret as long as he wants it to be, but SHIELD will get tabs on the Spider-man business. Fury promises it’s only registration, nothing more.”

Tony scoffed, the sound of distrust heavy and thick. “You’re believing in promises from the man who faked his own death?”

“There are different rules for us, Tony,” Steve insisted, his voice strained but firm. “We don’t have a choice in this, Peter won’t have a say, not after...”
The unspoken hung in the air, teasing the anticipation of resolution only to dissipate in the white noise that stretched between them.

Tony didn’t rush to fill in the missing gaps. After all, there wasn’t an official name for the incident that started it all. The Brooklyn bridge accident? The fire mishap? The OsCorp tampered Chitauri catastrophe? He shrugged it off; it was easier to leave the blip unnamed. The less attachment to it, the better.

“You accidentally get a minor killed once and they never let you forget it,” Tony wearily joke, trying to casually brush the subject away. They had time to deal with that another day, another month, hell even another year. Time had become his mantra as of late. As long as they had time, everything else could wait.

It was almost as if Rogers could sniff out his internal struggle though, eyeing him with a tongue that fought to stay quiet.

“Even if that had happened...” Steve started to say.

Tony managed to hold off on his eye roll. The man was so predictable.

“The burning building?” Steve brought up the sensitive subject with caution, tilting his head low with sincerity. “It wouldn’t have been your fault. It wouldn’t have been anyone’s fault.”

For a fleeting moment, Tony couldn’t find the strength to answer. There were few occurrences in his life that he never wanted to experience again, and the day on that bridge was certainly high up on his list. And although Rogers hadn’t been around for his little melt-down, he was sure the man wouldn’t be surprised to learn he tried to create unwanted distance between himself and Peter.

“A little more practice with that speech and you might sound like you actually believe it,” Tony bit back, his words dripping with sarcasm.

Steve remained unfazed by the retort. “I know it’s hard for you to believe, but it’s true. We try to save as many people as we can in this job. Sometimes it doesn’t mean everybody.”

Tony drummed his fingers alongside the armrest of his chair, never once making eye contact with Steve as he spoke. Too raw, too personal. It took every ounce of his energy to ignore his gut screaming ‘walk away, Stark. You’re free to walk away, you don’t have to talk about this.’

He stayed seated instead. A dull ache formed in the back of his neck, a headache growing almost like punishment to his actions. He had been given weeks to stall on the conversation and though Steve’s arrival was a surprise, one he greatly did not appreciate — birthday parties were the only surprises he enjoyed, if that — it was time they hashed it out.

They had been sitting in limbo too long, since the night Peter revealed his identity to the team, since the moment this all formed into the nightmare it had become.

“But you were right.” The words tumbled out of his mouth before he could shove them back in. “His life is my responsibility. He goes down and that’s on me. Always has been.”

Steve seemed to soften a little bit. The thunderous tension clouding him wavered with the hint of a smile perking up his expression. “It won’t always be. He’s a kid now but give it a few years. He’ll grow into his own shoes.”

Tony swiped at his nose with his thumb, shifting uncomfortably where he sat.
“You know, his Aunt’s encouraging this schmuck now,” he mentioned, eyeing Peter as he slept in the bed, absentmindedly wishing the kid’s gentle snores would distract him long enough to stop blabbering on. “I can’t stop thinking that...that I signed his death warrant by even getting him involved.”

To his surprise, Steve replied without missing a beat. “You haven’t.”

Tony shot his head up with an incredulous look. “I’m sorry, aren’t you the same guy who patronized me for recruiting a fifteen-year-old-teenager?”

Steve gave a one-shouldered shrug. “I’m not as proud as you are, Tony. I’m able to admit when I’m wrong. And you were right, I didn’t know Peter, not then.”

“You don’t know him now,” Tony insisted, shaking his head to clarify his point. “I tell him to stay out of this mess and he’ll jump in head first.”

“It’s not a mess,” Steve corrected, a small apology laced into his tone.

“You’re right,” Tony interjected. “It’s a war.”

He stared at Steve with cold eyes, knowing they both echoed the argument in their heads, bitterly wondering what kept them from staying on the same page for longer than two seconds at a time. And though their disagreement back then had ended with harsh words and the slamming of doors, Steve didn’t engage in hostility this time around.

With a tight-lipped smile, he met Tony’s gaze head-on. “Then I guess we need all the soldiers we can get.”

Tony stared at him, his expression grim, somber. He ignored the swell of his pulse that increased with an onset of anxiety, his face hot with irrational rage. The kid threw a couple good punches and suddenly Rogers was all for tossing him into the battlefield?

’Bullshit,’ he thought. Peter wasn’t a product of war. Despite having recruited him for bigger things, the kid was too good for that.

“Peter’s not a soldier,” Tony vehemently said. “Hell, he’s barely a man and yeah,” he turned to the bed where Peter laid, pointing his index finger at the sleeping kid. “If you can hear me I said that, twerp.”

Steve chuckled, smiling with a warmth that seemed sincere and yet in every sense of the word pissed Tony off.

“What?” he snapped, looking away from Peter with a scowling frown.

Steve held his hands up in a placating manner. “It’s just nice. Seeing you let someone in like this. You’re different around him. Better. You care for him, a lot.”

Tony rolled his eyes, stiffening. “For Christ’s sake — lay off. He gets the same treatment from me as anyone else.”

“I’ve seen you interact with others, Tony. This ain’t that.” Steve jerked his head towards Peter and the bed they sat around, as if further indicating what he meant. “It might be presumptuous to say that we’ve all noticed it.”

Tony squinted his eyes in a way that highlighted his discontent. “Presumptuous is correct. Just
because those super-solider legs of yours are capable of jumping to conclusions doesn’t mean you should, Rogers.”

The only response Tony received was Steve’s smile, the grin well-intended and still managing to further irritate him. It didn’t help that the man could say absolutely nothing and still speak a thousand words with one single look on his face. Tony had gotten used to that look being one of disappointment. He wasn’t too sure what the expression said now.

The overhead paging system outside the room sounded, muffled from where they sat, and the quiet beeps from Peter’s heart monitor chimed in a rhythmic pattern. The companionable silence went on for an undetermined length of time, a pause in conversation that Tony was fine with until Steve cleared his throat to speak.

“You know, I’ve come to realize something about you,” he started, straightening in his chair. “You use things to express yourself and your…” Steve paused on the word, “affection towards others.”

Tony gave a short, derisive snort.

Steve held up a hand to forestall his dispute.

“Think about it,” he encouraged. “When you wanted to show the world that Pepper was your girl, what did you do? Buy her a ring. When you wanted to keep the team together, you gave us a home. And Peter? The question becomes what haven’t you given him. A suit, your tech, your time. Nearly gave him your life and expected anyone else to do the same.”

Tony’s jaw clicked with tension, so tight he could hear his teeth grinding against one another. He would really love to know what gave everyone the idea that they could suddenly pry into his personal life. Sure, he had become uncharacteristically close with Peter but this type of response was borderline problematical, meddling he’d only dealt with by the paparazzi. Meddling from his team, people who normally couldn’t care less about him outside of Iron Man.

He sighed, ultimately viewing it as his punishment for hiding Peter away for so long. Out of what he considered to be the pure kindness of his heart, he gave Steve a pass on the matter. It was only fair, the man had been absent for most of the ‘let’s bug Tony Stark about his relationship with the spider-kid’ fiasco.

“Okay?” Tony conceded after a brief pause, shrugging with an exaggerated annoyance. “Isn’t that what this whole shindig is about? Willing to lay our lives down on the line to avenge those who deserve it?”

“Tony,” Steve chided, the bite in his words drowned out by his smile, his head once again nodding towards the sleeping occupant in the bed. “This ain’t that.”

Tony relented, his fingers harshly rubbing at his temples as he muttered a few foul-mouthed curses underneath his breath. He had gotten sloppy at hiding things in his old age. Or perhaps it was Pepper who had him slipping up — that was good, he blamed it on Pepper.

“So I have a soft spot for the kid,” Tony griped, propping his feet up on the bed’s lower frame again. “Big deal. That doesn’t mean I recruited him so he can die before his eighteen birthday — hell, I don’t want him to die at all.”

Steve nodded emphatically. “None of us do.”

Tony kept his head low, eyes locked on his shoes and the floor tiles below that. Though Rogers was being a bit smug — “That man could eat an apple and you’d call him smug, Tones,” Rhodey
once told him — he couldn’t dispute that the team’s act of convergence was an added benefit. Witnessing them come together the way they had, desperate to help, determined to save the kid — it was unexpected, for sure, but he couldn’t express his gratitude enough.

His eyes looked up while his chin stayed close to his chest, seeing Peter and softening at the light snores that came through his slightly parted lips. Who would have thought the kid could have such a way with people?

“You say he’s in this for the long haul, right?” Steve asked, tearing him away from his thoughts. “No convincing him otherwise?”

“Tried it once,” Tony stated flatly. “Didn’t end well.”

Steve nodded in sympathetic understanding. They both remembered all too well Tony’s tale of confiscating the suit and the fallen building shortly after. Between everything they had been told and personally witnessed, there was no doubt that Peter had the strength to endure any situation he was thrown into.

Still, there was no reason he should have to go at it alone.

“Then it’s best he’s got a group of people watching his back.” Steve smiled, whereas Tony looked at him like he had grown two heads. “A family to take care of him.”


“Yeah, well...” Steve shrugged, his grin slowly widening to show the whites of his teeth. “Aren’t they all?”

Tony studied him for a moment, his gaze hard, concentrating as if he could detect any lies solely from the way Steve appeared.

There was nothing, not even a hint of deceit. His words seemed authentic and genuine, no whistling bells or red flags drawing Tony’s attention. It seemed that his hesitancy in Peter’s involvement had dissipated almost entirely since their last pow-wow’s together.

Tony counted that as a win in his book, especially after all they had dealt with lately.

“Yeah,” he mumbled, nodding. “Yeah, I suppose they are.”

It was crazy to think that months had gone and passed since each escalating event they had dealt with, each layered on top of one other — the Accords, Siberia, the repeal, Barnes’ exoneration, rebanding the team — yet it was in that moment Tony finally felt closure to it all.

Whether or not he had lied to himself out of self-preservation stood to be debated, having continuously said he’d moved on, was done and over the whole deal. Finally feeling the weight lifted off his conscience, finally feeling free of past years burden — he could breathe a little easier with a little less baggage to carry around.

Tony found himself snapping his fingers in a way that hyped him up, a faint frown creasing his brow as he struggled to put his words in the correct order before they came out of his mouth.

“Listen,” he started, adjusting awkwardly in his chair. “I’m not good at this stuff so just stay quiet for a hot second —”
“Don’t, Tony,” Steve interrupted, shaking his head. “You don’t have to.”

Tony frowned, annoyed. “Bold move for not knowing what I was going to say.”

Steve nodded, his smile growing. “True. But I have a feeling I know what it would have been. And I would do it all over again in a heartbeat.”

Tony raised an incredulous eyebrow. “Which part?”

There was a pause, one Tony noticed that went on a millisecond too long. Steve never looked away from him, unwavering, blue eyes soaked with kindness only he could obtain.

“All of it,” he answered.

Tony’s lips twitched into a smirk.

The sun outside had come to a full rise, the half-drawn curtains behind Steve letting in a sharp stream of natural light into the room. Tony hadn’t even noticed, running his fingers through his hair as he sagged back into his chair.

For what it was worth, Steve seemed to relax as well.

It was crazy how their blaze of glory had turned ordinary, a near-death experience once again becoming a tale of action and reprieve. Of course, there was still a load of baggage to unpack between them. Tony dreaded when they’d eventually have to swallow the pill and come around to that, but for now, it wasn’t a priority.

For now, they could take baby steps in forming a new bond, one they could build on common ground.

“Well...you still deserve a thank you.” Tony pulled in a deep breath. “Without you, there’s no way we’d have gotten half those doors open in the base. I mean, don’t get me wrong, I’m pretty strong —”

Steve laughed, giving an easy grin.

“Sure. Right.” He perked up, gesturing his hand towards Tony. “It was a team effort. Besides, it looked like you gave Dmitri one hell of a beating before he even got to us —”

“Yeah, but getting your shield to the kid like that?” Tony mentioned, without missing a beat. “Quick thinking there, Cap.”

“Wouldn’t have made a difference if he didn’t react on it,” Steve said, eyes set on Peter, oddly aware of how much younger the lad looked when asleep. “You were right in recruiting him. He’s good, he’s smart.”

“Yeah…” Tony nodded. “And he’s got heart.”

It was when Steve glanced over at him with a smile, appreciative at hearing his own words reflected back to him that it dawned on Tony what exactly he saw hiding beneath the soldier’s eyes. It was never an emotion of pity, of sympathy or regret.

Steve related to the kid.

Tony could have laughed. The star-spangled-man had a connection with him. What or how exactly Tony was completely unsure of, and yet he found himself smirking at the very concept. No wonder
the look was so foreign; there were few people in this crazy new world Steve Rogers had awoken to that he could relate with. And somehow, the kid became one of them.

To think that he had recruited Peter months ago to try and get through to him. Maybe he managed to do just that after all.

With a screw-it-to-all attitude, Tony let himself ask, “How’s everything with Barnes?”

The question hung in the air, frozen by Steve’s brief flustering.

Tony stared at him, his expression shifting from mild concern to annoyed impatience.

The silence that stretched between them staled the air. Steve would have answered sooner, had it not been for the unexpected startle that tightened his throat shut. Words seemingly dissolved on his tongue.

Tony had never asked about Bucky. This was the first time since...Steve couldn’t even recall. Despite being months stacked on months since Siberia, the name never seemed to leave his lips, he never had a reason to talk about the man.

It didn’t take long for Steve to realize why. He never asked because he never cared. Up until now, at least.

He couldn’t help but smile. “He’s good,” Steve finally answered, swallowing hard. “He’s doing better. Thanks.”

“Good,” Tony answered succinctly, eyes noticeably looking up and away. “Good to hear.”

As wrong as it felt to take advantage of the moment, Steve also knew there was no better time than the present. It wasn’t often they had these conversations, the idea of going through another one tasking for them both.

So Steve leaned forward, lacing his fingers together with elbows braced on his knees. “Listen, speaking of...back there in the base, what you said about Bucky...”

Tony rolled his eyes. “You really like to re-live our least proudest moments, don’t you?”

Steve stayed somber, serious. He lowered his chin, asking, “Did you mean it?”

’It’ didn’t need to be clarified, Tony’s shoulders tensing up with anxiety proving the point.

“I did,” Tony answered, short and clipped.

Steve nodded, leaning back in his chair slightly. “What does that mean? Where do you stand with him now?”

Tony eyed him conspicuously. “I stand here, in New York, where he is safely tucked away with King T’Challa in Wakanda. Unless you’re looking to put out room and board for the man, I don’t think it matters too much where I stand with him.”

The absence of an immediate response was suffocating in its wake. Steve’s lips set in a thin line, bobbing his head up and down though the action didn’t seem to meet his eyes.

“Yeah...” he muttered idly, his mind seeming a million miles away, his thumb rubbing over the curve of his jaw. “Right.”
Tony leveled a disbelieving look his way. “Something you want to tell me, Rogers?”

Before Steve could even open his mouth, the sliding doors behind Tony opened first. He looked up while Tony craned his neck around, both catching sight of Bruce standing in the entryway of the room, hand gripping the handle to a tray of medical supplies that hung at his hip.

“Steve!” Bruce greeted, exhausted features managing a wide grin. “When did, uh, when did you get back?”

Steve felt a smile tug at his lips as the scientist walked into the room, having already set the basket down on the bed so he could review the monitors scattered around. His focus was unbreakable, fiddling with wires and reviewing numbers even as Tony persistently poked him in the side.

“Hi, Bruce.” Steve gave a small wave. “Just recently, we landed around o’three-hundred.”

Bruce spared him a glance between pressing buttons on the infusion pumps. “Well I’m uh, I’m glad to see you guys are home. You — you guys, right? Or just...just you...?”

“Natasha’s in the training room,” Steve filled in knowingly, watching Bruce as he lowered the guardrail to the hospital bed on Tony’s side. “Said she needed to get her frustrations out. Not a big fan of the corporate hoopla.”

“Ah, yes, of course,” Bruce stammered, making a confirming hum in the back of his throat. “Good for her.”

“God, you are so obvious,” Tony mocked derisively, going to prop his legs on the mattress of the bed. Bruce slapped his knees away, twice.

“Is Clint back as well?” he asked, his voice neutral as he shot Steve a sideways glance, stethoscope in one ear while he listened to Peter’s chest.

“Don’t act like you give two craps about Barton,” Tony sarcastically butted in.

Steve chuckled. “He’s back on the farm in Iowa. His family says hi.”

Bruce nodded, satisfied with what he heard from both Peter and Steve. He stood tall, his thumb rolling the clamp of the IV line that trialed into Peter’s arm, decreasing the amount of medication dripping through the catheter.

“Of course,” he echoed, more robotic this time around. “Good for him.”

“Wow.” Tony feigned offense, kicking his legs on the mattress and leaving them there now that Bruce was finished. “Should I tell Barton how less excited you were to hear about his safe return? Because really, the difference between your response to Romanoff and him is just astounding.”

“I don’t know, Tony,” Bruce wryly bit back, head titled to the side. “Should I tell Steve about how your hand was physically stuck to Peter’s for an entire eleven hours?”

Steve made a choking sound, one he hid behind a tightly closed fist. Tony shot him a glare before pointing a threatening finger at Bruce.

“Patient confidentiality breach. HIPPA would like to have a few words with you.” The finger wagged the length of Bruce’s body. “Take off that lab coat, you’re not worthy of it.”

Bruce rolled his eyes, barely paying attention as he logged vitals into his tablet. “Not how patient
confidentiality works.”

Tony crossed his arms over his chest. “Is too.”

“Definitely not how HIPPA works,” Bruce mumbled.

“I disagree,” Tony childishly threw back at him.

Steve watched the two bicker with a humorous smile, his gaze flickering rapidly back and forth between Tony and Bruce, each responding faster than the last.

“You know, Tony,” Bruce turned to face him, stylus pen sharp in his direction. “Helen is fully aware you sneak in to review his medical records which is a breach, so —”

“FRIDAY?” Tony looked to the ceiling, smirking. “Dear, please tell Doctor Banner if there’s any record of me accessing confidential documents belonging to Mr. Parker.”

There was a pause, one that Steve wondered possibly involved protocols of his A.I erasing history before answering. Sure enough, her Irish accented voice came through the ceiling speakers with stern professionalism.

“No record, sir.”

Bruce narrowed his eyes. “You’re a dirty liar, Tony.”

Tony looked as smug as ever, crossing his legs that sat propped up on the bed. “And you, Brucey, have been schooled.”

Steve frowned, looking at Tony as his thumb pointed to Bruce. “Is that what just happened?”

---

Waking up sucked.

Peter would happily take five-hundred pop quizzes over the misery that accompanied waking up.

For starters, it never failed that for the first twenty minutes or so he could barely form a coherent sentence. It was as if someone had replaced his once incredibly intelligent brain with a soggy cotton ball instead. He had become determined that before he left this place he would manage a proper, sensible ‘good morning’ to the cute nurse who flushed his central line, but it didn’t help that she always arrived just when basic syllables were impossible to enunciate.

Still, that was nothing compared to what would come next. Laying still all night in a deep, blissfully medicated sleep would mean one thing for his poor bruised and battered body — waking up stiff as a board and in uncomfortable, pulsating pain. It felt like someone had replaced the fluids in his joints with cement. Burning, fiery, hot cement.

“Baby, you have to eat something for breakfast,” May encouraged. “I had them make you waffles, your favorite. Come on, the faster you get moving the better you’ll feel.”

Peter made a disgruntled whine from his fetal position in bed. While May was right, moving around did manage to help the stiffness, moving around also meant moving around which hurt like a mother effin —
“L’ve me a’ne,” Peter mumbled, the side of his face deep in the stack of pillows behind his head. “I never wanna move ever again.”

May chuckled, and if he opened his eyes he was sure that she’d be staring at him with exasperation. But he was a teenager, he was allowed to be dramatic. That was his excuse and until it didn’t hurt to move his toes when he woke up, he’d stick to it.

“Make you a deal?” she offered, scooting the over-the-bed side-table closer to his chest. “If you manage to eat just a little bit, I’ll give you your phone back today.”

Peter cracked one eyelid open. “You got my phone back from school?”

May nodded.

And just like that, Peter managed to woof down two and a half waffles drowned in syrup, scrambled eggs and a slice of bacon. The rest of his morning was spent catching up on his phone, utterly shook to see how many missed calls and messages he received while he was away.

Of course, at least ninety percent of them came from Ned.

Peter scrolled through the messages one by one, starting with the day he ditched school.
Fri, Apr 7th, 11:26am

cover me I'm leaving my backpack in my locker!

Fri, Apr 7th, 11:27am

dude you totally just bailed on ms warren and finals

so cool!

Fri, Apr 7th 1:15pm

hey dude just wanted 2 say sorry 4 the whole diarrhea thing in class

giving u a heads up, Flash will not lay off the poopy Parker thing
Fri, Apr 7th, 1:28pm

Im sry

Fri, Apr 7th, 2:22pm

rly sorry

Fri, Apr 7th, 2:45pm

im super sorry?

Fri, Apr 7th, 3:06pm

Peter?

Fri, Apr 7th, 3:16pm

hey Peter?
classes r over dude. Ur going to bomb finals if u don't figure something out

schools just as important as spiderman u know

Fri, Apr 7th, 3:44pm

peter??

Fri, Apr 7th, 4:03pm

ok im not saying that im freaking out but ur dodging me and i know u got spiderman stuff but at least send an ok txt or something

Fri, Apr 7th, 4:21pm

im going home. reschedule movie rite another nite?
Fri, Apr 7th, 5:26pm

ok IM FREAKING OUT

Fri, Apr 7th, 5:28pm

Peter IM FREAKING OUT

Fri, Apr 7th, 5:29pm

 ANSWER UR PHONE

 DUDE ANSWER UR PHONE

 PLEASE

 Fri, Apr 7th, 5:29pm

 ITS ALL OVER THE NEWS!
 PLEASE
PLEASE

PLEASE

PLEASE

PLEASE

PLEASE

PLEASE

PLEASE

Fri. Apr 7th, 5:31pm
Fri, Apr 7th, 6:40pm

omg

Fri, Apr 7th, 6:46pm

dude please tell me this isn’t real. Plz tell me the avengers are there or something plz tell me anything peter plz

please text me

Sat, Apr 8th, 11:59pm

please peter. please still be here

please
I took a sick day from school.
moms mad since spring break is in a few days.

not that ur seeing this or anything, i just need to talk to someone

ur aunt told me i have to stay quiet about it. like not tell anyone. she won't tell me why. she won't give me any details

aside from captain America coming to ur apartment. that's so cool

or at least it would be.

if u weren't dead and all
Mon, Apr 10th, 9:16am

I haven’t seen you in a while. May be sad since

Shit dude, sorry

Mon, Apr 10th, 9:18am

I don’t know why I said sorry

Mon, Apr 10th, 9:19am

I don’t know why I’m texting your phone

Mon, Apr 10th, 9:20am

I just want someone to talk about this
Guy in the chair

Mon, Apr 10th, 9:27am

im not looking at what the bugle has to say. screw them

Mon, Apr 10th, 9:29am

ur not a menace

Mon, Apr 10th, 9:46am

u weren't a menace

Mon, Apr 10th, 9:59am

u were a hero, peter
i took another sick day

im actually sick tho. can’t stop throwing up. mom wants to take me 2 the docs but i know im not like really sick or anything. u know how it is

tried calling happy. he actually picked up!
said he was sry but couldn’t give deets

what the hell happened to u man
Tue, Apr 11th, 7:56pm

i know u were like super excited to be an avenger but and i hate to say i told u so but dude u still had so much going on. why couldn't u just wait. u were almost sixteen. ur birthday is like a week away.

Tue, Apr 11th, 8:47pm

i hope the avengers avenge u and all.

since they couldn't save u

Tue, Apr 11th, 11:56pm

i miss you, Peter.

a lot
Wed, Apr 12th, 5:36am

!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Wed, Apr 12th, 5:38am

CALL ME WHEN U HAVE UR PHONE AGAIN

LIKE IMMEDIATELY DO NOT WAIT

OMG PETER CALL ME!!!

Wed, Apr 12th, 5:41am

ok ok sry. may says ur in really bad shape??? omg. this is unreal. i can’t believe this. this is the best news EVER!!!!!!!
of course it would be so much better if we were never told u died and all

i don't even care anymore

im totally buying the millennium falcon lego set for when u get better. Its 1329 pieces!

unless u dont have hands anymore
Wed, Apr 12th, 6:01am

peter do u still have ur hands?

omg im srry thats a horrible thing to ask

im so srry

Wed, Apr 12th, 6:07am

if u did lose ur hands can u like pretend not 2 see these messages

wait how would u be reading them without hands

Wed, Apr 12th, 6:15am

im just gunna shut up now
Wed, Apr 12th, 6:15pm

ok may told me ur phone is still at school and she will get it later. said u can’t use it right now anyway

she gave me an update on how u r

so glad u still have ur hands

Wed, Apr 12th, 6:18pm

but damn

thats really scary.

you'll make it. i know u will
so no one else knows u died.

“died”

everyone is covering it up by saying u went on a stark internship trip with mr. stark to paris
good news! u will be covered for bailing on finals. i think may said the school will arrange a time for u to retake them when ur better.

lol “when u return from paris” i mean

bad news........

mj is totally on my case about u

she doesn’t buy the paris thing

like at all

shes kinda like buzzfeed unsolved crimes right now. totally gungho about finding out the truth

so mj found out the truth
I know you're Spider-man, nerd.

so mj found out the truth

so sorry dude. tried lying, i thought i did a good job!
Thu, Apr 13th, 1:17am
Ned did an awful job at lying.

Thank God he's not the one lying to the school. They actually bought that load of crap about Paris.

Thu, Apr 13th, 1:21am
You don't even speak french, Parker.

You barely speak Spanish.
Messages  Guy in the chair

Thur, Apr 13th, 1:15am
so mj found out the truth

Thur, Apr 13th, 1:18am
so sorry dude. tried lying. i thought i did a good job!

Thur, Apr 13th, 1:22am
created a group chat for us. sry if that bothers u.
Thur, Apr 13th, 1:25am

You have got to be kidding me, Ned. Spider friends? What is this?

It's just easier than going back and forth between u 2

Why, though? You said Peter was incapacitated or something.

Why are we texting him?

Thur, Apr 13th, 1:27am

2 keep him updated on what hes missing out on.

Like u finding out his secret, 4 starters.
Are you serious? You guys talk about these things like, right in front of me. I've known for months.

Sure u have

Seriously, Peter sucks at keeping secrets. Not to mention every time he runs away, Spiderman "suddenly" shows up.

And he goes on an impromptu trip to Paris the moment Spiderman is MIA? Possibly KIA?

Come on. Not buying it

Be thankful I found out. You two need some serious help with this.

we're doing fine

Besides, what secrets do you keep hidden so well?

If I told you then they wouldn't be secrets, dummy.
Thu, Apr 13th, 2:16am
But for real. Glad you're alive and kicking, Peter.

Thu, Apr 13th, 2:26am
Or at least alive. Not sure about the kicking part.

Thu, Apr 13th, 2:31am
...i wonder if he still has his legs.

WTF NED

Thu, Apr 13th, 2:43am
called his aunt. hes still got his legs!
Thursday, April 13th, 10:12 am

You better get well in time for the next Decathlon meet.

I will not have Flash sit in for you, lol.

Thursday, April 13th, 10:19 am

He’ll be better.

He’s spiderman.

Hey loser. If you want to get better at keeping secrets, start with not texting them. You’re leaving evidence for anyone to read.

Thursday, April 13th, 10:29 am

Right. Of course.

For anyone reading this Peter’s totally not spiderman.

Thursday, April 13th, 10:34 am

Christ.
Fri Apr 14th, 7:26am
HAPPY BIRTHDAY PETER!!!

Fri Apr 14th, 7:29am
Happy birthday, nerd.

Fri Apr 14th, 7:30am
♫ ♪♫♫ happy birthday 2 u ♪♫♫
♫ ♪♫♫
♫ ♪♫♫ happy birthday 2 u ♪♫♫
♫ ♪♫♫
♫ ♪♫♫♫ happy birthday dear Peter! ♪♫♫♫

Fri Apr 14th, 7:31am
Ned shut up

♫ ♪♫♫♫♫♫♫♫ HAPPY BIRTHDAY 2 U!!! ♪♫♫♫♫♫♫♫
Fri, Apr 14th, 7:35am

I’m muting this conversation

Fri, Apr 14th, 7:36am

no ur not :)

hey when peter’s better and back home did u want to get together with us for a be-lated birthday celebration?

Fri, Apr 14th, 8:09am

Don’t you think I have better things to do with my spring break?

no

Fri, Apr 14th, 2:06pm

Does he like chocolate cupcakes?

loves em!
Hey Parker, what's with this new girl adding stuff to our playlist?

???????

Her username is Scarlet Witch.

wait THE scarlet witch?!?

the avenger scarlet witch!!??

I guess, I don't know.

Someone gave her permission to add songs onto our playlist. It wasn't me so I guess it was Peter.

Let me know when you're better and all, nerd
Mon, Apr 17th, 6:56pm
Her taste in music isn’t so bad.
Pretty retro. I like it.
OMG MJ is friends with the scarlet witch. that’s so cool.

Mon, Apr 17th, 7:03pm
I don’t even know her, Ned.
Just saying her taste in music isn’t horrible.
we’re all friends with the avengers. so awesome.

Mon, Apr 17th, 7:09pm
christ
well spring back is over. we’re back at school today. srry u missed out on it, peter. we’ll make up for it when ur better!

Tue, Apr 18th 11:19am

may says that u will be out for a couple more weeks.

Tue, Apr 18th 12:42pm

u should see flash, he’s so angry. i think he finally believes you have a stark internship!

Wed, Apr 19th 3:15pm

queens is doing ok without spiderman right now, btw. don’t sweat it. spiderman needs the break!
Messages
Guy in the chair

Thur, Apr 20th 11:12am
remind me to tell u about betty.

Thur, Apr 20th 2:15pm
remind me to tell u about flash and gym class

Thur, Apr 20th 3:30pm
remind me to tell u about mj and flash. she punched him for bad mouthing you. it was AWESOME.
remind me to tell u about betty.

remind me to tell u about flash and gym class

remind me to tell u about mj and flash. she punched him for bad mouthing you. it was AWESOME.

Hey Ned

FYI, it's Spider-man. With a hyphen.
“You going to put that down anytime soon?”

Peter peered over his phone to look at May. He blinked twice, not realizing how dry his eyes had become, stars dancing in his vision from the sun blasting through the window ahead. Slowly he could make out May’s figure, bent over and stuffing items into her purse.

“Sorry,” he sheepishly apologized. “There’s so much I have to catch up on!”

“Uh-huh,” May hummed, swinging her purse over her shoulder. “I’m sure the nerd clique is just bustling with activity.”

Peter gaped, feigning melodramatic offense. “Hey!”

“Put it down soon, mister.” May wagged a finger at him. “You’re here to rest.”

“I am resting!” Peter defended, gesturing to the bed he laid in and the blankets covering him. He hadn’t even moved from the curled up position on his good side — the painful lesson of not messing with his right side one he wouldn’t forget anytime soon — practically wrapped like a
burrito in the softest blanket he’d ever had granted the pleasure of using.

“Don’t get smart with me, tough guy,” May jokingly threatened, a lighthearted laugh in her tone. “Or I’ll take that phone with me on my way out to work.”

The smell of coffee hit his nostrils before the doors to the infirmary room even slid open. Peter was a hairsbreadth away from letting May know that Mr. Stark was arriving when — woosh — the man already strolling into the room.

Damn, his senses really weren’t up to par lately.

“Mhmm, smells like teenage discipline in here,” Tony greeted, handing May one of the two styrofoam cups he had in his hands. “One for the road. What’s going on with the pip-squeak?”

“Thank you,” she replied easily, as if it was a common experience to have a billionaire hand her coffee — which for all Peter knew had become the norm for her, what with a missing week in his life having gone by. She nodded her head over in Peter’s direction. “Gave him his phone back this morning. He hasn’t put it down since.”

Peter frowned, head jerking back at offense to May’s tattle-telling.

Tony crossed the room, taking a sip of his coffee as he passed by Peter’s bed. Or at least that’s what Peter assumed, half his face being pleasantly smooshed into his pillows.

“Listen to Aunt Hottie, kid. Or I’ll take the phone away myself,” he warned.

“Pssh,” Peter muttered, eyes locked on the screen of his device. “No you won’t.”

A large hand dipped into his frame of vision, snatching the phone right out of his grip.

Peter gawked, staring at his fingers that gripped only air. He looked up, seeing Tony walking away with the device and pocketing it into his blazer.

Did that just…? He spared a glance to May, who seemed equally humored, doing a poor job at hiding her laugh behind a clearly fake cough.

“Oh damn.” Peter sat up straighter in bed, smiling ear-to-ear. “You that kind of parent.”

Tony snorted humorlessly, smacking the side of Peter’s leg lightly with the back of his hand.

Peter watched him head for the recliner chair nearby with a blank expression, worried for a moment that he may have said something wrong. Normally Mr. Stark was quick to engage in witty banter with him, always one to throw it back faster than he received it. This time though, he kept any wisecracks to himself, wordlessly opening the laptop he kept in the room and filling the silence with clickclickclicks of the mouse and keyboard.

Peter looked away, slowly but surely adjusting himself in bed so that he was sitting up. First and foremost, he gave himself a pat on the back for not crying like a baby in front of Mr. Stark when he moved, because damn that still hurt. Moving still equaled pain. Noted.

As Tony typed away on his laptop, Peter convinced himself that he had to be busy — he had stuff to do. He was Tony Stark. He really needed to stop taking everything so personally. He just hoped he didn’t make him uncomfortable joking about —

“Alright sweetie,” May cut through his running-rampant thoughts. “I’ll be back later tonight.
“Behave.”

“Yeah,” Peter snorted, rolling his eyes. “Cause there’s so much trouble I can get into here.”

She stopped on her way to the doors, shooting him a glare that had him sinking against the cushions of his bed. “Mouth. Watch it.”

Tony let out a noticeable chuckle from his position across the room.

May shot him the same glare, an added finger wagging toward him thrown in the mix. “Don’t even, I think he gets some of it from you.”

Tony knew better than to respond. He instead smiled with charm, giving her a wave as she left the room. She returned it, blew a kiss to Peter, and went on her way. The doors slid shut with an airy hum and Peter fiddled with the edges of his blanket, suddenly feeling oddly uneasy without the distraction of his phone.

It was strange. For the most part, he never even needed his phone, too busy sleeping to even use it. That was the nice part about his recovery; he slept, often. Everyone did more than just encourage the act, they urged it on, even when he wasn’t medicated. Which was fine by him, it was like his body wanted him asleep, like a hibernation of sorts. He assumed it had something to do with the spider-bite. There were days he could sleep for eleven hours and still feel tired.

But sleeping was also nice. Sleeping kept his mind at ease.

He didn’t hear the sound of a laptop closing shut until a voice broke through alongside the noise.

“Alright Parker, what’s your deal?”

Peter dragged his gaze away from the doors, not even noticing he had been staring at them in the first place. He looked at Mr. Stark, who eyed at him from his spot on the recliner. The laptop had been closed and put aside, the man’s attention now solely on him.

“What?” Peter asked, fingernails digging into the seams of the blanket. “Oh, it’s — that’s — I’m just giving her a hard time. She knows it. We have fun.”

Tony quirked an eyebrow. “That? Yeah, that’s obvious.” He eased back into the recliner, seeming much more relaxed than Peter currently felt. “I’m talking about that fifty-yard stare you got going on. What’s that all about?”

Peter ducked his head low, hiding the blush that reddened his cheeks. He must have spaced out again. May mentioned he was doing that a lot lately.

“It’s nothing,” he dismissed, about ready to curl up on his side again when a *plop!* landed between his knees.

Tony tossed him his phone, the device landing on top of the blankets. Peter wondered if he had short-circuited for a moment, looking down at the phone, looking up at Tony, down at the phone, up at Tony —

“Trade off,” Tony nonchalantly explained. “Now, a penny for your thoughts?”

Peter gave a sad attempt at a chuckle, his fingers still picking at the frays of the blanket. “You sure? No refunds.”
“I can afford the loss.” Tony followed his words up with a smile.

Peter nodded, though he couldn’t seem to shake the odd feeling that gnawed at his insides. It was like a beast was inside his mind playing tug of war. A part of him wanted to talk about things, a part of him never wanted to utter a single word, and he was never sure which side would win in the end.

He managed a slow, deep breath to calm his nerves.

“I’ve just been thinking a lot lately.”

Peter had more to say. Really, there was a whole flood of things waiting to be unleashed. But he stayed quiet with each passing second that ticked on the clock, feeling embarrassed the longer it took him to talk.

Tony must have noticed, having gotten up from the recliner with a grunt and loud crack of his knees.

“Wow. Really? You don’t say,” he dryly joked, stretching his arms over his head. “Who would have thought a kid-genius like you would be thinking. Careful with that, it can be dangerous.”

Peter had been expecting him to leave the room when he first got up from his seat. It wasn’t like they were in the middle of a conversation, he couldn’t even manage more than a few words.

To his surprise though, Tony instead came closer to the bed, sitting down in the chair directly next to him. It was the same one he found May usually occupied. It was close. So close that May would almost always be holding his hand and still be comfortable from where she sat.

And now Mr. Stark chose to sit there.

It took everything in Peter not to tell Tony that he didn’t need to stay. It was a habit of his to easily dismiss people when he actually needed them most — ‘It’s okay, Mr. Stark. You’re busy, I understand.’ He didn’t want to push anyone away by making them think he didn’t want them around. Especially right now, because he did, he most certainly wanted people around after...

“Do you think...” Peter started to say, desperate to get any words out of his mouth. “Do you think that all this would have happened if I didn’t screw up?”

Tony blinked. “If you didn’t — what?”

The look of confusion that fell over his face was one Peter had never seen before. It seemed to grow more absurd by the second, as if he had been asked the most ridiculous, idiotic question ever spoken in existence. Peter’s stomach fluttered with more anxiety, the part of him that never wanted to speak about things gaining the lead in its battle of tug-of-war.

‘Come on, Parker. You can do this.’ His thoughts hyped himself up. ‘You need to know.’

“If I had nailed Mysterio that night in Times Square. Or — or caught him when he broke into your lab to steal the helmet. Or...listen to you and not go into that burning building,” Peter’s voice dipped low as he asked, “Do you think this would have happened if I never got involved?”

Tony stared at Peter, lips pursed, brow creased. The cogs in his head failed to turn, practically grinding to an abrupt stop.

“I’m not following you on this, kid,” he said, a discerned tone of concern in his voice. “Are you
blaming yourself for what happened?”

Another lull fell between them, one that required a great deal of patience for Tony to get through. He watched silently as Peter’s throat convulsed, the small muscle in his jaw tensing up and his upper teeth bite down his lower lip.

“Well...yeah.” Peter finally admitted, head bowed and eyes looking down. “I mean, you even said I let Mysterio get away in Times Square. It was all over the Daily Bugle — *everything* I do has been scrutinized by the Daily Bugle.” He let out a frustrated sigh, one that heaved his shoulders high. “Every time I try to help I make things worse.”

Tony frowned. He titled his head to the side, hoping to squeeze his face into Peter’s line of vision. “You helped us with Awesome Android. It was your quick thinking that saved the day there, bud.”

Peter lit up at the use of the nickname, only to deflate shortly after. “Yeah, but that’s like, one good thing and there’s like, a million bad things that follow. I just feel like a giant screw up. Like I’m failing at everything.”

Tony pondered his words over for a moment, nodding. Peter continued to grip the blankets in his fingers, clenching and unclenching with a turmoil that was implicit. If he didn’t know better, Tony could have sworn that his own heart ached with him.

“You can’t win them all, Pete,” he said.

Peter gave a slow, hesitant sort of nod, although his eyes were still glued to his hands. “I know. But I’d like to win *some*.”

“You have.”

Peter's brow creased with confusion. “What?”

Tony adjusted in his chair, sitting straighter. “Dmitri — Chameleon? That was all your win, kiddo. Your take-down. Hell, you saved both me and Cap from being sucked into the ocean with that fast-thinking of yours. Don’t let yourself get discouraged too easily just because the Bugle says a few crappy things about you to sell their newspapers.”

Despite his encouragement, Peter remained dejected. “You were right, though. The moment I mess up and it’s ‘Spider-man: Thwarted by local street magician.’ So stupid.”

“Yeah, well...” Tony popped his lips, shrugging. “What do they know?”

Peter scoffed, rolling his eyes.

“No, seriously, what do they know?” Tony asked again, piquing Peter’s interest. He finally looked up from his hands, frowning, completely puzzled. Tony met his gaze head-on. “Tomorrow’s issue isn’t going to be about Spider-man taking down a psychopathic Russian spy in an underwater facility, all with two broken wrists, hypothermia, a concussion—”

Peter blushed with embarrassment. “Okay, I—I get it—”

“A shattered leg, a *gaping hole* in his stomach and back,” Tony went on, ignoring his protest. “And you *still* managed to knock that Bond wannabe flat on his ass. Don’t let some outdated, old fart of a journalist who’s a couple years away from retiring and starting a podcast get under your skin.”

Peter gave a soft, wobbly laugh that brought on the inkling of a smile. With it, the tension seemed
to thin just enough that Tony felt comfortable leaning forward, resting a firm open palm on Peter’s shoulder.

“For every ten good things Iron Man does, there has to be fifty that the press doesn’t talk about. They will always pick and chose what the public wants to hear. That doesn’t discredit your doing, kiddo. You know in your heart what you’re doing is right.” Tony’s voice dropped a little, quieter but no less sincere. “And if I’ve been hard on you lately about that, well...I really have no excuse. I just want you to be safe.”

Peter nodded, letting his smile widen a tad bit more. The feel of Tony’s thumb stroking over the curve of his shoulder was grounding, comfortable. It reminded him a lot of the same feeling he’d get when he wore his suit — protection, safety.

“Thanks, Mr. Stark.”

Tony patted his shoulder before leaning to the side in his chair, grabbing his coffee cup from next to him.

“Always thanking me, and I never know what for.”

Peter gave an easy smile and shrugged, a swell of warmth and gratitude replacing the butterflies of anxiety in his chest.

“For being here.”

Tony looked up from his coffee cup and gave him a wink, all charm, no bite. Any worry he had about his off-handed comment from before faded away with it, and Peter grinned as he picked his phone back up, though he was too distracted to really use it.

He stared down at the device, flipping it around, caught up in his own thoughts. He almost felt silly for having panicked earlier over what he’d say. It was just that he and Mr. Stark always had an odd relationship, never really defined, always bouncing between ‘he helps me do my superhero-ing and keeps me in line’ to ‘he’s like my mentor and teaches me all these cool things’.

But that had changed lately, since Homecoming, since he broke-in-but-not-really-broke-in to the Avengers facility. He wasn’t exactly sure what this was now, what they had become. He didn’t care either way. He liked it.

Uncle Ben would always tell him to try and find the positives out of any situation he was faced with.

Peter smiled — he was pretty sure he just found one.

“Hey, Mr. Stark?”

Tony sipped from his cup. “Hm?”

“What are the chances of me actually going to Paris before returning to school?” Peter asked, pointing to his phone. “Cause like, my friends are going to want proof and Flash is going to say any photos I show him are photoshopped so I was thinking...”

As Peter rambled on, Tony shook his styrofoam cup, judging how much liquid was left.

He was going to need more coffee.
*whispers quietly to herself* my god, why did it take so long to wrap up these B and C plots…

*whispers even quieter* oh rigghhtt…the whump.

\[ (\cdot \sim \cdot) \Gamma \]

Sorry not Sorry
Handle with Care

Chapter Summary

A long one here, folks. After all, this is it – gotta tie up those final loose strings now. The next chapter is sorta the last. I mean, still got the epilogue after that but...yeah, we’re close to the finish line.

Oy.

A few nerd facts here. Sam and Clint’s backstories are pretty true to their comic selves – Sam did lose his dad at sixteen and Clint did run off to the circus. Of course, Tony was at MIT. And I will never stop quoting Ultimate Spider-man, you can't make me.

Lastly, if you feel this chapter is full of a ridiculous amount of fluff, that’s because it is. I’m suffering from serious Endgame stress and this is apparently how I cope.

“Your turn, Blues Clues.”

“Aah, ‘a got it, uhm….” crunchcrunch...munch...crunch...“oh’k... hmmm...al’rig...—”

“Hey!” The sound of over-enthusiastic finger-snapping tore his gaze away from the television. “Uh-uh. No buying extra time for french fry breaks.”

Peter’s hand was already mid-bag when Clint snapped his fingers, an authoritative-but-not-really-authoritative finger going to point sharply in his direction. It was hard to take him seriously, what with the rolling around precariously in the wheelchair kept nearby.

Sam arched an eyebrow, watching as Clint rolled-hopped-bounced towards him. Admittedly it was an amusing sight, looking as if he was a centimeter away from falling backward and cracking his skull open. It couldn’t be any more obvious that he’d gone ahead and disregarded the nurse’s stern warning of “We’ll take that away if you keep fooling around with it.”

Knock on wood, the archer had yet to get caught misbehaving. Sam had a feeling his luck would run dry eventually.

Peter managed a sheepish smile as he shoved another handful of french fries into his mouth.

“S’ry — th’se ‘re just so good!” He licked his fingers of any residual salt, further displaying his appetite for good ‘ol greasy fast food. Not that the infirmary here didn’t have fantastic food, because they did – Mr. Stark really went all out. It was just... healthy food. He could only take so many gluten-free waffles before his taste buds began to resent him.

“Tell us something we don’t know,” Sam’s voice came from the cushioned bedside chair on his left. “Now c’mon, hurry up.”

Leaning back and rolling hazardously on the edges of the wheelchair, Clint enthusiastically nodded. “Seriously, I want to see what Tasha’s twisted mind comes up with next.” He wagged his
eyebrows in her direction, both hands firmly holding the wheels straight.

Natasha, sitting quietly in the recliner towards the corner of the room, didn’t even look up from her book as her name was mentioned.

“For the last time,” she dryly stated, licking her thumb and flipping a page over, “I’m not playing.”

Clint craned his head around. “You say that now, but ten years ago I never would have guessed you’d be dancing like a ballerina in the common room. Things change.”

Natasha looked up, her expression caught somewhere between being humored and overall appearing down-right-scary. With a gulp of delicious french fries, Peter noted that more of the latter appropriately coated her features.

He eyed her briefly, shifting around the many empty fast-food cartons littering his bed. He had found it to be both impressive and frightening that she could barely twitch a facial muscle and still say so much. Twirling the string to his over-sized hoodie — appreciative times five-hundred that they finally let him change into some real clothes — Peter wondered how much super secret spy training it must have taken to achieve such a feat.

Her eye glanced towards him and he immediately looked away, fast to make it seem like he was instead looking at the television straight ahead.

“This isn’t even a good pick!” he insisted, wiping his hands clean on the load of napkins covering the bed-sheets. “The thumbnail is just of two dudes standing back to back. What am I supposed to get out of that?”

Clint, preoccupied spinning the wheelchair around, was facing the window when he answered, “That’s the game, Itsy Bitsy. Now put up or shut up.”

Peter rolled his eyes — what a ridiculous game, one he had been ‘playing’ since he got out of physical therapy earlier in the day. Clint insisted he only hung around him for the jello cups, but it never failed that the others would begin to stream into his room shortly after his arrival. Sometimes they would hang around just to read a book, like Natasha had been doing all morning. It at least distracted him, made the time go by relatively quick.

Plus, he was hanging out with the Avengers. They could be playing Go-Fish and he’d be having the time of his life.

Peter pursed his lips tightly together, studying the screen with a sense of intensity he usually reserved for calculus homework.

“That one guy looks a little older then the other...they look alike, too...” he muttered slowly, hushed under his breath. “Okay, I think I got it. My guess is...television show about two brothers trying to survive the zombie apocalypse together?”

“Ehnt!” Sam cupped his hands over his mouth, making a loud buzzing sound.

“Wrong!” Clint followed up without any real heat, dropping the wheelchair to the ground with a toothy grin.

Natasha gave them both a sideways glance, otherwise staying silent with her focus on her book.

“Sorry, bug brain.” A few clicks from the remote and Clint had brought up the description page of the selected program, reading the details aloud to the room. “Two detectives stand on different ends
of the social and moral spectrum and also seriously distrust one other – and for good reason. British drama, TVMA.”

“Man!” Peter whined, crossing his arms over chest. “That doesn’t even sound like a good show. My idea sounds way better.”

Despite his objection, Clint proceeded to draw new tally marks on the large whiteboard behind him, the one that was supposed to be for nurses only, to keep Peter updated on his condition. What had once been ‘range of motion’ listed under ‘patient’s goals for today’ had since been crudely replaced with ‘winners and losers’ and a stream of tally marks underneath.

Sam had made it abundantly clear he would not stick around to face the nurse’s wrath at seeing the vandalization. He also proceeded to draw a little red Falcon flying in the corner of the whiteboard.

Clint popped the cap back on the marker. “That puts yours truly in the lead.”

Sam leaned back into his chair and kicked his feet up on the bottom of Peter’s bed. “Only because you’ve already seen ninety percent of what’s on Hulu.”

“This month alone,” Natasha piped up, flipping another page.

Before Clint could make a comeback, a predictable “I’m semi-retired!” on the tip of his tongue, the doors to the room split open to a very confused Rhodey standing at the entryway.

“What the hell?” Rhodey creased his brow, hands going to rest firmly on his hips. “When FRIDAY told me you guys ordered lunch, this isn’t where I expected everyone to be eating.”

A lecture about health hazards and germs fell secondary to the sight of Peter’s energetic waving, the kid’s smile never dimming a watt.

“Hi, Mr. Rhodes!”

Rhodey strolled up to the bed, offering a closed fist that Peter eagerly reached out to bump.

“Whatup, Pete?” He was a breath away from saying something more when his nose visibly sniffed, catching a whiff of the food that lined the window-bay ledge. “Ohh, are those Baklava’s?”

Rhodey was halfway to the window when Clint rolled out in front of him.

“Ah-ah!” The archer held out an outstretched arm, blocking Rhodey from getting any closer to his closely guarded food. “Winner gets those.”

Rhodey looked down at Clint’s arm, up at the food, and finally settled on his face with growing confusion. “Winner of what?”

“It’s this game I play with the kids back home,” he explained. “You peruse the streaming catalog of Netflix or Hulu, and take a guess at what the show or movie is about based solely on the thumbnail.”

Natasha looked up from her book with a slight curl to the corner of her mouth. “See, this is why his kids love their Aunt Natasha. I sit back and let them watch whatever they want without having to play some stupid game first.”

“They love it,” Clint retorted, rolling his eyes.

“And I have to win this game to have those Baklava’s?” Rhodey briefly considered pushing the
wheelchair, and its occupant, out of the way to get to the window-ledge. With a decision he was sure he’d later regret, he instead shrugged. “Deal me in.”

Peter visibly cringed, almost seeming concerned. “It’s a lot harder than you think, Mr. Rhodes.”

“Pshh. Look at me, Pete.” Rhodey settled into the chair opposite of Sam, leaning forward to rest a hand on Peter’s shoulder. “I know you put Tony way up here,” He signaled with his other hand high above his head, “but don’t forget that I graduated at the top of my class right alongside him. Have some faith in me.”

Peter went on to smile, nodding his head with assurance and appearing – for the most part – confident in Rhodey’s little speech.

That newfound assurance was quickly unraveled not even a full ten minutes later when Rhodey began shouting in protest.

“That’s some B.S!” He gestured widely at the television. “Your point system sucks, Barton. I should at least get something for knowing it was a chick flick.”

Sam scoffed, shaking his head. “You were warned, man.”

Rhodey narrowed his eyes at him. “I don’t want to hear it from you, Sam.”

Peter did his best to hide his laughing beneath a handful of french fries, whereas Clint put in no effort to conceal his enjoyment, grinning so wide that Natasha was sure she could see the filled cavity on his back molar tooth.

“Alright!” Clint clicked the cap back on the marker with a pop. “That puts me as winner, Petey-pie in second place, Sam takes home the silver and Rhodey...loses.”

“You know what? Screw this.” Rhodey shook his head, leg braces whirring as he shot up from his chair and stormed forward. “Those Baklava’s are mine.”

“Uh-uh!” Clint braced his feet against the wall and pushed off firmly, propelling himself over to the bay window. “No, I don’t think so! Back away, shell-head, these bad boys are all mine.”

Rhodey quirked an eyebrow high, looking between Clint’s face and the two hands he had covering the food, specifically the plate of desserts.

“Barton, you best move those hands before I —”

“Mine.” Clint hissed, jumping up from the chair to cover the treats with his midsection. “Mine!”

Peter gave them both an incredulous look, one mostly hidden behind the open palm that forced an abundance of fries into his mouth.

“I’m gettin’ some serious Lord of the Rings flashbacks right about now,” he mumbled through half-chewed food.

The automatic doors split open with a droning whoosh, the sound almost buried beneath their arguing and Sam’s persistence that they behave like grown-ups.

“Pretty sure those are mine, in all technicality,” Tony announced, pointing to the window and the two fighting men. “Considering who bought all this in the first place.”

Peter glanced over to see Tony and Bruce moving towards them, the billionaire sauntering in suave
as ever, hands shoved in the pockets of his trousers and an easy smile on his face.

Bruce, on the other hand, fumbled with his tablet, glasses slipping down the bridge of his nose as he looked up at their surroundings.

“Wow. This is a dietitian's worse nightmare,” he dryly stated, using his smart pad to gesture at the quantity of food laying around. “Pizza, Chinese, burgers, fries — ohhh, is that Shawarma?”

He was halfway across the room before anyone could get a word in.

Tony hoped up on the edge of the mattress, nudging Peter’s legs to the side to make more room. Once there, he squeezed Peter's ankle with a reassuring warmth. “You get your fill up? These ravenous animals didn’t have first dibs, did they?”

Peter shook his head with a swallow, wiping his greasy hands on the napkins nearby. “This is great, Mr. Stark, really. Thank you so much. I didn’t even realize how hungry I was.”

Tony patted the back of his hand against Peter’s leg. “Yeah, well, gotta put some meat back on those skinny bones of yours.”

Peter gaped, hand pressed to his chest as though wounded. Tony reached out and ruffled his hair in a way he knew the kid disliked, and sure enough, Peter ducked out the way with an annoyed yelp.

“Ah, dude!” His bite was drowned out with laughter. “Stop!”

“Oh, what? You want to look handsome for the cute nurses, huh?” Tony finally got a good swipe at Peter’s head, roughly making this hair go in all directions. “Here, let me help with that. You’re in desperate need of some style lessons.”

Peter half-laughed, half-groaned as he fought to smooth back his hair. “Seriously man, not cool!”

“Go for the arm, Pete!” Rhodey called out from across the way, snatching a Baklava while Clint was busy with his back turned, drawing a makeshift dart bullseye on the whiteboard.

Tony wadded up a used napkin and tossed it at him. “Traitor!”

It was at that moment the doors slid open again, the ruckus in the room easily overlapping the soft hum that normally alerted them to a new presence.

Steve stood in the entryway, slightly startled.

Natasha waved long before he had even noticed her in the corner of the room. Sam gave a nod of acknowledgment while Clint was busy with his back turned, drawing a makeshift dart bullseye on the whiteboard.

Bruce spun around, food dangling out of his mouth. He pointed to the mini-buffet lining the window ledge with a gulp.

“Fella’s,” Steve greeted, smirking. “I didn’t think FRIDAY was leading me in the right direction, but...I see I was wrong.”

“What?” Natasha asked, a hint of a smile curving her lips. “You don’t like risking C. diff when you eat your lunch?”

“It’s a smorgasbord,” Bruce mostly garbled through a mouth full of carbs. “Take your pick.”
Steve nodded, taking his time as he walked in, eyeing the food nearby and the fries Peter nibbled on. “I think I’ll have some of what Peter’s having. Looks good.”

Peter nodded enthusiastically. “So good.”

Looking around, it seemed everyone had already helped themselves, even Natasha having taken a pick despite her sarcastic remarks. Steve knew the leftover cherry tomatoes on the discarded plate nearby belonged to her. Call him old fashioned; he liked to stay up to date on the idiosyncrasies and habits of his team members.

As he gathered his own plate and carefully avoided the Baklava’s both Rhodey and Clint seemed to be oddly protective over, he couldn’t help but chuckle at the commotion that came from behind him.

“Dude, get your own!” Peter squawked, holding his french fries to the side where Tony couldn’t snatch any more from him.

“I believe we already established these are mine.” Tony innocently gestured with his finger to the carton of fries. “And didn’t anyone ever teach you to share?”

“Oh, that’s rich coming from you,” Rhodey chided from near the window.

Tony craned his neck around with an affronted grimace. “Hey. There’s hierarchy here, a chain-of-teasing, if you will. If I’m ragging on the lowest common denominator —”

“If you even think about finishing that thought,” Rhodey pointed his half-eaten sandwich at him, “I’ll have Pepper in here before you can say whipped.”

Peter cleared his throat, shaking his head. “Actually, uhm...can– can you not? I have a deal with her...if I keep Mr. Stark in check while I’m here, I get to be the flower girl at their wedding.”

Tony shot his neck over to Peter with record-breaking speed. If Sam didn’t know better, he’d say the man lost all color in his face within a startling millisecond, turning whiter than the bed-sheets he sat on.

It was too much for Peter, who cracked up almost immediately, and a little breathlessly at that. He covered his mouth with the crook of his elbow in hopes it would suppress his laughter.

“Sorry, sorry,” he muffled through the fabric of his hoodie, cheeks blushing pink as Tony continued to stare daggers his way. “I had to! You should have seen your face.”

Tony pursed his lips tightly together. “Ring-bearer. If you keep behaving.”

It took a second for Peter to process what was said, wordlessly dropping his arm with wide eyes and looking at the others to see how he should react. Unfortunately for him, most were either too busy talking among themselves or stuffing food into their mouths.

He looked back at Mr. Stark with a finger pointed to his chest. “Wait, really? Are you serious?”

Tony paused, a beat passing by as he considered the question.

“Nah,” he said, a laugh in his voice. “You’re right, you’ll never behave long enough for that to happen.”

It was Peter’s turn to glare, halfhearted with a smirk that Tony followed up with.
He leaned in far enough to punch Peter lightly against the shoulder. “Kid, between you and me, I’d do everything short of having you replace Rhodey as the best man.”

“Thanks, Tones!” Rhodey sarcastically hollered, a fake smile pulling tightly on his lips. “Good to know you still have some form of a soul.”

Tony held an open palm in the air, refusing to turn and look at Rhodey. “I don’t talk to traitors.”

Steve chuckled as he took a seat across from where Tony sat, still perched on the edge of Peter’s bed. It didn’t go unnoticed, both briefly locking eyes, managing to give each other a small nod of sorts.

Tony couldn’t help but realize the soldier was doing him the small favor of giving him space, as much as possible in the crowded room. The chair closest to him remained unoccupied, as if on purpose. It wouldn’t be long before Rhodey ended up sitting there, Sam and Steve across the way while Bruce and Natasha stayed near the bay window — Natasha to read quietly, Bruce to eat.

Clint proceeded to wheel himself around the room, even after nearly rolling over Sam’s toes.

Peter stayed mostly quiet as the group chatted, random topics and conversations coming and going before he could really process them. It was freakishly abnormal how seamlessly they spoke to each other, like lifelong friends who could pick up right from where they had left off. It was nice, peaceful. He found himself leaning back in bed, eyes closed, relaxed with a smile while he listened in on their stories.

Rhodey seemed to tell his with the most enthusiasm.

“So there I am, flying this AGM-64 Hornet across the horizon when —”

Natasha interrupted, “Let me guess —”

“Boom!” The entire room proceeded to echo in unison.

“You looking for this?” she finished, grinning smugly.

“You guys suck.” Rhodey pulled a face, tucking his hands tightly underneath his armpits with a sense of rejection. “Seriously, it’s not like we all could join in on your little underwater adventure.”

Tony scoffed flatly. “Yeah, you weren’t missing anything there.”

By either coincidence or simply from being reminded of the tale, Tony craned his neck to look at Peter, surprised to see the kid had all but dozed off. He nudged his foot a little, gaining his attention.

Peter shot his eyes open like a startled baby animal, rubbing harshly at them with the cuffs of his hoodie. “Sorry, must of —”

“You want us to duck out, kid?” Tony asked, squeezing his ankle. “You’re looking a little pooped over there.”

Peter shook his head emphatically, eyelids drooping closed for a split second before snapping open again. “Nah, I’m good. Besides, Mr. Rogers just got here!”

Steve shook his head, a quiet smile in place. “I’m flattered, champ. But you don’t have to stay awake for me.”
Before Peter could even consider stammering out a drowsy and slurred response, Rhodey cut in. “Tell me someone else thinks of the Mr. Rogers when the Rugrat says that,” he pressed. “Fred Rogers? It’s a wonderful day in the neighborhood?”

“Showing your age there, sour patch.” Tony leaned over, patting him on the arm.

Rhodey batted his hand away with a huff. “Don’t be acting like you’re so much younger than me.”

Peter chuckled, eyes falling shut and staying that way despite his many attempts to keep them open. A bone-deep, fierce weariness seemed to pull on him suddenly, possibly a food-coma of sorts, more likely exhaustion from having hours on hours of social interaction. He didn’t mind; the soreness in his stomach from the fits of laughter were so incredibly worth it.

Still, he felt like a kid at a sleepover — he knew he should get some rest, but he really wanted to stay awake just a tad bit longer. Alas, he could already feel his body sagging deeper into the pillows behind him, and it was nearly impossible to resist the comfort of the softest blankets he’d ever been granted the pleasure of using.

Seriously, he needed to see if he could snatch one of these suckers before going home.

The last thing he remembered hearing was something about memories and Budapest.

“Ohh!” Sam straightened from his slouched position in the armchair, hand waving frantically at the others. “Shh, shh, shh! Anyone else notice that the kid fell asleep?”

All eyes turned to the bed, any lingering voices that spoke falling silent. The most rustle they heard came from Bruce, who abandoned his plate of Shawarma to give the monitors a cursory glance. Even he didn’t seem to be worked up, though.

“Huh,” Tony drawled out, quietly hopping down from the edge of the mattress. “Would you look at that.”

Sure enough, Peter had clonked himself out, sound asleep and dead to the world. Bruce grabbed the remote to the bed and lowered it a bit more, the adjustment doing nothing to stir him.

Sam pointed his thumb to the doors, half-way out of his chair as he said, “We should probably —”

“Nah.” Clint waved away the issue with an easy grin, rising from the wheelchair with a french fry in between his fingers. “That crazy-super-strong-dope they got him on knocks his lights out. Watch this.”

Bruce barely had time to protest, preoccupied checking Peter’s breathing with his stethoscope when Clint leaned over the bed, waving a french fry directly under his nose. The teenager didn’t so much as flinch.

“Twinkle-toes, wake up,” he coaxed in a sing-song voice, “Wakey wakey, eggs and backey.”

With perfect timing, Peter snored.

Even Bruce couldn’t hide his chuckle. He went to remove the cool head of the stethoscope from beneath Peter’s hoodie with a slight shake of his head.

“God, I haven’t slept that good since I was a baby,” he offhandedly mentioned, leaning against the wall behind him.
Tony stretched his arms over his head, his shoulder making a well-timed crack as he grumbled, “I’ve never slept that good.”

Clint, having returned to the wheelchair, rolled repeatedly into the back of Steve’s seat, kicking the cushioned armchair with his knees. “Come on, Cap...say it...”

Steve rolled his eyes but smiled all the same. “I slept that good for seventy years.”

Clint shot both arms up in victory, giving a whispered cry of triumph.

Despite the fact that it appeared even a megaphone wouldn’t wake Peter up, Sam still slapped Clint across the elbow, encouraging him to keep his voice down.

"Just be careful, Clint,” Natasha dryly teased. “Wouldn’t want anyone’s hand to get stuck to his.”

The comment was met with stifled laughter and one intensely heated look from Tony, leveled directly at Bruce.

“What?” Bruce raised a hand without missing a beat. “I didn’t say anything to them.”

“I did,” Rhodey answered, arms crossed, a no-nonsense expression covering his features.

Tony narrowed his eyes, dipping his chin low with resentment. “I want my suit back.”

Rhodey shook his head, deadpanned. “Not your suit anymore.”

“You’re dead to me,” Tony insisted stubbornly, walking away while wiping his hands ‘clean’ to prove his point.

Sam snickered loudly from where he sat.

“Hey!” Tony dragged along a spare chair and placed it around the crowd surrounding the bed. He collapsed into it with a stern threat of, “No comments from the peanut gallery.”

A delighted grin curled at Clint’s mouth as another thick snore broke through their conversation. He ripped his teeth into the last hamburger and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “I want to go home with like, six jugs of this stuff for my kids.”

“You...want to give your kids an endogenous opioid peptide containing primary Dynorphin A mixed with dynorphin B1–29 bordering on the analogue of carfentanil?” Bruce asked, sounding both confused and concerned.

The archer gave a mix of half-hum, half-laugh. “Okay, a normal human variant of it, Doc Green.”

It was Bruce who shot Tony a look this time, one he acknowledged with an easy nod of his head. “Oh, I did tell them about that.”

Sam patted Clint on the shoulder, dropping a few extra napkins in his lap. “They call that Nyquil. Go to the drug store.”

Slouching back in his chair, Rhodey went on to ask, “How’s the birthday planning going, Tones?”

From where she sat in the corner of the room, Natasha dropped her book, brows furrowed with curiosity. “Birthday planning? For what?”

“Pete’s sixteenth,” Tony casually answered. “Figured I’d throw him a party since he spent the big
day incapacitated."

“Well damn,” Sam murmured, stretching his legs out and crossing his ankles over one another. “Why didn’t you tell us Nickelodeon had a birthday?”

“He mentioned he was turning sixteen soon,” Natasha spoke up, her book disregarded, her attention focused straight ahead. “When we all had breakfast together.”

Clint spun the wheelchair around to face her. “And yet you can’t remember where you put the TV remote in the common room?”

Bruce bowed his head low as he cleaned the lenses to his glasses, barely hiding the smile that tugged at his lips.

“Planning anything special for him?” Steve asked quietly enough that the question almost went unheard.

Tony shook his head. “Eh, not really. Was going to do something big, maybe take him to Paris, put some truth to that cover story. But his aunt insists I keep it low-key. Gonna bring him back to the compound for a little get-together after everything settles down.” He gestured towards everyone in the room with a lazy twizzle of his index finger. “You’re all invited – not because I want you there, the kid just has googly eyes for you losers.”

Clint sighed with a sense of dejection, going to run his hand through his shortly clipped hair. “Man, I remember my sixteenth. That’s about the time I ran away from home, joined the traveling circus, lost hearing in my left ear – the norm.”

His dismissive chuckle was met with sad smiles, the type he normally prided the team on not resorting to. As a poorly managed distraction, he rolled over to the window ledge and snatched the last Baklava. It was easy to stay quiet when his mouth was full of food.

“Can’t say I remember much of my sixteenth,” Sam piped in, crossing his arms over his chest. “The day after...hard to forget the death of a parent.”

Natasha was still looking straight ahead as she flatly answered, “I don’t really like to think about mine.”

Bruce could see through her minimalistic words, making sure not to share in the pity smiles that everyone seemed to pass around. He instead cleared his throat before the tension could thicken any more than it already had.

“I...don’t even remember mine,” he airily stated. “Pretty sure I was working on a thesis or something, who knows.”

Tony nodded his head, leaning over to pat Bruce’s hip. “A million years ago, right, buddy?”

“Let me guess.” Sam sat forward, waiting until Tony looked up at him before speaking. “Shiny new cars, radio-hit bands, strippers and the attendance of a one thousand plus?”

Tony gave him a wide-eyed look, feigning offense. “Of course not!” Immediately following up with, “That was my twenty-first birthday.”

“You kidding me?” Rhodey snorted from next to him. “This nerd was too busy working on his master’s at MIT. Couldn’t get him to leave the dorm room to save his life.”
Tony smiled fondly at the memory. “Yeah, well, sixteen at college...can’t say it wasn’t a bit overwhelming.”

“Pretty sure I was only trying to over-correct my own sixteenth on you,” Rhodey admitted, shrugging. “Didn’t want to chance doing something stupid and risk my enlistment in the Marine Corps. Mom made vanilla cake, I think.”

Steve cleared his throat, smiling with a trace of embarrassment. “Spent mine in bed. Scarlet fever.”

Tony huffed a laugh, moving to cross his legs and let his ankle rest against his knee. “Well, he’ll have a hell of a story to tell.”

He spared a glance at Peter, snoring lightly, suddenly looking five years younger even with the baby face he already had. Without even needing to look behind him, he could feel Natasha staring the same way, observant as ever.

Looking around the room, he quickly realized it wasn’t just her. They all seemed to be remembering their youth as they watched the kid sleep, for once seeming at peace despite the weight he carried around on his young shoulders.

While Tony couldn’t speak for what the others were thinking, he knew what his own thoughts were, thoughts cemented heavily in his head. Although he had come to accept Peter as a part of this — with or without his help — the feeling of being conflicted would never go away. A part of him loved having Peter as a recruit, fresh blood, a start to bringing in more energetic and starry-eyed heroes to take over the job.

He just hated that there was a job to begin with.

Sixteen and already stepping up as a hero. Tony stiffly shook his head; what a crazy world they lived in.

“Hey,” Clint’s voice cut through the thickening tension, “you guys realize this is the first time we’ve all been in the same room since...?”

The unspoken remained hanging in the air. They looked around at each other, some humming in realization, others shrugging it off.

It was Steve who pointed out, “Wanda and Viz aren’t here.”

“Dude, speaking of —” Sam sat up straighter in his seat, nearly pushing the chair back at the sudden action. “Viz is turning into a lost puppy without Wanda around.”

“Anyone heard from her?” Bruce asked after a brief pause.

“She’s doing good,” Steve said, smiling slightly. “Says she’s learning a lot from Doctor Strange.”

Clint let out a grunt as he forced the wheelchair to lean back, holding it steady with the firm grip of his hands. “Magic, man. You know —”

“Hey!” The doors split open and Claire squeezed between them before they had fully parted, brow creased in a way that screamed she shouldn’t be messed with. “Did I not —”

“I’m out.” Clint dropped the wheelchair with a thud, hasty in getting up to leave. He managed to give Tony a quick pat on the shoulder as he passed by. “See ya at the next PTA meeting.”
Tony grinned mirthlessly at him as he left.

Rhodey was the next to stand up, wiping his hands on the last clean bunch of napkins and cracking his neck with a relieved sigh.

“Thanks for the lunch, Tones,” he said, slower in his departure.

From across the room, Claire pointed to the top corner of the whiteboard with a dry-eraser, directing her question to the remaining team members, Natasha excluded.

“Cartoons? Really?” She rolled her eyes, erasing the drawings with a huff. “Are you guys five?”

Sam slowly rose from his chair, making sure his trash ended up in the nearest bin as opposed to littering the floor. “First off, ma’am, that is not a cartoon, that is Redwing,” he pointed out, already near the exit before she could respond. “Now have a good day. I need to go run about twenty miles to burn off my lunch.”

The doors split open at the same time Tony shot up from his chair, quick to follow suit. “Hey, hold up there, Wilson.”

He practically half-jogged to catch up with Sam, only to be mildly surprised that he stood waiting outside the room, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed. The doors closed shut on Claire and Natasha’s voices, the latter shamelessly ratting out the whiteboard vandalizer’s.

Sam arched an eyebrow high, waiting for him to talk.

“Have you had the chance to...” Tony dragged his gaze away from the doors to eye him, “...you know.”

Sam gave a sharp nod. “Yeah, actually. Spoke to him a couple days ago.”

Tony shrugged, expectantly. “And?”

“Told him what I do most folks,” Sam answered, unfolding his arms to stick his hands deep inside his jean pockets. “Some stuff you leave there...other stuff you bring back. It’s his job to figure out how he’s going to carry it.”

Tony nodded, eyes wandering back to the doors despite the glass having frosted-over, hiding the sight from within. He swiped his thumb across his nose, sniffing hard.

“So what do you think? This something he’s going to deal with long-term or —”

“I’m not diagnosing him, Stark,” Sam cut in. “He’s got trauma, for sure. Not to mention he’s young, it’s going to be hard for him to get through this.”

“So...PTSD, right?” Tony surmised. “I should get him some shrinks, someone to talk to —”

“I never said that,” Sam interjected.

“C’mon, Wilson, level with me here.” Tony sighed heavily, tension visibly stiffening the muscles in his shoulders. “I need you to get me some answers.”

“You want an answer?” Sam kicked off from the wall, putting himself closer to Tony. He inclined his head, coming off as serious yet sympathetic. “Fact is, most people don’t start really dealing with their trauma til a couple months after everything goes down. Don’t rush to throw him in the category of PTSD before he really has a chance to deal. If, or when, this catches up to him...that’s
when you gotta focus on getting him the help.”

Despite his earnest tone and sincere words, Sam only got a hefty eye-roll in response.

“Fantastic,” Tony grumbled, squeezing past him to head down the hallway. “Glad I didn’t pay you for that expert advice.”

Sam sighed, turning to face the man as he walked away. “Tony?”

He waited until Tony not only stopped walking but also turned back around to face him, the billionaire folding his arms over his chest with eyebrows arched to his hairline.

Sam took a couple steps forward, bridging the gap they had created. “I’m not saying you shouldn’t be there for him, because you should. Kid latches onto you like a baby to a lollipop. But...don’t be surprised if he never actually talks to you about this.”

Tony furrowed his brows, arms dropping to his side with confusion. “What?”

“You’re his idol,” Sam explained, tinting his tone with a resonating ‘duh’ laced into his words. “You’re going to be the last person he wants to see him as weak.”

“That’s ridiculous, there’s no way I would —”

“I get that. None of us see him that way.” Sam took another step forward, biting back a sigh. “But he sees himself that way. That’s what’s important, that’s what matters. Let him process this how he needs to, but don’t be surprised if he goes to someone else to dish out all the details. Consider it flattery.”

Tony slumped, letting out a frustrated sigh that barely began to touch the surface of his distress. For what it was worth, Sam bobbed his head in sympathetic agreement, as if he had known what needed to be said couldn’t be easy to hear.

Gesturing his hand down the hallway, Tony began walking away, matching Sam’s pace just enough that they ended up walking side-by-side.

“Dish out all the details, huh? What, is that new slang you picked up from the kid?”

Sam huffed a laugh. “No, he refers to it as ‘the deets.’ Pretty sure I heard that one a couple times.”

He paused briefly, taking a sharp inhale of air before asking, “Do you know how old that makes me feel?”

While taking a right turn at the end of the connecting hallway, Tony patted him emphatically on the shoulder. “Trust me, big bird. I know.”

Long after everyone had left, Steve stuck around.

At first, he wasn’t sure why, having already cleaned up the loads of fast food cartons and trays scattered around before anyone else could be bothered with their mess. He tried telling himself how much he personally hated waking up in medical, that he’d be a friendly face for when Peter woke up. But the more the night went on, the more he assumed Peter may be out for the count. Clint wasn’t exaggerating, the new drug they created really knocked him out.
For a while, he spoke with the nice caramel-skinned nurse, Claire. She told him how Bruce recruited her for Peter’s case, that she’d be returning to Harlem in a couple days despite the offer to stay onboard at the compound. Steve listened intently as she spoke highly of a few friends she had back home, friends she seemed to take good care of. He wished her the best of luck in her endeavors.

Overall though, it wasn’t enough to keep him occupied, not from himself and the way his mind ran wild. He was skimming through the book that Natasha had left behind when a loud, shameless yawn startled him out of his own thoughts.

“Mr. Rogers?” Peter’s bleary voice croaked, the teenager struggling to sit up in bed while rubbing harshly at his face. “What are you doing here? Is everything okay? Is there a mission? Do I need to —”

Steve laughed, extending his arm across the bed to keep Peter from rolling straight onto the floor, his sluggish attempts at moving proving to be hazardous.

“At ease, soldier,” he said, giving Peter enough time to gather his bearings and from the looks of it, rub the crust out of his eyes. “And please, call me Steve.”

Peter nodded, slowly becoming more awake and aware by the second. Though his eyes stayed half-mast, he managed to mumble out a half-coherent response of, “Right, right...”

His hand fumbled around beneath his blankets, blindly reaching for something he knew was there but couldn’t seem to locate. Steve wasn’t too sure what it could be he was searching for, and just when he thought to ask the young lad if he had lost something, Peter whipped out his cell phone.

Steve quirked an eyebrow, amused.

Peter smacked his lips together a couple times as he struggled to unlock his phone, swiping his finger on the cracked touch-screen until it finally displayed the time clock. Once there and brightly illuminated in his face, Peter’s wide eyes went to look over at him.

“It’s late, Mr. Rog—Steve,” he stammered, feeling a little dumb after uttering such an obvious statement. “Shouldn’t you, uh...shouldn’t you be sleeping?”

Steve offered a small smile. “I slept for seventy years, son. I don’t need much more rest.”

Peter physically strained not to let the goofy, stupidly wide grin that pulled at his lips take over his entire face. It was clear he couldn’t tell for sure if it was appropriate or not to laugh, like a dark joke some would find funny and others took seriously. He struggled to hold back his chuckle as he fiddled with the edges of his blankets.

“You use that a lot, don’t you?” he managed, smirking.

Steve gave a one-shouldered shrug. “No more than I’ve earned it.”

The reply seemed to break a good chunk of palpable anxiety that bounced between them. Peter finally let himself laugh, though it was much quieter, more tamed than the rowdy hysterics he witnessed earlier today. The lighthearted energy he once carried had since been replaced with a bundle of high-strung teenage nerves.

Steve couldn’t help but notice how much more awkward Peter seemed around him, his head ducked low, his fingers pulling at the seams of the blanket resting across his lap. It was a stark contrast to how relaxed he was around Tony. And with good reason, he and Peter barely had time
to become acquainted.

With that thought, he cleared his throat, gesturing an open palm at Peter. “I haven’t really had the chance to talk with you, one on one. You’ve been quite popular here.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Peter muttered, chewing noticeably on his lower lip. “If only I could take some of that popularity back to school with me.”

Steve sympathized, “It was similar for me back in my day, too. It can be hard, being at the bottom of the barrel like that.”

His eyes slid down to Peter’s lap as he spoke, where the kid kept tugging on his blanket, his nail beds pushing white from the pressure of his grip.

Steve frowned — he related all too well with nervous habits. With a deep breath, he fixed his gaze resolutely on Peter’s face. “But you got something special that they don’t. You know that, right?”

Peter finally stopped fidgeting, his hands freezing in place. He looked up and over at Steve. “What — being bitten by a radioactive spider? Could’ve happened to anyone.”

“True,” Steve said, nodding. “But it happened to the best of us.”

The compliment seemed to momentarily go over Peter’s head, as if there was no way such a good thing could ever be said about him. Instead of reiterating the statement, Steve instead gave it a moment to sink in, taking the pink blush that began to heat Peter’s cheeks as the sign that he understood.

“You know,” Steve leaned back in his chair, entwining his hands together and letting them rest on his stomach, “It’s kind of hard to trust someone when you don’t know who that someone really is. I know we got off on the wrong foot, Pete. But I couldn’t be more proud to have you here now. You’re a strong kid. And I don’t just mean your physical strength. Don’t lose that quality.”

In his lifetime, Steve had seen a lot of young, resilient men eager to please, the type that would bend over backward to receive such praise. He’d see them light up with joy and have a skip in their step for days after one good remark directed towards them.

All those men combined did nothing to top Peter, grinning so enthusiastically, so full of pride that it almost overwhelmed him to bear witness to.

“Thanks,” Peter finally managed, swallowing hard. “And—and that’s...that’s okay. I’ve been wrong about a lot of things, too.” He paused, briefly looking down to his hands with a noticeable sense of hesitation. Slowly he dropped the blanket altogether, his fingers going to tap against an open palm instead. “You know, when I first got my powers, I...I did stupid things with them. I made money...helped my Aunt. I thought that’s what powers were for. I...I was wrong about that. I was wrong about a lot of things.”

Steve let him talk until he was sure there was nothing more to say, patient through each pause and stutter that kept the young lad from finishing. And though he’d keep it to himself, there was no denying the pulse of warmth that fluttered in his chest, a sudden swell of pride at the pure heart he saw coating every bit of Peter’s character.

“For what it’s worth, I’m sorry for believing you were a criminal just because you were a mask,” Steve said, his voice both firm, serious and yet still gentle. “I understand now that you make that choice to protect your family.”
Peter nodded, meeting Steve’s gaze head-on.

“I do — I want to protect them, as much as I can. I don’t want anyone to get hurt because of what I do. But it’s also…” Peter paused, dipping his chin low as he waved the thought away. “Never mind, it’s silly.”

Steve shook his head, leaning forward slightly in his chair. “No, what?”

The hand that went to grip the blanket beneath him let go almost as quickly, the tight fist uncurling before ever really getting a chance to stress the muscles in his wrist. Steve took note that each deep breath the kid pulled in lifted his shoulders high.

He remained patient — if that’s what it took to get a little closer to Peter, he’d wait all night. After all, he was considered one of them now, part of the family.

Peter lifted his gaze from his lap, surprising Steve when he looked straight at him.

“I don’t want anyone to know my identity, who I am. I want to keep Spider-man and Peter Parker separate, I do. But…” He blinked furiously, forcing unshed water in his eyes to stay put. “I also wear it because...because no one can see my face. So no one can see how scared I am.”

Steve let out a soft sigh. He hesitated to lean forward, almost fighting the urge to rest a comforting hand on Peter’s shoulder and offer the contact that he felt was right in the moment. The warning signs to stay back were all there — the anxiety, the fidgeting — Steve pushed them aside, grateful when Peter didn’t shy away from his touch.

“Bravery isn’t just about not being afraid, son,” he said, squeezing his grip. “It’s about being scared and doing something anyway. Back there in that base? You showed more bravery than I’ve ever seen before. I mean it, pal — when you grow up, you’re going to be the best of all of us.”

For a moment that felt as long as it did short, Steve and Peter looked to each other with no words, no additional comments needed to fill the silence that washed over.

What wasn’t said was understood, a connection that eerily sparked and teetered through generations and decades of life. A lot of days — most days since coming out of the ice, Steve felt exhausted, weighed down by all the miles in his bones.

Something about Peter, about that connection they shared in morals, in character, it renewed his will to fight. Not for his own future, no. For theirs.

“Sorry about…” Peter broke the comfortable lull in conversation with a sheepish grimace. “Ya know, telling everyone...’bout the whole PSA thing.”

Steve groaned, letting his hand drop from Peter’s shoulder to scrub down the length of his face.

“No, Pete,” he grumbled, “I owe you an apology for those PSA’s.”

Outside the room and across the hall, Tony watched the interaction quietly, arms crossed with his back resting against the desk of the nurse's station.

Shifting his weight from one foot to the other, he glanced over at the nearest wall and caught sight of a digital clock — it was past midnight. What could he say, he was a night owl, always had been. While it would be odd for anyone else to make visits to the kid at this hour, even his Aunt having
retired to the personal sleeping quarters in the compound, this was when Tony felt his best.

It helped that Peter had developed an odd sleeping schedule himself, medicated through most of the day, wide awake during the late hours of the night. He didn’t mind keeping the kid company, even if that meant browsing through Netflix until the sun started to rise. And no, that feeling curling in his gut was not jealousy at Rogers having taken his spot tonight. That would be positively ridiculous.

Even if it was — ‘and it’s not’ he told himself— it was for the best. He needed to wean himself away. Peter would be returning home in a couple days, gone and back in Queens where he belonged. The kid had a life to get back to and Tony had made it his personal mission to ensure he would return to as much normalcy as possible.

Though it wasn’t a forever sort of departure, Tony had gotten so used to the easy access, the quick elevator rides and walk down the hall to see him. Dare he say, he had gotten spoiled.

Tony scoffed at the thought. He turned to leave, the heel of his foot spinning on the tile floors when —

“You know,” a voice stopped him dead in his tracks, “when I said to look after the boy, this isn’t exactly what I had in mind.”

For a brief moment, Tony looked up to the ceiling, willing the patience to keep his curses from floating where others could hear. The base of his skull began to ache with the persistent sort of headache that came only from that voice.

“A little late in the evening to be scheduling your annual check-ups with the docs, don’t you think?” he chided, turning around to face the source of his aggravation. “Of course, I’ll never argue that a man of your age should be getting his prostate checked frequently —”

“Seven years later and you’re still a problem, Stark,” Fury bit back, strolling forward with hands deep inside his jacket pockets. “One that I still have to deal with.”

Tony watched Nick Fury walk up the hallway with an exasperation that ran deep, his presence practically zapping away any of the energy he had remaining. There wasn’t enough caffeine in the world to get him through this.

Shrugging a little too nonchalantly, he let his hip rest against the desk next to him. “No idea what you’re talking about.”

“Mhmm, do you smell that?” Fury asked cynically, dipping his head low. “Smells like some commercial grade bullshit to me.”

Fury wasn’t fazed. Once close enough he mimicked Tony’s body language, the two now standing barely a foot apart at the reception station.

The brunette haired nurse that sat behind the desk looked at the two of them timidly, her eyes darting back and forth before she immediately got up and left.

Tony rolled his eyes. “Why are you here? What do you want?”

Despite the question, Tony already had a gut feeling why the former director had made his presence, especially now of all times. There was barely a skeleton crew walking the medical ward they stood in, little to no audience to witness the encounter and no immediate excuse he could dodge away with. It was a conversational trap, and one that he fell right into.
“What do I want?” Fury echoed, giving him a knowing look. “Well, in a perfect world I would have the real story of what happened down in that OsCorp facility. Not some cookie-cutter, cherry-picking nonsense that Rogers decided to spew.”

“Wouldn’t know what you’re talking about,” Tony airily insisted.

Fury’s frown deepened, leaving dark grooves in his brow. “I’m having a hard time believing that.”

“Hm,” Tony hummed, his fingers drumming against the counter. “Maybe you should trust people more.”

Fury straightened his posture, one eye squinting hard at Tony. “Last time I did that, I got the once in a lifetime opportunity to stand over my own tombstone.”

Tony’s fingers tapped insistently against the desk — drumdrumdrum — and he found himself using every ounce of control in his body not to lose it right then and there. He looked past Fury, biting down on his tongue both metaphorically and literally until he could form a proper response.

“So, let me get this straight. You came all the way down here just to question Director Hill’s conclusive and concluded report on what happened?” Tony forced a smirk. “You know you can always call me.”

Fury didn’t break eye contact. “Maybe I wanted to look you straight in the eye and see what you had to say for yourself.”

Tony walked past him, slapping the back of his hand against Fury’s leather-covered arm. “Still don’t know what you’re talking about, Nick.”

“That’s Fury to you,” he strongly chastised, spinning around to stare Tony down. “And I’d watch yourself here, Stark. You’re already on my shit-list.”

Tony turned on his own heels, mouth gaped open. “For what, exactly?”

He threw the man a look that oscillated somewhere between overly false innocence and deeply rooted annoyance.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Fury started to sarcastically say, folding his arms over his chest. “Nearly a goddamn decade and it’s starting to all blur together.”

Tony smiled teasingly. “I imagine the twenty-zero eyesight doesn’t help much with that.”

Fury frowned, irritated. “You want a recent example? If my memory serves me right — and tell me if I’m not recalling this correctly — I lent you classified SHIELD Intel that you decided to use as an opportunity to give yourself a side-kick.”

The anger hit Tony like a whip, red hot and as sharp as the finger he pointed at the former director. “That is not what this is —”

“I told you to look after the boy,” Fury reminded him, accusation laced through every syllable.

Tony threw his arms out wide. “And I think I’ve been doing a good job!”

Fury stared at him for a long moment, scowling.

As if to further make his point, the overhead intercom system paged a doctor somewhere within the compound, and a tech wheeledled equipment past the both of them.
“Do I look dumb to you?” Fury finally retorted, his no-nonsense tone echoing the halls.

Tony blew out a deep breath. Okay, so maybe the infirmary wasn’t the best place to defend himself.

Fury began to walk away, beckoning Tony to follow him with the mere wave of his hand. Reluctantly he did, though it wasn’t without a dramatic eye roll and childish sigh. The direction led them away from Peter's hospital room, the only reason he decided to tag along. Whatever they were discussing shouldn’t be eavesdropped on by spiderlings with enhanced hearing, they both knew that much to be true.

“Keep him on the ground,” Fury firmly repeated, leading them both out of the med-bay. “Not in the skies, and definitely not in the oceans. He belongs on the ground.”

“Right,” Tony snarled through his teeth. “Train him well now so that when he turns eighteen he’ll be a perfect candidate for you and your SHIELD operations, right? That’s what this is all about?”

Fury didn’t lessen his pace down the hallway. “You know part of our job is to monitor and regulate any unauthorized genetic mutations. That’s how we found out about him. And don’t forget that if we didn’t find out about him, you would have never found out about him.”

Tony stiffened, his mouth set in a thin line. “Really?”

Fury arched an eyebrow, sparing Tony a glance as they turned a corner. “You calling me a liar, Stark?”

Tony shrugged. “I’m just putting it out there. It wouldn’t be the first thing you’ve kept hidden from us.”

They both came to a stop outside the elevator lobby. Rather than make a move to access one of the many elevators, Fury instead crossed his arms, inclining his head as he stared Tony down.

“And what’s that supposed to mean?”

Tony pursed his lips, a seething energy leaching between them. “OsCorp? Their ‘research’ studies? The highly illegal, under wraps experimentations they’ve been performing that you knew about? If SHIELD had handled this correctly the first time around, psychos like Mysterio, the rock android, the Chitauri heads — they would have never been a problem in the first place.”

“Despite what you may think, the Avengers don’t receive every single issue SHIELD comes across,” Fury harshly asserted, his words containing such bite that anyone else would have flinched at the mere sound. “We have other, better-qualified people working on those matters.

Tony popped his lips. “Yeah, well, I think it’s time you turn the case over to us. Before more people get hurt.”

“And I think it’s time you watch your place.” Fury took a step closer to Tony, putting them inches apart from each other. The intimidation was intense, his head cocked to the side while Tony’s chin stayed high up, his composure never faltering.

“You’ve been given a lot of leeway here, Stark. You don’t want to find out what it’s really like when the red tape comes into play.”

With that, Fury leaned over and pressed his thumb against the button for the elevator doors. Tony watched him with a sense of contempt, swiping his own thumb across his nose with a scoff.
“That’s it, huh?” Tony smirked with a cockiness that was drowned out only by his aggravation. “You were itching so bad to lecture me that you made a trip out here all by yourself to get the satisfaction of having the last word?”

“Don’t think so highly of yourself,” Fury easily dismissed, eyes locked on the elevator in front of them.

“No, really. I never showed up to national headquarters with the others, I never gave you the opportunity to ream me out in front of the new World Security Council, and now here you are.” Tony wagged a finger at him. “Proving once again that you can’t stand to church and state the idea of me not being actively involved in every damn thing this duct-taped-together team manages to pull off.”

Fury cocked an eyebrow high, craning his neck to look at Tony. “You really don’t know, do you?”

Tony felt his pulse begin to race, jerky and painful in his chest as a protective surge of anger made his skin flush with heat. Between SHIELD and Fury, whatever he didn’t know couldn’t, in any way, shape or form, be a good thing.

He stepped forward, swallowing hard. “If this is about Peter, he’s a kid. Go away.”

Fury paused, taking one look at Tony before barking out a laugh.

“Oh, wow. And you’re giving me shit for keeping secrets?” Fury rested his hand against his stomach, nearly bent over from laughing. “Oh, that’s rich.”

The elevator doors slid open neatly, and Fury didn’t waste a second in stepping inside, all while Tony’s stare intensified on him.

“What are you talking about?” Tony tried to ignore the slight panic thrumming under his skin.

Fury turned around in the elevator, shoulders pulled back tight with his hands resting deep in his jacket pockets. “I’m talking about the welcome-wagon, Stark. After all, Rogers did make a deal with us.”

The elevator chimed at the exact second Tony felt his gusto fall away, replaced with a dangerous combination of curiosity and anxiety. His jaw tensed tightly, the muscles clenching so hard he worried they might lock.

“A deal?” A noticeable edge coated his question. “For what?”

Tony raised his eyebrows. Fury raised his right back.

“You best sweep the floors and dust the shelves,” was his response. “You got a new housemate moving in.”

The elevator doors closed on Fury’s face, smug for a man who barely showed any emotion.

Feet rooted in place in the empty lobby, Tony could feel the wheels in his head churning at light speed, his face pinched with confusion as he stared blankly ahead.

What was that...and why would…

His mouth ran dry, his jaw slacked open and sucking in all the air around him. He didn’t notice, not over the coiling anger that had his fingers digging into the palms of his hands, leaving dent marks
from his fingernails.

The voice that told him to steady his breathing and calm himself down couldn’t be heard over screaming reality, a high-pitched sort of monster that formed into gut-punching realization.

“Motherfu—”
Incoming Hefty Long-Ass-Chapter.

You want my last fun fact of the story? I can’t make this one up – past me decided to hold off on all these plot-heavy conversations for the second-to-last-chapter so that I had motivation to finish this damn beast. I’m not lying. I even came across a note I wrote myself last spring saying “Just finish it, you damn coward.”

Now, I really wish I could have split this up. It’s the longest of the bunch and boy-oh-boy did it stress me out posting such a word count. But it’s all one scene, preventing me from making neat little slices even if I wanted to. So again…

Warning: Incoming Hefty Long-ass-chapter.

Enjoy it, ‘cause it’s the last. It wraps up everything. All loose ends are now tied up somewhere, even if that somewhere doesn’t exist just yet. ;)

So here it is. This will be my final (lengthy) authors note. I want the ending of this chapter to hit with some impact and flow smoothly into the Epilogue, so Imma say my last words here and now.

This is my thank you.

Every single one of you – everyone who has read this, bookmarked this, commented on this, or just silently stalked this from afar...thank you. From the bottom of my damn heart, thank you. I have never, in my entire life, received such a positive, overwhelmingly fantastic response to a fanfiction before. I’d be lying if I said it wasn’t a goal of mine to have something I’ve written become such a “hit”, and guys – to me, this became a hit. I feel so incredibly lucky and I’m so incredibly thankful to you all. For taking time out of your day to comment – if I never got around to responding to each and every one of you I’m so sorry but I treasure EVERY comment, every single one, even if they were short “this was great” – I treasure it all.

People drew art for this fic. Wtf. Shoyzz, speakerunfolding, dragonnan, gigglewater – thank you doesn’t cut it. There just aren’t words to express my gratitude at seeing the beauty you took the time to create, the fact that you put your amazingly awesome skills to use for this fic feels like a dream to me. I really feel like I won the lottery, I really do.

Mei_kun, you deserve a shutout for helping tremendously with editing the 3rd segment of this fic (chapters 11 through 18) You have fantastic editorial skills and seriously, you need to get into the business. Thank you for spending the summer with me, teaching me and helping me format my writing with your skills.

This has been a hell of a roller-coaster, you guys. I started this nearly a year ago to get me through the wait between Infinity War and Endgame. I never anticipated the love it would get. I can only hope it’s helped you with the wait the way it has for me. ‘Cause seriously…

I’m not ready for Endgame.
So, with that said, I hope to see you all on the other side of this heart-wrenching, soul sucking movie that will, without a doubt, break me into pieces. Remember – as we cry in the seats of the movie theater for whatever torture we might experience at the hands of the Russo brothers – we’re in this together.

Love you all. Hit me up on Tumblr if ya wanna keep in touch.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

To Tony’s surprise and irritation, it turned out that when Rogers didn’t want to talk about something, the star-spangled asshole could make himself conveniently unavailable.

He tapped his foot repeatedly against the marble floors below him, sitting in his office with documents laid out on his desk that he really wasn’t happy to be looking at. The sound distracted him, kept his boiling temperament at bay. It had to; it wasn’t like he could take it out on the source.

“FRIDAY...” He stared straight ahead, the wall easier to look at than the ‘Steve Rogers: Request for leave of absence. Location, Wakanda’ forms that taunted him. “I want to be notified the instant he steps back into this building. Not a second later.”

His AI was dutiful in his request. A few weeks later he received word that Rogers had returned to the compound — on the day of Peter’s belated birthday celebration.

He was with the catering company when the notice came through.
“Cake goes in the kitchen, talk to Pepper if you have any questions,” Tony explained in one rushed breath, pushing past the decorators in his hurry.

Storming to the exit with his jaw clenched tightly, he nearly knocked into the ladder someone stood on, the person too busy hanging red and blue garland across the ceiling to notice.

The balloons he kicked around settled to the ground just as he came to a startling halt at the doorway, eyes locking dead-center on Steve.

It took Tony’s brain a moment to catch up with his eyes, to realize that he wasn’t imagining things. Because there was no possible way Steve had decided to approach him here — let alone now of all times. That would be outrageous, even by Rogers’ standards.

And yet here he was. Steve stood diffidently in the doorway, holding a colorful gift-wrapped box underneath his arm. Had he a clear mind, Tony might possibly say the soldier looked guilty, a weight on his shoulders that carried the aura of shame.

He didn’t notice, too busy restraining himself from ripping Steve’s face off — Iron Man repulsors not needed.

“Conference room,” Tony snarled, his voice low. “Now.”

Steve gave one shake of his head. “I just bumped into Pepper. She said Peter’s about to arrive any second now.”

“Good. She can distract him for me.” Tony could feel his words waver with instability, his tone darkening with unbridled anger. “Don’t think for a second that you’re off the hook from this.”

“I don’t. And I’m not saying that I should be,” Steve’s voice had his own sense of unsteadiness to it. “I agree, we need to talk —”

“No.” Tony took a step closer, his shoulders pulled back tautly. “I need to talk, you need to shut your goddamn mouth and listen.”

Steve swallowed thickly. The Adam’s apple in his throat bobbed with the movement.

It only managed to further piss Tony off, a sign that Rogers knew what he did was wrong, that he knew he was guilty. Christ, if it weren’t for King T’Challa having insisted they keep any personal arguments off his soil, he’d have flown to Wakanda days ago and given both Steve and his damn buddy-ol-pal a piece of his mind.

Steve gently sat his present aside on the nearest end-table, going to lift his hands in the air placatingly.

“I know you’re angry —”

“Oh, angry doesn’t begin to cover it.”

Tony’s chest was heaving at this point, his breaths coming in shallow and fast, fists clenching dangerously tight at his sides. His knuckles began to tingle the longer he held the grip, the tension in his muscles shooting an aching strain up his forearms. The feeling was all secondary to the betrayal, the deception that rolled through him like a crumbling avalanche.

The room began to clear out, the decorators finished and the caterers having laid out their abundance of food. Despite being in their way, Tony never budged an inch from the exit, letting
them instead walk around him.

Steve politely took a step away from the door, further entering the room. It put him closer to Tony, now barely a foot apart.

He took a deep breath in. “Hear me out —”

“I did,” Tony bluntly retorted. “In Siberia.”

Steve furrowed his brows, his expression caught between offended and torn. The words hit home. For a brief moment, it was all that stood between the two of them, pulling them down with a heavy weight and a doubtful silence.

“We got him pardoned, exonerated —” Tony snapped, a cold glare preceding his question. “What more did you want?”

Steve wasn’t oblivious. He could see the conflict raging behind Tony’s eyes, the fire in his words that he barely managed to suppress. Like a twisted merry-go-round thriving off their misery, they were back at odds with each other, standing on different ends of the spectrum. Back at where they started.

“I wanted him home,” Steve slowly explained. “And living under SHIELD’s roof was the only way they’d let him back into the states. You know that.”

Tony nodded scathingly, teeth gritting hard. “So that’s how you, Barton and Romanoff got off scot-free. You finally used that bargaining chip of yours.”

Steve sighed. “Tony —”

“If you had just let me help —”

“We couldn’t involve you!” Steve swallowed hard before speaking again. “Come on, Tony. If we had gotten you involved, they’d have taken you away from Peter. They’d deem you irresponsible to even be involved in his life. We handled it, the best that we could.”

“No,” Tony bit back lowly, shaking his head. “You made a deal is what you did. A deal that if they let you free, you’d finally give them what they want — you’d give them Barnes.”

Steve’s face answered the question long before his words were actually spoken.

“Yes,” he admitted, his voice noticeably small. “I told them if they let us go, I’d surrender Bucky to SHIELD.”

Tony knew the answer. He had known it for weeks, since before Peter had been discharged from the infirmary and sent back home to Queens. He couldn’t understand why it bothered him so much now, why it knocked the wind straight out of his lungs.

He realized that somehow, hearing it straight from the source dug a darker hole, a greater sense of distress that not even the weeks of limbo waiting for this very conversation had done to him.

“Unreal,” Tony scoffed, stricken. He looked away, not able to fathom staring Steve down right now, every ounce of his body resisting the urge to punch out each of his goddamn perfect teeth.

Despite the obvious tension, Steve stepped forward. Tony’s head snapped towards him as he did.
“It’s not like Bucky’s happy about this,” he tried to reason. “He’s just as furious, he doesn’t want to work under SHIELD as much as you don’t want him living here.”

Tony barked a laugh, dry and hollow with no traces of humor. “Oh, that’s better, that makes this all okay.”

The indignation poured out of Tony like a broken dam, and Steve frowned as he felt the animosity curdle, knowing he was the cause.

“Listen, it’ll be months before he even arrives. There’s still time to get used to this, they still have to finish rehabilitating him—”

“He’s not even rehabilitated yet?” Tony hissed, stiffening from the roots of anxiety planted deep in his spine.

Steve paused, deflated.

“No.” He barely managed to jump back in before Tony could go off the rails. “They’re close, though! A few more cycles, just a few more treatments. King T’Challa’s sister Shuri is insistent that—”

“Why couldn’t you just take the Quinjet out to Wakanda every weekend to see him like a normal person?” Tony’s face remained stern, even as he pinched the bridge of his nose tightly. He didn’t chance to look at Rogers for too long, the risk of being swayed by his crystal blue eyes always somehow greater in the middle of an argument.

“Tony,” Steve persisted. “He’s better now, they’ve helped him, he—”

“Doesn’t belong here.”

Steve opened his mouth to argue, only to stay silent. The retaliation visibly caught him off-guard, his jaw hanging loose, his shoulders slumping like a puppet whose strings had been cut.

Long after Tony had said the words and the sting remained in the air, sharp and painful like a laceration across his skin.

When he finally found his voice, it was much quieter, more reserved.

“I thought you...” Steve shook his head, confused. “After what you said...I thought you were okay with him.”

The memories of freezing cold water roaring through Tony’s ears brought alongside the sound of his own voice, broken and pleading for forgiveness at the anticipation of death. His breaths deepened as his anger lessened, his resentment replaced with disappointment — disappointment in Rogers, disappointment in himself.

“So did I,” Tony admitted.

Steve’s expression seemed to crumble, a loss of composure in his face so rarely seen that it took Tony by surprise. Each line that etched into the contours of his skin seemed to bring anew the age he never showed, displaying the wars he fought through and the men he had lost along the way.

Tony wouldn’t admit to it, but he felt like a dick at that moment. The one thing that brought Rogers the smallest amount of peace and he felt the need to pick a fight about it. Weeks of stewing anger seemed to quell at the realization, especially as he remembered how he had finally come to
understand that similar solace himself. It was hypocritical of him to ask anything different from his team, and yet here he was doing as much.

Pounding footsteps, the kind that was both light and heavy at the same time, quaked through their resonating silence.

“Hey,” Natasha whispered harshly, her wide-lipped grin not matching the tone of her voice. “Can you two save your little martial spat for after the kid leaves?”

Both Tony and Steve looked to their right, slightly startled by her presence. She wasn’t alone. A group of familiar faces began to walk up the stairway, first Clint—who looked as aggravated as she did at the two of them, followed by Bruce, Vision, Happy—

“Kid, why is your face so sweaty!?” Happy grimaced as he led Peter into the room, both his large hands covering the boy’s eyes while they walked slowly up the stairs.

“I don’t know—because I’m nervous!?” Peter had a laugh in his voice, even as he tripped on the final step leading up. “I think the better question here is—why do your hands smell like a cheesy gordita crunch from taco bell?”

The room came back into unrelenting, brutal focus and Tony’s vision cleared way of his red, heated anger, showcasing instead the reality of the situation. It was Peter’s birthday party. And Peter had arrived.

Happy paused, deadpanned. “You know, you’re lucky that I’m too busy with interviews to stick around.”

Peter frowned. “Stick around for…?”

Happy removed his hands from Peter’s eyes before he could finish the question, immediately wiping them against his dress pants with a disgusted scoff.

There was a beat when Peter looked around. Wide, starry eyes roamed the room that had been decked out in red and blue, the colors covering nearly every corner from hanging garland to floating balloons. He was in awe taking in the sight.

Tony snapped his head back over to Steve, scowling as if to say ‘You just had to wait until now to talk about this.’

From the stairway, Clint and Bruce exchanged a nervous glance, clearly sensing the tension.

Across the room, Natasha stared at Tony and Steve, having walked in on the two looking to be a second away from a possible fist fight.

With a shrug and a bitten back sigh, Clint forced out an exaggeratedly excited, “Happy birthday!”, followed by staring daggers down at the three instigators. After all, this was not what they had planned.

The gravity of the situation didn’t go untouched. Natasha seemed irritated enough by their arguing that the stress in her words could invoke a quiet aneurysm—in who was yet to be determined.

“Save it for later,” she hissed lowly, around the same time Peter exclaimed with rapt excitement, “This is so cool!”

“Oh,” Vision spoke up, adjusting his sweater vest. “Was that the cue Mr. Banner spoke about? I
apologize. As they say...happy birthday, Peter.”

Clint rolled his eyes, blowing into two different party horns that squawked out a noise even Vision was annoyed by.

Peter grinned even wider, kicking through a floor of balloons as he walked into the communal area. Bruce hastily followed suit, side-eyeing the three across the way to make sure they didn’t get too close.

“We, uh, we have a cake..for you, Peter. Here, in the kitchen,” Bruce hurried to gain Peter’s attention, laying his hand against the small his back while they walked together.

Tony and Steve locked eyes. The unspoken lingering between them had an obvious cause.

They both knew Tony would go off to Peter, someone he considered to be his protegee, someone who he nearly gave his own life for and expected everyone to do the same — and yet he would carry resentment for Steve wanting to try and bring back his equivalent. They’d talk about it later, they always did. But in the interim, nothing was resolved, nothing was fixed.

And yet still, Steve nodded his head, encouraging Tony to go. Their confrontation could wait another day.

It felt wrong.

And just like that, after staring in Steve’s ridiculously blue eyes for too long, Tony felt guilty.

Luckily for him, he was the master of pushing emotions aside, an expert of slipping on a mask to cover the ugly truth. Years, decades even spent living under the scrutiny of the public eye meant learning how to switch off at a whim.

With a deep breath, a deeper exhale, and a sharp roll of his neck and shoulders, he approached the group. All smiles, no traces of worry.

“Happy sixteenth, spiderling!”

Cool, calm, collected. Like nothing had happened.

While the others looked at him with knowing eyes, Peter seemed oblivious to the stress and tension they had walked in on. And that’s all that mattered for Tony.

“Mr. Stark, this is —!” Peter looked around the room, ecstatic. “This is awesome! I can’t believe — holy crap!”

Clint, busy strapping a cone-shaped birthday hat onto his head, snorted at Tony’s flippancy.

Happy mimicked a similar scoff, pointing his thumb down the staircase as he told Tony, “I’m heading out. Pepper has me booked for thirty-six interviews today.”

Tony shrugged. “And who did that to themselves?” he asked as he approached the others in the kitchen.

Happy glared.

Tony smiled, popping off the top to one of his beer bottles and going so far as to take a swig before Happy left. Straightening his tie, the man retreated down the stairway muttering something about “five months” and “security breaches” and “I didn’t think I had to do the interviews if I fired them
all.”

In the kitchen, Peter fought a losing battle at shutting his widely-open jaw, his eyes glued to the cake sitting in front of him that he imagined had to cost what his Aunt paid monthly in rent, if not double that.

Bruce was already cutting slices into the top layer, the bright colors bringing life to the modern designed kitchen. It had red and blue with black webbing laced through-out — it was every bit Spider-man, all the way down to the white curved eyes mimicking his infamous masks lenses.

“Mr. Stark, this is — I mean — what is this?”

“It’s a surprise party, squirt.” Tony slung his arm around Peter’s shoulder. “What, you’ve never had one before?”

“Not like this!” Peter gawked, struggling to remove his backpack, practically tossing it to the ground with excitement “Oh my god, this is the coolest thing ever!”

“Got the cake!”

Sam’s announcement was distant, coming from the bottom of the stairway. The group, confused, turned to look as he approached the top, a rectangular sheet cake barely the length of his body held in both hands.

“Uhm...no,” Natasha bluntly said, head cocked towards the five-tier masterpiece sitting in front of them. “I believe we have the cake here, Sam.”

Despite her obvious correction, Sam’s grin never lessened, even as he approached the kitchen and set down his cheaply made cake directly next Tony’s.

Peter, who had been taking a dozen or so photos with his cell phone, only stopped when seeing Sam place the cake on the counter.

“Yes, but mine,” Sam gestured with both hands, “is much better.”

The group hovered over the kitchen counter, frowning at the purple frosted Barney cake in front of them. The price sticker of twenty-two dollars was still on the plastic dome.

Bruce took one look at it before continuing to cut the Spider-man cake into pieces, laying out slices on individual plates.

Tony shook his head. “You do understand I’m not reimbursing you for that, correct?”

Sam shrugged, his smile locked in place. “Totally worth it.”

Stuffing his cell phone way, Peter shrugged himself, still bouncing on his feet. “I don’t mind! Double the cake, double the yum!”

“Not the reaction I was going for, but I’ll take it!” Sam began to pop the plastic dome off the sheet-cake, ignoring the protests from the others as he did.

For what it was worth, Peter really didn’t mind having two cakes. Whether he ate Sam’s out of pity or not stood to be debated. And in all fairness, Tony’s cake was so professionally baked that he actually felt a tad bit bad about eating it, the design so immaculate and perfect that he wanted to keep it around forever.
Until he actually ate a piece, anyway.

“Holy crap!” he muffled through a mouthful of frosting. “This is amazing!”

“It’s not that great,” Sam huffed, all but pouting.

Clint, sucking the helium out of one of the nearby balloons, managed a high-pitch, “It’s delicious and you know it.”

Natasha rolled her eyes. “Keep that up and you’ll kill what little brain cells you have left.”

Clint, deadpanned, sucked in another breath of helium, looking her dead-square in the eyes as he responded, “Maybe then I can actually retire for good, vegetable or not.”

If there was one thing Tony was great at doing, it was throwing a party. There was no shortage of food lining up the kitchen counters, to the point where Peter was sure he’d end up in either a diabetic coma or sodium-induced heart attack.

Stuffing his mouth with a handful of pigs-in-a-blanket, he decided either would be a good way to go.

“Alright, I’m getting another drink. Anyone?” Sam asked, standing from the sofa.

Clint handed his plate towards him. “Get me another slice?”

Sam took the plate with a furrow of his brows. “Dude, that’s like your seventh slice.”

“Yeah…” he drawled out. “And I’m the only one eating your Trader Joe’s cake, so…”

Sam side-eyed him with a glare that contained no real threat, especially as he walked into the kitchen to smack another crudely designed slice of cake onto his plate.

Natasha crossed her legs and eyed him suspiciously. “Clint, how the hell do you manage to stay fit eating all this crap?”

“That is an excellent question!” Clint wagged his purple-frosted covered fork at her, crumbs falling into his lap. “I could have sworn my metabolism would be shot once I hit thirty. Never happened. Still waiting for my dad bod. Until then —”

The unexpected sound of sharp, crisp crackling interrupted their conversation, a bright orange glow illuminating the room’s walls with a familiarity they had become accustomed to. Those with their backs turned barely paid attention to the vivid light as the portal came to a close, sparks dropping to the floor like extinguished fireworks.

Peter, on the other hand, watched with wide-eyes, a single potato chip falling out of his mouth. “Holy sh —”

“I don’t know how I feel about you bypassing my security like that.” Tony circled a finger in the direction of the disappearing portal and the occupants who stood in front of it. “Apparently you failed to get the whole gist of security breaches when we took down an impostor who infiltrated my company.”

Strange broke into a smile, as small as it may have been.

“I apologize for the intrusion,” he said, gesturing behind him in a way that rustled his red cloak. “I have somebody here who wanted to —”
“Peter!” Wanda ran forward the moment she caught sight of the boy, who was too busy standing frozen in shock to register her presence. She tackled him into a hug, nearly knocking the two of them onto the sofa he stood in front of.

“Ompfh!” he grunted, startled by the skinny arms that wrapped tightly around him. Before he could consider what to do with his own hands – hug back? Keep them at his sides? Seriously, when it came to girls he was a lost tourist in NYC without their GPS – she had pulled away, grinning ear to ear.

“I missed you so much, my rebenok pauk!” Wanda placed both her hands to his cheeks, smushing them in a way that puffed his lips forward. “I am so happy to see how much better you are!”

Peter nodded, eyes still wide as saucers. “Thanks, I —”

“I have spent every day checking with Steve to see how you have been,” she continued, moving her hands down from his face onto his shoulders. “I was so happy to hear you are home again. I am even happier to be here with you!”

From nearby on the couches, Sam arched an eyebrow high enough to reach the ceiling and Clint snorted a laugh into his fork covered with cake. The others watched silently, with both confusion and mild interest. Wanda had never been one to be so open, so talkative. It was the exact opposite of her normal behavior, shy and reserved, almost always off in a corner conversing quietly with Vision.

Still, it was hard not to enjoy how happy she seemed. They could all agree that after everything she’d been through, it was well deserved.

“Uhm, yeah,” Peter stammered, “it’s great to see —”

“I heard it was your birthday!” Her excitement was only matched by his teenage-boy confusion.

“Uh, sorta?” Peter gulped heavily, touching his cheek where she had put her hands. It felt warm, and not just from the contact of her skin. There was a fizzle to it, like static electricity. “It was my birthday a couple weeks ago—”

“Look!” Wanda had already pulled out a slim, white device from her jean pockets, holding it up for him to see. “Doctor Strange has shown me his entire collection of music so I have been adding songs to the playlist. I believe you will like what you see.”

Peter reached out to grab the iPod, thumb already scrolling across the touchscreen. They began to walk towards the kitchen while he did.

“Whoa, super retro,” he could be heard saying as she gathered him a plate of food. “Awesome!”

From the living room, Strange looked towards Tony, quirking an eyebrow high.

“Retro?” he repeated.

Tony snorted, patting him on the back. “Hurts to be reminded of your mortal age, don’t it?”

Strange narrowed his eyes and Tony smirked. The grin fell flat as soon as the corner of the red cloak reached up towards him, aiming for his hand. He jerked away, a finger going to point sharply at the fabric.

“That thing needs to behave as long as you’re in my house.”
Before Stephen could manage a retort, Peter had come walking out of the kitchen, his footsteps shy and timid. From behind them, Wanda could be heard kindly ushering orders to Vision, something about the potato chip dip needing more spices while he rummaged through the cabinets for her.

“I...feel like I’ve seen you before,” Peter was quiet, unsure if he really wanted the oddly dressed man to hear him or not.

Stephen smiled at him, much more warmth in his facial features than what he originally arrived with.

“That is very well possible,” he said.

His answer only further confused Peter, who continued to stare at him with a look of bewilderment so intense it almost had Tony laughing.

“Peter, magical wizard,” Tony went on to introduce, gesturing towards each of them with an open palm. “Magical wizard, Peter.”

“Please,” Stephen said, reaching forward to shake Peter’s hand. The kid wiped his palm against his pants before latching onto his grip. “Don’t ever call me that.”

They shook hands for much longer than needed, Peter only realizing how awkward the moment had become once Stephen lifted an eyebrow high against his hairline.

“Oh wow.” Peter swallowed nervously, abruptly letting go of handshake “You’re...you’re real.”

Stephen cocked his head to the side, somewhat insulted, mostly puzzled.

“I mean, I knew that you were...you were real,” Peter tried to correct, only managing to further steer himself off the cliff that he liked to call mountain of embarrassment. “But you’re...you’re real–real. Like, really here. Like, holy crap you just teleported here? How — that’s so — I mean — wow.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “Despite the incredibly limited vocabulary you may be hearing now, I ensure you Peter is actually top of his class at a highly sought after prestigious STEM high-school.”

Stephen’s lips curled up in a soft smile and Peter rubbed ferociously at the nape of his neck, barely keeping himself from cringing under Tony’s stare. It was like the man was mentally begging him not to make an embarrassment of himself in front of the magical wizard, of which he had clearly already managed to do.

“Sorry, sorry,” he muttered, noticeably chewing on his lower lip. “Thank you, Mr—Doctor Strange. You know, for uh...for saving me and all.”

“Oh course, Peter.” Stephen had placed both his hands deep inside his blue tunic, the red cloak oddly mimicking his action by hugging its corners to his hips. “It’s nice to see you up and about. You’ve made quite a recovery.”

Peter nodded with more force than what felt natural, too busy eyeing Stephen with words resting on the tip of his tongue, never making it out in his fit of confusion. His finger pointed towards him, eyes narrow with a recognition he couldn’t place.

“I really do feel like I’ve met you before —”

“Peter, come!” Wanda appeared suddenly from behind, tugging on his arm and guiding him to the
sofas. “I have so much to talk with you about!”

Practically ushered away from the adults, Peter shot a sideways glance at the sorcerer as Wanda dragged him across the room, unsure if their conversation should come to an end so suddenly.

Stephen gave one soft nod, as if telling the teenager that it was okay.

The two plopped down on the couch together, Wanda eagerly pointing out the different songs he browsed through on the iPod while he listened patiently to her excited rambling.

“And then he took me to another realm. It was beautiful, Peter! So gorgeous. You should have seen it – no, you will see it, we will take you there one day! And then, as we practiced the art of energy projection...”

Tony crossed his arms over his chest, standing at Strange’s side while they both eyed the young ones from afar.

“The little witch been treating you okay?” he asked, careful to sound casual.

Strange spared a glance towards him, almost smirking at the question.

“As okay as it appears you’ve been treating Peter...” he hummed, looking around at the room’s decorations. “Not your ward, huh?”

Tony shook his head, his eyes straight ahead. “Not my ward.”

And with that, Strange chuckled, his shoulders shaking at the humor only he found in Tony’s denial.

“Regardless,” he turned slightly to face the billionaire, “I’m glad everything’s been working out in your favor.”

“You knew that though, didn’t you?” Tony hunched his shoulders, turning inwards enough to be facing Stephen head-on. “Your magical spirits told you this would all work out in the end, that everything would be hunky dory and you could end up taking one of my team members to train them the ways of Houdini.”

Stephen hesitated, lips pursed as he fought off a rising debate. It didn’t take him long to figure out that magic and Tony Stark didn’t get along too well; he was a man of science, someone who needed concrete proof for his foundation of belief. There was nothing Stephen could do to change that.

“The time stone is a...finicky object, Stark,” he explained. “It is not always reliable. The future changes and alters with every decision we make. This future was not one the Vishanti chose to show me.”

Peter’s sudden laugh took them both by surprise, the kid bent over and gasping for air. Clint had since joined in on his conversation with Wanda, leaning over the back of the couch and saying something hushed to them both. Wanda had stuffed her face into a pillow, failing to contain her own laughter, gently trying to slap Clint away.

Stephen smiled. “This future is in your hands.”

Tony shifted slightly on his feet, his hands still tucked firmly underneath his armpits. He cleared his throat more than once, licked his lips, sniffed a few times – he found himself doing everything
possible to keep his own outrageously joyful smile at bay.

“You know, speaking of hands,” he began, eyes focusing somewhere ahead on a blank wall. “With the advancements I’ve made on nano-tech lately, and how far ahead SI has gotten with biomedical engineering, I could have something whipped up to help with those tremors of yours. Similar to the stabilizing devices Parkinson patients are using these days. Discrete, flexible, no one would ever notice a thing.”

Stephen nodded with a hum. “Your thoughtfulness is appreciated. Trust me, the wish for a cure is seductive. It captives...it charms. But not everything broken needs fixed.” Though Tony failed to look his way, Stephen locked eyes on him. “Sometimes it’s how we handle the brokenness that makes us who we are.”

Tony kept his eyes trained ahead, not daring to meet the gaze that pierced through him. The worlds had done enough of that as it was. It resonated with him, deeper than he expected. He hadn’t realized how heavy the need to fix things had been on his mind, especially just in the last handful of weeks. It had become a poisonous mentality, embedded in him like the arc reactor once residing inside his chest.

He hummed, only realizing his throat had made the noise shortly after it entered his own ears. “Well, I’m not too sure if I ever properly thanked you or not, but uh...yeah. Thanks.”

The rushed attempt at gratitude was met with physical contact, one Tony nearly backed away from. He turned to see Stephen with his hand against his arm, chin tilted low, eyes solemn. “Tony, I meant what I said when this all first started,” his tone held a heavy weight. “You will play an integral part in all of our futures, however, and whenever that may be. I have no doubt we’ll be seeing each other again.”

Tony turned his attention back ahead, watching as Sam and Clint both argued over the sofa where Peter and Wanda sat. Something about whether Pink Floyd or Garfunkel and Oates were the better bands; Tony couldn’t quite hear and he wasn’t paying much attention. “So does that mean you want to pass on a phone number, or...?”

The rush of wind blew through his hair before he could finish the thought. Snapping his head to the side, Tony furrowed his brows, surprised at the empty space next to him where Stephen once stood. “Alright then,” he muttered.

Despite everything they had gone through, magic was still something he couldn’t get a handle on. Tony found himself chuckling, returning to the group with a smile he finally couldn’t resist.

Of course, he snatched a handful of pretzels from Bruce’s plate first before collapsing onto the couch. “The kitchen is right there.” Bruce sighed.

Tony crunched on a mouthful of pretzels. “Yes, but your plate was right there. C’mon Brucey, how long we been doing this shindig? You haven’t been out of the game that long.”

The afternoon turned into evening long before any of them could realize how quickly time was passing, their conversations easy and lighthearted. It never failed to amaze Tony how vast their spread of topics could be. One moment they were talking about the difference between analog and
nano-tech web-shooters, the very next someone was explaining to Vision why balloons were used to celebrate birthdays.

“Do not over-complicate it, Vis,” Wanda assured him, her hand gentle against his. “It is just something we do for fun.”

Vision nodded, still appearing confused. “For...fun. I think I understand.”

It was around the time the sun had set, the starry night beginning to shine through the skylight ceiling that Tony had stepped away to make a brief phone call.

When he returned — not even a full ten minutes later — the group had huddled towards the largest wall of the room, having taped up his once framed and favorite Iron Man poster. The imitation design of the ‘Obama Hope’ campaign stuck out like a sore thumb against the sleek, gray walls, yet almost blended in perfectly with the bright red and blue garland hanging down from the ceilings.

A few feet in front of it, Sam was spinning Clint in a circle, the archer blind-folded with Bruce’s green striped necktie. His eyes nearly bulged out of his head at the sight, his hand barely managing to stuff his cell phone back into his blazer pocket.

“Hey!” Tony shouted, storming forward. “What’s this? What the hell is going on?”

Sam’s grin was all teeth, his hands firm on Clint’s shoulder as he forced him to come to a stop.

“Pin the tail on the Iron Man,” he explained with such nonchalance that Tony almost doubted his own hearing, going so far as to dig his index finger around inside his ear.

It took a beat for him to realize they were serious, even after he loosened the built-up wax that may have made him imagine such an absurd statement.

“You have got to be kidding me,” Tony muttered, affronted. “Should I even ask how you managed to get your hands on this?”

Natasha grinned at Tony’s disgruntlement, crossing her legs and letting her heel sit against Bruce’s thigh. “Pepper was gracious enough to offer it up as a party favor.”

Tony’s eyebrows shot up with a sense of shock he couldn’t articulate. Instead, he looked between the red, yellow and blue Iron Man poster to back at Natasha.

She smiled sweetly at him.

He turned to stare incredulously at Bruce, who — for someone who appeared highly entertained by the game — shrugged with remorse. Tony could see through his poorly concealed veil as if it were sheer lace; after all, it wasn’t like the others would risk a code-green by bullying his dress tie off of him.

“Alright, count of three.” Clint teetered his hand back, the dart clenched tightly between his fingers. “One...two...”

Tony snatched the feathered-tip dart before he could throw it. “You even think about it, Barton...”

Clint pulled the makeshift blindfold from his eyes, frowning with little heat behind the expression. If anything, he looked to be holding back a smirk that Tony was sure he could easily wipe off his face with one blast of his repulsor beam.
“That,” he gestured to the poster with the dart, “is a piece of art not having been created for your childish amusement.”

“Art, vanity—” Clint shrugged, snatching the dart back. “Do you even know the difference?”

Tony glared.

Clint smiled, the cocky smirk he had clearly been resisting finally pulling at his lips. Before Tony could even blink, he threw the dart forward, never once even glancing at the wall as he did. To no one’s surprise, it hit dead-center on the poster.

To Tony’s annoyance, the archer blew a puff of air at his fingers, further cultivating his air of arrogance.

“Okay,” Bruce got up from the sofa with a grunt, leaning his hands on his knees before standing tall. “That’s enough of that.”

Tony waved his hand towards his friend. “Thank you —!”

“Clint stole my turn two rounds ago, it’s time I get a shot at this.” Bruce smiled stupidly, enjoying the moment far more than expected when Sam wrapped the tie around his eyes.

It took an alarming amount of effort on Tony’s part to stonewall the argument, let alone resist the urge to tear down his poster so he could hang it over Pepper’s side of the bed later in the evening. The latter he still wasn’t one hundred percent positive he wouldn’t do once the party came to an end.

He settled on rolling his eyes, relishing in Bruce’s horrible aim when the dart he threw hit way above the top of the poster. He didn’t understand what it was about having the kid around that turned the rest of them into immature brats, but had to admit that there was no desire to fight it. If silly games made them happy, who was he to put a stop to that?

It was then Tony noticed the kid was strangely absent from the group and their childish shenanigans.

It didn’t take long to find him, sitting quietly on a love-sofa towards the corner of the room. On the glass table in front of him were numerous textbooks, and he chewed on a yellow pencil in-between his teeth with harsh concentration. It appeared he had been left alone, what with Wanda and Vision catching up away from everyone else, and said everyone else preoccupied tearing holes into the large print of Iron Man’s face.

Natasha cheered loudly as her dart hit square in the eye-slit. “Ten points for me!”

“Wait, we’re doing points?” Clint sat up straighter on the couch, frowning. “No one told me there was a point system.”

Sam scribbled something down on the nearest notepad, never looking up at Clint as he answered, “There’s a point system. You’re excluded from it.”

With the others distracted and Peter off by himself, Tony decided there wouldn’t be a better time to bite the bullet and get his gift-giving over with. From one of the nearest bookshelves, he retrieved the shiny, glossed wrapped box he had stored away earlier, careful not to rip the blue bows off the top before stuffing it under his arm.

“Hey, spider-brat,” Tony teased, gaining his attention. Peter shot his head up at record speed, the
pencil nearly falling from between his teeth. “You do realize this is your party, right?”

For a moment, Peter’s face was blank, as if he didn’t understand what he had been asked. He looked around, wondering if it was a trick question. It wasn’t until he looked back at Tony that it clicked — he chuckled, going to remove the pencil from his mouth.

“Yeah, yeah, sorry. I just missed so much homework while I was...you know, dead.” The finger quotations he gave couldn’t be any more exaggerated, only matched by the humored grin on his face.

Tony sighed, subconsciously clenching the box harder underneath his arm.

“Scoot,” he demanded, waiting until Peter wiggled to the side before plopping down on the couch next to him. “You were never officially or legally dead, kiddo. Stick to the Paris story.”

Peter nodded enough times that Tony was sure his head would roll off his shoulders.

“Right, right...”

They sat side-by-side, Peter with an open textbook in his lap, Tony with a square wrapped box settled near the sofa’s armrest. For longer than he knew could have been comfortable he stared ahead with unfocused eyes, his only movement the jittery tapping from his foot to the floor.

It got to the point where Peter tried to figure out what was so interesting about the stairway banister he was looking at, curiously craning his neck forward to get a better view.

Just when he opened his mouth to speak, Tony swiftly and wordlessly swapped out his textbook for the gift box, tossing the offensive World History textbook on the coffee table.

“What’s this?” Peter frowned, hands hovering over the box.

“I believe they call this a birthday present,” Tony said wryly, resisting the urge to roll his eyes by instead running his hand through his goatee.

Peter’s eyes widened with shock. “Mr. Stark, you didn’t have to —”

“Kid, keep it up and you’re going to give me an aneurysm. I can feel the blood vessels in my brain weakening as we speak.” Tony turned to face him, pointing his hand towards the red box. “Open it.”

Despite the instructions, Peter didn’t move to unwrap the gift. His hands hovered over it tentatively like it was porcelain glass, afraid it would break.

Only after Tony once again gestured to the gift with eyebrows raised high did Peter begin to unwrap it, and Jesus, was this kid saving the wrapping paper to sell on E-bay? He unfolded each edge with an annoyingly slow precision that had Tony’s blood pressure skyrocketing through the roof.

By the time he had folded the glossy red wrapping paper in a neat little square and set it aside, Tony had popped the lid off the box for him. God only knew how long that would have taken him otherwise.

Peter stared down below at his lap with an expression that made it look like he had stepped straight into Narnia.
“Holy sh—”

“Don’t curse in front of Rogers, he’s got a thing about bad language.”

The joke fell flat, especially considering how little Steve had been present throughout most the evening. Tony did a quick glance around; the soldier seemed to have stepped outside, again. He couldn’t help the twinge of guilt that settled in his stomach, knowing he was the reason why.

He turned his attention back to Peter, willing himself to stay in the moment.

“Mr. Stark, this is — I can’t accept this,” Peter stammered, in true Parker nature. “This is — I can’t — this cost — this is —”

“The Canon EOS-1DX Mark II?” Tony interrupted airily, nodding. “Yep, that’s what it is. It’s yours now, treat it well.”

Peter kept shaking his head, to the point where Tony worried he might rattle his skull loose.

“I can’t. Take it back.” Peter pushed the box towards him, refusing to look at it. “Please, take it back.”

“Mhmm, no can do.” Tony swiped his thumb across his nose, giving a hard sniff as he refused to take the box Peter held out for him. “You see, I sorta have this thing about people handing me stuff so..it’s all yours now.”

He was sure to follow his words up with a smile, all charm.

Peter looked to be one second away from screaming or passing out, Tony wasn’t sure which. The last time he saw the kid so excited had to be the day he revealed the Iron Spider suit to him. There was no denying how much he loved that look, the sparkle in his eyes, the struggle to speak a single coherent sentence. It felt even greater knowing he was the reason for it.

Peter kept shaking his head, his brown locks falling in front of his eyes. “Mr. Stark —”

“Pete, please,” Tony said, finally taking the box from him only to plop it right back down into his lap. “Don’t think I haven’t seen you snapping pictures all the time with that dingy little thing you call a phone. You have a knack for photography, not to mention an interest in it. And you know me — I have an irresistible urge to nurture potential. Take the camera, take some damn photos with it, have fun. It’s honest to God the least you could do for me.”

Peter gulped hard, looking down at the box and back up at Tony once more. He still seemed timid as he grabbed the camera into his hands, acting as if its weight was too heavy for even his spider-super strength. Holding the object seemed to perk him up a little though, and he finally let his shoulders relax with a bit more delight.

“You’re the best, Mr. Stark.” Peter grinned, his words laced with an airiness normally reserved for when he had been hopped up on Cho’s good drugs. Tony chuckled – even sober this kid acted like anything he did for him was extraordinarily superior.

“That’s debatable,” he muttered, leaning back into the sofa with a shake of his head.

“Can I...” Peter lifted the camera shyly, sitting forward a bit further on the couch. “For my first picture?”

Tony shook his head, deadpanned, looking straight ahead as he answered, “I don’t do selfies.”
“Oh, uhm...” Peter lowered the camera slowly, eyes glued to the floor. “Right, sorry, that’s stupid —”

“I’m kidding,” Tony said with a little more firmness than necessary. “Christ, you’re like a kicked puppy. Come here, bring it in.”

All traces of offense vanished from Peter’s face as soon as they had come, his smile widening each time Tony motioned for him to scoot closer. He fiddled with the camera for a brief moment, setting up a timer and proper ISO before holding the device out in front of them both.

Tony wrapped his hand around his back, pulling him in. It was too late for Peter to notice he had taken the opportunity to throw up bunny ears behind his head of hair; the camera flashed and the moment the photo popped up on the display, Tony was snickering like a mad man.

Peter wasn’t insulted, if anything he grinned wider. Besides, there would be plenty of opportunities to get him back.

“Awesome!” Peter looked satisfied as he reviewed the display of the DSLR camera. “You know, I’ve been thinking about taking some candid photos of Spidey, maybe selling some to the Daily Bugle for some extra cash—”

“Alright, hand it back over,” Tony waved his hands in a ‘give me’ motion, “it’s mine again.”

Peter broke out with surprising laughter, even as Tony relentlessly stared him on.

“Okay, okay! Jeeze,” he chuckled, setting the camera aside on the coffee table, bending over to place the box underneath.

“Hold up.” Tony stopped him, his hand outstretched before he could go any further. “You might want to look a little further in that box first.”

Bent over with the box between both hands, Peter craned his head up at Tony, his brows furrowed. Tony had gone back to staring at the stairway banister, the attempt at managing his discomfort more than obvious.

Slowly and cautiously, Peter sat up straight, letting the box rest against his thighs. The two lapsed into silence as he rummaged around the bundles of red and blue tissue paper, his fingers scraping the bottom of the cardboard. He froze when he finally gripped onto the additional item inside, carefully and slowly bringing it out to see.

It was a sleek, thin black watch — or at least, it looked that way. But there was no case to the band, no circular or even square window where a clock could be displayed and time could be shown.

Peter tilted his head to the side, turning the bracelet over in his hands. “What is this?”

Tony cleared his throat, sniffed his nose in a way that sounded painful, drummed his fingers against the armrest of the sofa — all the things he normally did when vastly uncomfortable. He even went to push up the sunglasses he hadn’t been wearing, his hand smoothing back his hair to cover for the mistake.

“I was inspired by that little Starkbits illusion you had going on,” he explained.

Peter frowned, glancing up at Tony before looking back down at the thin, metal bracelet. He vaguely recalled the memory, most of the details having come second-hand from sources like Mr.
Stark and Bruce, the two sharing the story with a hearty chuckle.

Still, those had been high-tech casts for his broken wrists. Bone stabilizing devices, Tony had called them. What could this possibly be —?

“It’s a panic watch, directly connected to me,” Tony answered, as if reading his thoughts. He lifted his arm, showing off the same sleek, black bracelet strapped around his wrist. “So if anything happens to you — earth, wind, rain or shine, you can reach out to me.”

The information floored Peter, his throat tightening in a way that made it hard to speak.

“Wow, this is...I-I don’t know what to say...” his voice cracked, forcing him to swallow hard before looking up at Tony. “Why?”

“Why?” Tony echoed.

Peter quickly shook his head.

“Not that I’m not flattered! Or-or appreciative, ‘cause I am. Like, this is awesome, really. I’m just...confused,” his tone swirled in the same pattern that his head spun. “You can monitor the suit, right? Or is this about that nanite mist in the base? Would this even work with that nanite mist? Or is this —”

Tony held a hand in the air, desperate to stop the rapid-fire onslaught of words.

“I’m going to give this to you straight, Pete. No chaser. You good, you able to handle that?” Tony didn’t even let the kid respond before jumping right back in. “Good, that’s what I thought.”

With one fluid motion, he lifted his arm in the air again, his other hand tapping on his own wrist bracelet.

“This works both ways,” he diligently explained. “It’s not just about me keeping tabs on you — you hit a dead ringer, we got the suit for that. This is for non-Spider-man business. If you’re in trouble, it reaches out to me. And if I’m in trouble, it’ll reach out to you. I want you to feel a part of the team, to feel safe. And I don’t mean that solely to the physical concern.”

The recognition seemed to hit Peter long before Tony had finished, his eyes clouding over in a way Tony could really only describe as shame. He almost wanted to hit the metaphorical back button, undo what he had said and go back to laughing at stupid bunny ear photos.

And yet Wilson, the naggy little shit he was, pestered relentlessness in his ear that this needed to be done, these things needed to be said.

Peter seemed to take it a like a champ, and exactly how Tony expected him to — by deflecting.

“Oh! That’s — I’m-I’m good, Mr. Stark,” he insisted, still twirling the bracelet in his hands. “I’m fine, really. Everyone’s been, ya know...checkin’ up on me. I’m fine, really.”

Tony nodded firmly. He pretended not to notice the bob in Peter’s throat, or the way he fidgeted with the bracelet as he fidgeted with anything else he could get his hands on during times of high anxiety. There was no point in calling him out on it right now — it was his birthday, or so they celebrated the day as such.

Wilson was right, the kid needed to go at this on his own pace. He searched Peter’s eyes, those wide, absurdly trusting eyes that stared back at him as if he could solve all the problems in the
world.

“That’s okay, that’s great. If you’re fine today, that’s great. But on the days you’re not, I’m here to help. We all are.” Tony dipped his chin low, hand braced against Peter’s arm to gain his attention. “And I’m not the best listener, Peter. But I’m here. I understand.”

The words came out with more ease than Tony ever could have anticipated, much smoother than the numerous practice talks he had with FRIDAY in his lab. He distantly wondered if it was premature to declare how natural this felt for him now, this whole mentor nonsense he took on finally gaining the right trajectory it had needed.

For the sake of not jinxing things, he decided to push the thought away. He was just happy the bout of nerves he had initially felt when beginning the conversation seemed to vanish, or at the very most transfer over to Peter. The kid nodded with a sense of insecurity pouring through every fiber of his begin.

“Thanks. Really, thanks, that...it means a lot.” Peter’s mouth upturned slightly, his gaze fixed on Tony. “I just...I kinda just want things to go back to normal though. Ya know?”

Tony nodded, patting his arm before pulling away. “Well, that’s going to be kinda hard. What with your training and you staying here on the weekends —”

“Wait, what?” Peter nearly dropped the panic watch, fumbling to gather it back into his hands. “What – what are you talking about?”

“Training,” Tony repeated with a pop of his lips, leaning casually back onto the sofa. “We got to get you up to par with the others. Plus you’re pretty useful in the lab and mentoring you from upstate is just exhausting.”

Peter let out a nervous chuckle, waving him off. “Ah that’s – that’s okay Mr. Stark, you don’t need to do that.”

“I’m sorry, did you think this was up for negotiation?” Tony crossed his arms over his chest and his leg over his other knee. “‘Cause it’s not. You know why? It was all Aunt Hotties idea.”

Peter gaped. He had been home with May for weeks, they had talked about all sorts of things together – he couldn’t believe she hadn’t mentioned this of all things to him yet. Of course, she was the better of the two of them at keeping secrets.

He rubbed at the nape of his neck, tucking that memory away in his ‘do not access embarrassing moments’ folder.

“I still don’t know if I’m...” his voice oscillated somewhere enthused and uncertain, muttered under his breath while he gnawed on his lip. “Ya know, ready. To be an Avenger.”

Tony patted the back of his hand playfully against his arm.

“Good thing you’re PRN, then. As needed, remember?” He fiddled with the functions to his own watch, scrolling through a couple holographic menus while he spoke. “Plus, you’ve got your quarters here. Can’t let that space go to waste.”

Before Peter could respond, the panic watch in his hands lit up, syncing simultaneously with Tony’s. Both devices chirped, beeped, and blinked a red light before dimming away with soft blue, eventually returning to their sleek black state altogether.
Peter grinned, eagerly strapping it around his own wrist. It fit perfectly, snug yet comfortable. He couldn’t help but think about how much Ned was going to flip when he saw this.

“Consider it partial custody, kid,” Tony said, hand clasping on his shoulder. “You’re ours now.”

Peter looked up at him, all smiles.

Tony smiled back, at least until his eyes focused away from Peter and to the doorway behind him. Despite his best efforts, the grin fell off his face when Rhodey came walking into the common room, dressed in his military blues with his cap tucked underneath his arm.

“Hey,” Tony said, never once looking away from the doorway, “you mind grabbing me a piece of cake before Hawkeye over there becomes an endangered species at the hands of diabetes?”

Peter nodded, still fascinated with his new wrist device to notice anything was amiss. He departed for the kitchen and Tony shot up from the sofa, quick to cross the path of the room where Rhodey stood.

“Looking handsome as ever, Honey Bear,” Tony complimented, motioning with a casual wave to the crisp, iron-pressed military blues Rhodey wore. His demeanor, however, grew serious. “What’d you find out?”

Rhodey loosened his black tie a smidgen, shaking his head. “C’mon, Tones. Not here, not in front of the kid.”

Still staring at Rhodey, Tony lifted his hand and snapped his fingers to the side, right as Wanda walked by. The girl was carrying a plate overloaded with food, surely for Peter.

“Wanda,” he turned to look at her, “do us a favor?”

His eyes did the talking for him. He looked from Wanda to the kitchen where Peter stood, busy talking with Vision.

She opened her mouth in protest, but got the hint rather quickly. Though less than pleased, she nodded and retreated towards the kitchen to keep Peter distracted.

Rhodey’s eye twitched in a way only Tony’s incessant annoyance could cause. “You have the patience of a toddler.”

“While I don’t disagree with you on that particular observation,” Natasha approached them, her expression solemn. “I have to admit I’m eager myself to hear what the bastards had to say.”

Rhodey and Tony looked to their left, Natasha taking long strides in her walk with the entire group hot on her tail, even Steve having rejoined. They converged together towards the room’s entrance in a clearly conspicuous way.

Steve shot a look into the kitchen, eyebrows dipping in worry. Though Wanda seemed to be doing a decent job at distracting Peter, he knew the whole enhanced-hearing deal made it difficult for private conversations. Plus, even he could feel the strung-out, high electricity tension building between them all.

Peter was a smart kid, there was no keeping him in the dark for long.

“Guys, we should discuss this at a later time;” Steve pressed.
“You’re right,” Tony said, arms crossed over his chest. “You’re absolutely right, we should definitely discuss the nitty gritty details at a later time. But for now — and please pardon my impatience building on the anticipation of the United States Air Force weapons procurement liaison division filing a subpoena against OsCorp industries so that they could explain, on the record, how their increasingly dangerous experiments are justified under research standards — I’d like to hear what the court had to say.”

Rhodey bit back his response, the eyes staring his way putting him at a brief loss. Even Bruce was seemingly curious for an answer.

He wanted to say something about Tony expending all the air that inflated his ego down to his lungs for such a ramble. He instead let out a long, drawn-out sigh.

“The case was thrown out. It’s in their favor.”

Tony physically balked, his body practically jolting forward. “What do you mean it’s in their favor?”

“That’s messed up,” Clint muttered.

Tony shook his head. “You’re telling me I get grade-a shit for building the Iron Man armor and yet these ass-wipes are free to create sentient beings like the damn rock android, no repercussions whatsoever? Not to mention SHIELD knew they were performing highly illegal experimentation’s like Klum’s teleportation abilities and the flying Chitauri heads. How —”

Rhodey held two hands in the air. “The judge declared that the indictment we sought out doesn’t have grounds for reason. OsCorp claims they’ve reconstructed their projects into a more educational stand-point.”

Bruce scoffed. “Gotta give them points for thinking on their feet,” he said, removing his glasses to clean the lenses with the bottom hem of his shirt.

“That’s horse shit,” Tony hissed. “You can’t just slap an ‘educational’ sticker on something and call it a day.”

Rhodey nodded. “I don’t disagree. But they have a valid point, we don’t have ground to stand on. Everything we have against them is mostly hearsay, those documents you found are word of mouth. No solid evidence.”

“Tony has a point,” Natasha chimed in, ignoring Tony’s exaggerated look of shock towards her agreement. “What about the rock android nearly destroying the Collar City Bridge, or the reassembled Chitauri heads that blew a hole near Main Street Park? That should be enough cause for concern.”

Clint winced, half-shrugging. “Think about it, though. The most damage those freaky flying Chitauri heads managed to do was blow up St. Annes, which was already an abandoned building.”

“Yeah, thanks to us,” Sam reminded them, his tone indignant. “We contained that catastrophe before it blew up all of Brooklyn Heights.”

Bruce slid his glasses back onto his face. “And OsCorp proceeded to pay the damages and fines caused by Awesome Android. Not to mention, SHIELD still hasn’t come out and said one way or the other who stole and reassembled the Chitauri heads.”

“Rhodey and Bruce are right.” Steve sighed, his chin low to his chest. “According to Doctor
Strange, Francis Klum was sent to another dimension. And we all know what happened to Dmitri. They’re getting away with this on the same grounds we got away with lying to SHIELD about the undersea base rescue mission. There’s no proof.

Rhodey pessimistically nodded, no happier than the others at what he had to say. “Scientific research. That’s what they’re calling it. Nothing they’re doing right now can be deemed illegal.”

“But risky,” Peter spoke up.

Everyone turned to look at him, all seemingly at once.

Peter had stepped forward, Wanda not far behind. Her expression fell guilty, silently speaking an apology to Tony for not being able to hold him back.

Even if he wanted to, Tony didn’t have time to berate her. Steve was already crossing the path to the kitchen, failing stupendously at acting nonchalant.

“Hey, champ, why don’t you —”

“My class went on a field trip there. To OsCorp.” Peter came closer to the threshold, fingers fidgeting together. “They uh, they are actually...pretty educational. Showed us a whole bunch of stuff. Regenerative cloning of animal limbs, unlimited solar energy, bio-cable mechanisms… radioactive spiders.”

Tony shot his head over fast enough to give himself whiplash.

Steve froze in his steps, head cocking to the side at the realization. “That’s how you got your abilities.”

Peter nodded, the small movement timid and jerky. “One of them got loose. Bit me.”

Tony’s jaw clenched painfully tight, the words giving him pause.

“OsCorp gave you these powers?”

The unwelcome bitter edge that coated his question had Peter suddenly feeling uncomfortable. Even from the distance they stood, Tony’s barely contained anger emitted a heat only matched by his sharp glare.

Peter knew he wasn’t directly mad at him, yet he couldn’t help but feel guilty nonetheless.

“The spider they were experimenting on did, anyway,” he explained shyly, head down low. “It’s uh...it’s dead now.”

The conversation died out briefly, a blanket of tense silence piercing through the room.

Clint brought his festive, colorfully fringed party horn to his mouth, a second away from blowing into the toy. Natasha smacked his hand down before he could.

To Tony’s credit, he managed to suppress the increasing urge that wanted him to focus only on the new and unsettling information he had just heard. His subconscious told him to wait, or perhaps that was Rhodey harshly whispering his name — he could never tell the difference, they both sounded alike.

“Trust me, we’re going to discuss that later, in excruciating detail.” Tony turned away from Peter and back towards Rhodey. “Did you at least get any more information on the OZ Formula I told
you about?”

Sam’s brow wrinkled with confusion. “OZ Formula?”

“Barton,” Tony snapped his fingers twice at Clint, “you remember that green glowing tank we came across?”

“I know what you’re talking about!” Peter excitedly spoke up before anyone else could.

They turned to look at him, baffled. He shrank a little under their gaze.

“The...tank, anyway. Came across it. Didn’t know what was in it.” He kicked his shoe against the floor, his voice low as he murmured, “Fun times.”

Rhodey went from side-eyeing Peter to looking directly at Tony.

“They were willing to tell us that it’s something originating from their epidemiology department. In fact, most of their funding has gone into this project since the beginning of the year. They call it ‘the next cure for any human malignancy or ailment modern medicine has yet to come across.’ You ask me though?” Rhodey shifted on his feet. “Sounds like a humble way of dodging how dangerously close they are to reaching Strucker levels of science.”

“Why do you say that?” Natasha asked, frowning.

Rhodey turned to look at her. “Because the way they proceeded to explain it — ‘man would become immune to even the destruction of his own molecular structure’ — they made it seem like they’re out to create the next Captain America.”

“You think they’re trying to recreate the super soldier serum that I received?” Steve stiffened, paling at the mere possibility.

Rhodey shrugged. “Hard to say without more information.”

Tony pinched the bridge of his nose, warding off the migraine threatening to sneak up towards the back of his skull. With a rattled sigh, his hand moved into his hair as he managed quite well at keeping his breathing even and calm. It was a feat for him, considering how his insides felt like they were being ripped apart organ by organ, slowly consumed by the monster that was his anxiety.

He had known for weeks now that they were approaching a troublesome juncture with OsCorp, long before Peter’s kidnapping, around the same time he witnessed the Hulk take on a sentimen rock being the twisted corporation had birthed to life. This only intensified the feeling in his gut that screamed a crisis would soon culminate.

And if there was one lesson he valued the most in his life, it was to trust his gut when something seemed wrong.

Tony took a deep inhale, back ramrod straight as he said, “Looks like we have our work cut out for his, ladies and gentlemen.”

“You sure about this, Tony?” Steve took a step towards him, hesitate to get too close. “We could be starting a war here.”

Tony turned on his heels to face him, brow creased, lips pressed in a firm line. He fixed his gaze squarely to the blue eyes reflecting back at him.
“Possibly. But whatever Norman Osborn is up to, it can’t be good. The depravity is clear as day and proof or not, we’ve come across enough evidence to know that he’s heading down a path of destruction. It’s time somebody puts a stop to his mad scientist game before more people get hurt.”

The pause that followed came with heavy contemplation. The team surrounding the two glanced between both men, awaiting a response.

Finally, Steve nodded, outstretching his hand to bridge the gap between them.

“Okay, you’re right,” he acquiesced. “We’ll follow you on this one.”

Despite the bubbling anger that still sat deep underneath his skin, Tony gripped firmly onto Steve’s hand, giving it a hard shake. It felt enough to be able to put aside their differences. They still had things to discuss — ‘many things to discuss,’ Tony mused with a scowl — but they both understood that at the end of the day, no matter what came between them, they were teammates.

They had to be, for the sake of those relying on them. After all, it was vital that they never forgot the disaster the Accords nearly created for them.

Steve let go of his grip, nodding curtly. Tony managed the same.

“Aww,” Clint’s voice broke through, “back to the missions like the good ‘ol days. And it feels like just yesterday we were mopping up Hydra’s mess.”

Bruce hummed. “Well, this should be a lot easier than that.”

On his way back to the couches, Clint slapped Bruce against the back of his head. “You jinxed it, you big green goof!”

The common room of the facility, normally much too large with walls that echoed conversations, seemed to suddenly shrink with the presence of only ten people. Tony absolutely hated the term domestic, but it was hard not to think of the word as he observed the evening go on.

Wanda proceeded to guide Peter back into the kitchen, shoving a plate full of food towards him as she showed him how to properly spice her homeland salsa dip. Tony couldn’t help but smile as Vision loomed over them both, studying the act with more intensity than the two combined.

The others retreated to the couches, their activities calm and uneventful. Bruce and Natasha kept to themselves on the love sofa while Clint, Sam, Rhodey and Steve drank over discussions that never really held much weight, rather kept the comradery alive.

It was around ten o’clock that most of the team had retired for bed. It was also around that same time Clint had passed out on the shortest sofa in the room, his feet dangling over the edge, red frosting smeared against the corner of his lips.

“Take this in, kid,” Tony grunted as he sat down next to Peter, gesturing ahead. “It’s not every day you get to see an Avenger fall into a food coma.”

Peter chuckled, retrieving his new camera from where it lay on the couch so that it rested on his thigh.

“I may have...” He inched the camera closer to Tony, the candid photo of Clint passed out on the sofa, cupcake frosting glory and all brightening the display screen.

Tony smirked, patting Peter on the shoulder. “That’s why I keep you around.”
Peter turned the camera off with a smile, setting it aside so that he could relax on the sofa. The room had gone quiet, what with half of the team gone and one visibly asleep. Still, he didn’t feel the urge to bring out his phone and his textbooks had been long since abandoned, letting him enjoy the moment for what it was.

Mr. Stark appeared to be doing the same, leaning back into the cushions of the couch and staring ahead at nothing particular. For the longest time, it was just their breathing that filled up the space, until Peter cleared his throat with a rattling bout of nerves.

“Can I ask you a question, Mr. Stark?” he managed around the squeak in his voice.

Tony quirked an eyebrow at him.

“Why all this?” Peter’s ears visibly reddened as he hastily corrected himself. “Not that this isn’t great, it’s fantastic, really. I had a blast and I can’t thank you enough —”

“As much as I would love to see how long you can go without coming up for air, of which I believe your record is a minute and fifty seconds if FRIDAY timed correctly —”

“One minute and fifty-three seconds, boss.” The AI’s voice boomed from overhead, yet barely startled Clint, the archer fast asleep across the room.

Tony smirked. “Good girl.”

Peter frowned with confusion. “When was that —”

“I’m going to answer your question in the simplest terms possible and I ask that in return you keep the rising level of emotions to barely above average, capisce?” Tony crossed his arms and tilted his chin low, tired eyes meeting Peter’s.

Peter nodded a little too fast, rapt with eagerness.

Tony hesitated, taking a moment to reel himself back in. He was dangerously close to backing out, coming up with some pathetic excuse that he was sure Peter would buy in a heartbeat. But it wouldn’t do him any good, he had to remind himself of that.

This whole thing he felt going on — the ever-incessant ‘more than mentorship’ deal everyone called him out on — it was a two-way street. If he wanted to be better than Howard, he needed to put himself out there. He needed to be better than his own father if he had a shot at this.

It wouldn’t come easily. But then again, nothing good ever did.

It was that realization that pushed Tony forward, breaking through the walls he had built for himself, if only a smidgen.

“Growing up, my dad didn’t give me a lot of support. He was cold. He was calculating. Never told me he loved me, never even told me he liked me.” Tony took a deep breath in, his chest visibly rising. “What I’m trying to say here, kid, is that I don’t have the best first-hand experience with this sort of- stuff. Christ, the world’s lucky Pepper doesn’t even want children, can you imagine how badly I’d screw up a child?”

Peter smiled so softly, with such a gentle glow that Tony almost felt bad for dumping a load of pessimism on him.

“I think you’d make a great dad, Mr. Stark,” he said, the happy lift in his tone enough to break
through even the iciest of hearts.

Tony smiled in a way he wasn’t initially sure he had been capable of doing. The kid was too pure for his own good, He couldn’t help the burning blaspheme at thanking whatever higher being was out there protecting that innocence.

Even with weeks building a gap between believing the kid was dead and holding him alive in his arms, Tony’s gratitude hadn’t diminished. He still felt the same, immense indebtedness that Peter was getting a second chance at things. That they were getting a second chance at things.

All and all, he still felt like it was a miracle to be here, in the now, with Peter by his side. He hoped to never lose that feeling.

“You’re a great kid, Pete. And not just because you’ve decided to run around New York a skin-tight suit putting yourself in harm’s way every chance you can get.” Tony cleared his throat, working to rid the raw emotion that laced his words. “So seeing as I’m not good with the whole touchy-feely sort of dialogue happening here, I’m going to say this once and you better listen good because I can’t promise I’ll ever repeat it. You’re...well, I’ll just say it. You’re like a son to me. I don’t ever want to entertain the idea of losing you again, not because it’ll be heavy on my conscience, but because you have a lot to offer this world and in the grand scheme of things, you’ve barely begun.”

Peter stared at Tony for a long time, at a loss for what to say. The understanding seemed to crash into him in waves, each staggering in a series of what had been the past year and a half. Germany, Toomes, Homecoming night, frequent internship visits, the Chameleon helmet, the burning building, the undersea base, Dmitri...each event began to stack on top of the other, building into something completely new.

He had always felt like Mr. Stark had been the anchor to his otherwise turbulent super-hero life. He had just never expected that side of him to transition into other aspects. Personal aspects.

And just like that, Peter’s throat began to tighten once he realized how much that truly meant to him.

“I...I don’t know what to...”

“Don’t. C’mon, learn to feel the room, you’ll ruin the moment.” Tony waved his hand, motioning for him to come closer. “Just bring it in before I regret this.”

Peter didn’t have much say in the interaction. Tony had already wrapped his arm around his shoulder, pulling him in tightly, so close that Peter could rest his chin against the crook of the man’s neck.

His embrace was warm, albeit surprising. Peter’s eyes widened enough that he worried they might pop right out of his sockets. And though he relished at the contact, he did little other than lay a hand gently against Tony’s back to reciprocate. Part of him couldn’t tell if this was real or not. In his defense, the last time he assumed they were hugging, Mr. Stark was just trying to open the door for him.

When the touch wasn’t grounding enough for him, the scent was. It was hard not to notice the smell of his cologne, different from the usual musky, smokey scents he found most older men wore. Mr. Stark smelt light, fresh, reminding him a lot of the familiar smell he often encountered while recovering in the infirmary.
It made him feel safe. It occurred to him a beat later why that was.

Just when his muscles began to loosen, allowing him to fully enjoy the moment —

“Mr. Stark, this isn’t…this isn’t a hug, is it?” he joked, resisting a smirk. “I thought we weren’t there yet?”

The words were delivered with such intense sincerity that it took Tony a few seconds to even register them. When he did, he pulled away abruptly, his face stern even once being greeted with Peter’s million dollar smile.

“See what you just did there? That was ruining it. Never do that again.” Tony waved him an open palm. “Proud of yourself?”

Peter laughed.

Tony warmed up to a smile.

They both relaxed on the sofa together, the cushions sinking in against their combined weight. It was a little closer than what Tony would normally tolerate, Peter’s shoulder leaning against him and his own leg pushing up against Peter’s. Neither of them seemed to care.

“Thank you, Mr. Stark,” Peter said with a solemnity Tony wasn’t prepared to hear. “I know you said I keep saying that but...I mean it.”

“I know you do,” Tony airily responded, kicking his feet up on the coffee table. “And we gotta work on you calling me Tony. Because seriously, you’re adding a gray hair to my beard every time you say Mr. Stark.”

“Sure,” Peter chuckled under his breath. “That’s what that is.”

Tony shifted his gaze to the communal area in front of them. Beer bottles and dirty plates scattered along the tables and kitchen counters in a way that made the room look like more than just a housing area for the team. It started to look like a home.

He couldn’t help but wonder when that had happened.

Peter adjusted on the couch next to him, his arm brushing up against his. He was pretty sure he knew the answer.

In the midst of his eyes wandering, he caught sight of Steve, far off in the corner sitting in one of the cushioned armchairs. An open sketchbook laid out in his lap, his pencil moving fast against the paper.

Like the perceptive man he was, he somehow noticed the eyes boring into him, looking up to meet Tony’s gaze.

Against his initial instinct, Tony managed a small form of a smile, splintering the part of him he had been ready to leave behind for quite some time now.

Steve nodded, returning the gesture.

For a fleeting moment, Tony wondered if they had finally reached a place where despite any argument or disagreement they came into, they could still be friends. Perhaps they had finally grown enough so that not every problem would break them apart.
It was hard to say without truly hashing out the details of Barnes’ moving in. He didn’t feel that same sinking, overwhelming black hole threatening to consume him at the very thought, though. That was progress, right?

He looked over to Peter, silently thankful that of all things in this world, he had been the one to help them make that progress.

Tony crossed his ankles over one another, rattling a beer bottle nearby. “Hey, Pete?”

“Hm?” Peter hummed, the small notion tapering off into a slur of exhaustion.

“What’s something you want to do that you haven’t done yet?” Tony laid further back into the sofa, crossing his arms against his chest. His elbows bumped up against Peter’s upper arms, the kid too lost in thought to even notice.

“I...I really can’t think of anything.” Peter mused, staring ahead with a smile wide enough to show even his back teeth. “Honestly, Mr. Stark? This all feels like a dream come true. Hashtag blessed.”

Tony nearly facepalmed. “Parker, I swear —”

“Okay, okay!” Peter chuckled, a warmth swelling in his chest. His voice was surprisingly unguarded when he spoke again. “For real...I think I could die tomorrow and be happy. My life feels complete right about now.”

A familiar, calming wave fell over them, the domestic atmosphere of the room somehow intensifying even with most of the group being gone.

While Peter looked ahead, surely still in awe at his oddly evolved yet completely awesome life with the Avengers, Tony had turned to look at him, a quiet grin in place.

“No, kid…” he said, his voice soft. “Your life is just beginning.”

Peter met his gaze, a winning smile lighting up the room.

Drowsy from the day’s activities, Tony slung his arm around Peter’s shoulder, his sigh loud yet lighthearted. He let the kid relax against his side, unable to keep himself from doing the same.

A distant, quiet hum coming from the various technology ingrained in the walls took the place of any conversation, accompanied by the occasional snore from Clint across the way.

Tony would later retire to his personal quarters and Peter to his. Although, while Tony slept peacefully next to Pepper, Peter would proceed to send an unreasonable amount of texts to his friends until a little past midnight. Still, they both slept soundly throughout the night in spite of all the troubles they had weighing them down, tomorrows concerns a worry for another time.

For now, they let themselves be, enjoying each other’s companionship for what it was. Present, and very much alive.

Cross over, turn back, tuck underneath, wrap the narrow end, pull the wide end —
“— and in turn, the synthetic silk, mimicking that of a spiders web, has embed antibiotic molecules containing salicylic acid, toluene, methanol, L-Heptane, carbon tetrachloride, potassium carbonate, ethyl acetate, creating a biodegradable mesh for the treatment of slow-healing wounds. Because the webs are extremely rich in Vitamin K, which helps with clotting of the blood, and biologically neutral with antiseptic and anti-fungal properties, the chances of infections are minimal as long as —”

“Whoa, kiddo,” Tony laughs, pulling Peter’s black polyester tie snugly before looking him straight in the face. “You gotta take a breath between all these words.”

Peter lets out a chuckle, one that releases a cool puff of spearmint from the dozen or so mints he insisted on popping into his mouth. He had demolished the tin of Altoids within the hour, despite being reminded no one would be able to smell his breath from up on stage.

“Sorry, sorry!” Peter tugs at his fitted suit jacket, pulling at the seams until Tony gently slaps his hands away. His nervous ticks were understandable, but Armani was still Armani. “I just...I can’t believe this is really happening. This is insane! A presentation in front of the MIT Educational Council and Offices of Admissions and Alumni? This is crazy, this is...jeeze, this could determine my entire continuing education — this is so cool!”

Tony smooths out the wrinkles around his shoulders — creating a crisp, clean look on the dark blue blazer. Once, twice, three times before laying his hands to rest near his collarbones.

“Okay, deep breath,” he instructs, waiting until Peter inhales deeply, his posture pulling back tautly with the action. He then grips both shoulders, standing eye level with the kid. When did he get so tall? Matching height was never in his game-plan. “Now...what’s the most important thing for you to remember out there?”

Peter blinks at him, his lips curving up into a coy smirk. “That imagining everyone in their underwear will only freak me out more?”

“Pete —”

“Professor Benjamin Wyatt focuses on the potential for an open mind, always seeking new students who seem to be willing to grow, not stunted in the knowledge they already have. Director of Admissions Catherine Kaiser looks at personality, she likes diversity and turns a blind eye to anyone who appears like a cardboard cut out of last years enrollments. And Vice Chair Member Douglas Hagan is a former STEM professor himself, he craves originality and creativity in ideas. Don’t mention movie references around him, he’s a snob.” Peter smiles, the grin all teeth. “I remember everything you told me. I got this.”

The velvet presentation curtain from behind them ruffles as a body ducks underneath. Hands swatted the red drapes away and muttered curses could be heard when a large frame struggled to arrive backstage with them.

Tony quirked an amused eyebrow as Happy managed to free himself from the heavy fabric.

“Sure you do, rascal.” Happy had his hands in Peter’s hair before he could notice, ruffling the gel-backed locks with a twisted grin.

“Ah! Hap! Not the hair, dude.” Peter ducks low, barely managing to further protect the hair he spent all morning perfecting. Literally — all morning. Tony wants to mention that not even he was that vain about his appearance, but the kid had to get it from someone.
One hand goes to smooth back the newly created cow-licks while the other pushes Happy away. “God, you are the worst uncle ever.”

Happy scoffs, pulling index-cards out of his blazer pocket and handing them off to Peter. “You only say that because Rhodey bought you a computerized telescope for Christmas.”

The curtain call lifts again, this time with much more grace and ease than before. It’s followed up with the sound of high-heels clicking against marble floors. “That was ten years ago, Happy,” Pepper kindly says, letting the red fabric drop down behind her. “Let it go.”

Tony smiles as Happy fumbles for a retort, Peter much too busy reviewing his cue-cards to engage in witty comeback. Before anyone can toss around words, the speakers from the hidden stage behind them fizzle to life, a microphone echoing the sound of someone clearing their throat. “Good afternoon, and thank you to everyone for coming. It is with great pleasure that I introduce today one of the brightest candidates elected to our Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics department —”

“Okay, that’s you.” Tony pats Peter on the shoulder one last time, evening out the wrinkles he was sure wouldn’t go away before letting his hands drop down to his side. “You’re up, pal. Break a leg.”

Though still obviously a bundle of nervous energy, Peter nods enthusiastically, his face lit up with an excitement comparable only to a child. His dress-shoes squeak as he spins on his heels, heading to the presentation curtain with deep breaths. “Metaphorically speaking, please!” Pepper hollers out, noticeably cringing.

Tony turns to stare at her, lips half-pursed and eyes narrowed. The speaker behind the curtains continues on with his announcement and in front of them, Peter hops from one leg to the other, eagerly awaiting to begin his presentation. “What? He’s a tad bit of a clutz.” Pepper airily defends, standing side-by-side with her husband. She crosses her arms, the diamond rock wrapped around her left ring finger noticeable even under the dim backstage lights of the auditorium. “I worry about him. After all...I see a lot of you in him.”

Tony hums. “Yeah? You do?”

“I do.” Pepper leans in, laying a kiss on his cheek that felt as smooth as butter. She lingers there for a brief moment until pulling away with a smirk. “I see about...twelve percent.”

Tony shoots her a playful scowl, one breath away from responding when shoes squeak noticeably against the floors. “Wait! Hold up, hold on!” Peter swivels around, running back towards them both, gripping his cue-cards tightly. “I forgot something!”

Tony gaped, gesturing ahead. “Peter, they’re about to call your name, you need to— ompf!h!”

The weight of a muscular sixteen-year-old teenager smacks into him, his breath nearly knocked out of his chest before he can finish. With eyes comically wide, Tony stumbles back, Peter’s arms
wrapping tightly around his waist.

“Love ya, dad.” A huge grin spreads across Peter’s face, his head tucked deep in the crook of Tony’s neck.

“Love you too, son.” Tony returned the gesture with a squeeze that may have been twice as enthusiastic as Peter’s. He only pulls away once the announcer calls Peter by name, going to pat him on the back before ushering him away.

Peter nods quickly, giving Pepper a toothy smile before turning his back on them both.

The red velvet curtains begins to draw upwards, inching towards the high ceilings with a whir that could barely be heard over the announcer’s voice booming from the surround sound. As soon as he stopped speaking, the crowd began to clap, a harsh echo of their greeting bouncing off the walls of the large concert hall.

With his shoulders pulled back tight and his hands nervously rubbing together, Peter spares Tony one more look, his grin brighter than the lights that began to flood in from the auditorium stage. His grin spoke it all — the audience could be a million strong and Peter would only ever care about one person’s opinion, only ever care about his number one fan.

Tony could feel his heart soar out of his chest from that look, overflowing with pride.

The stage lights seep in as the curtains pull up, casting an overwhelming bright halo where Peter stood. It eclipses around him, highlights him as he begins to walk on stage until eventually, Tony can see nothing but white.

He opened his eyes to the same.

“Tony?” Pepper’s voice seemed distant, but her hand was firm on his shoulder, grounding him to reality. “Tony, are you okay?”

Tony blinked, his every thought in high definition, his mind seemingly caught between then and now. The crisp white colors to his bed-sheets filled his vision, his eyes slowly coming into focus until eventually he could see even the finer crinkles from his own pillowcase.

The overhead lights to their bedroom were bright from above, harsh in comparison to the gently rising orange sun coming from the room’s window. Pepper’s warm body was settled next to his, a weight that dipped the mattress low.

“Hey…” she softly said, leaning further into his vision. “Another nightmare?”

Tony shook his head, his mouth dry, slacked open. His heart beat fast in his chest despite never having been jolted awake, never having woken up with a scream or a shout.

He slowly managed to sit up from his resting position on his side, the goosebumps that traveled up his arms razor sharp.
“No. It was...” Tony shook his head, his hand running down the length of his face. “I had a dream.”

There was a heavy silence that fell between them, the rhythm of Pepper sweeping her hand across his arm the only indicator that time still existed. The fluorescent lights from above began to dim away, allowing the sunrise from outside to cast a golden ray of copper hues into the room, bringing with it a brand new day.

He took a shallow breath in as she stared at him, exhorted him silently, softly and without any words.

“We had a kid,” Tony explained, swallowing hard. “It felt so real.”

Chapter End Notes

If this story were a movie, the end credits song would be Miracle by Rise Against.

Which means the Epilogue is the mid-credits scene. Stay tuned.
The sleek, heavy fountain pen resting between his index and middle finger sang a repetitive song, the gold plated design of the expensive writing tool standing out with a shimmer against the dark Bocote wood of his executive desk.

In the corner of his eyes, he could see flames curl and sway from the fireplace across the room, the
wood crackling as it burned into embers. The hot colors dancing from the mantle against the wall reflected in the rimless glasses resting on his face. Yet the sound barely touched his ears, all of it a faint, distant white noise to the tapping from below.

*Taptaptap…*

*Tap tap.*

*Taptaptap…*

*Taptaptap…*

*Taptap —*

“Sir,” a timid voice accompanied the squeaking of an open door. “I apologize for the intrusion. I understand you wish to be left alone —”

His fingers gripped the pen hard, the cap coming loose and slipping out of his grip. It rolled across his desk.

Without looking up, he asked, “What do you want, Murphy?”

The man swallowed hard, his gulp audible even from across the room. “The reports came in, sir.”

A log from within the fireplace burned in half, the scorched wood making a loud crackle as it split apart. Gently resting the fountain pen down below on his desk, he looked up towards the doorway, an eyebrow raised high.

“And?”

Murphy’s stare lingered for a long moment, his hesitance carrying with him nervous energy that penetrated his attempt at composure.

“There...” Murphy swallowed hard again, his lips struggling to speak. “There was nothing. The divers were unable to salvage any of the remains. The facility sank to the bottom of the ocean, the walls succumbed to the pressures, the formula —”

“Understood, Murphy.” His calm interruption was followed by the removal of his rimless glasses. Slowly, with ease, he set them down next to his green banker’s lamp. “Thank you.”

Murphy furrowed his brows, his expression torn with sympathy coating his features, highlighted by the fireplace he stood near. The yellow and red flames tinted the whites to his eyes. He took one step further into the office, not daring to risk two.
“Sir, I understand this is...devastating news,” Murphy started, “but know that we still have the chemical process design for the structural formula. We can still recreate —”

“Did I ask for anything further?” His tone was frigid, as deep as the stress lines that etched into his face. His calm composure only intensified the sharp sting to his words.

Murphy froze in place, his wildly excited hands coming to a stop mid-air. With his breath held tightly in his chest, he shook his head.

“That’s what I thought.” Gesturing to the doorway behind the scientist, he nodded his dismissal. “Thank you for your time.”

The doorway behind him lead back into the hallways from where he came, and yet Murphy found himself taking that second step into the luxurious office.

“If I may, sir —”

A white-coated female pushed him aside, rushing into the room with a stack of papers in her hands.

“Mr. Osborn,” she harshly announced, “you need to look at this.”

Two fingers rubbed harshly at his temple, a deep breath the only thing containing the outburst boiling deep in his throat. Despite the papers being waved in front of his face, creating a breeze that ruffled through his brownish red hair, he never looked up.

“Doctor Adler,” Norman flatly greeted. “I do not believe I need to do anything for you. Last time I checked, you worked for me. Not the other way around.”

Adler gave the documents one more push, the papers flapping in her grip. Her professional, stern attitude didn’t go unnoticed, especially when compared to the apprehensive man standing behind her.

Looking at her only with his eyes, his chin staying low to his chest, he reached out for them. The green banker’s lamp to his side tinted his features a sickly color, a bright olive mixing in with his pale complexion.

The files were heavy in his grip, the records on top masking numerous radiological films beneath. He sorted through them carefully, cautiously, one at a time.

“It’s the PET scan report,” she explained. “It’s not good.”

With his elbow leaning against his desk and his chin going to rest in the cup of his palm, Norman held image by image up to the light, the flickering of the fireplace illuminating the films. X-rays, MRI’s, bone scans, CT scans — the surplus of tests were too many to count.

“The findings from the latest notable laboratory test results show that this has gone metastatic,” she explained. “The pathogenesis of immunological tolerance and unrestricted hyperactivation of the immune system still remains uncertain, however, the nuclear scan reports show that the periodic remissions and relapses that have occurred are growing smaller —”

“Yes, doctor,” Norman set the films aside, covering them with the stack of paper medical records. Out of sight, out of mind. “I can read. Thank you.”

Adler sighed, both frustrated and dejected. “The disease is progressing. Rapidly. We’re losing the ability to control manifestation. If we don’t find a substitute to slow this down, and quickly at
that...you could be looking at a couple months. At best.”

“You don’t need a substitute,” Murphy cut in, still standing by the doorway. The doctor turned to face him, puzzled. “Give us a couple weeks, we can still recreate the Oz formula. It was successful, it worked —”

“It began to cause early signs of schizophrenia and dissociative identity disorder,” she rebutted, accusation lacing her tone.

Murphy shrugged. “While true, it also halted the disease at a remarkable eight-nine percent.”

Adler’s face hardened as she retorted, “At the risk of a psychotic break!”

“Excuse me,” Norman interrupted, an open palm high in the air. “That’s enough of that.”

The two fell quiet, though not before Adler managed a glare in the direction of the doorway, further sparking the nervous energy of the scientist.

A shuffle of papers could be heard over the crackling fireplace, Norman’s hands diligently and slowly sorting through the reports.

“How long would you estimate a time-frame given that you reconstruct the formula into something more stable?” Though he never looked up from the documents, it was clear who the question was directed towards.

“I...really couldn’t say,” Murphy admitted, a waver in his voice. “That would take the chemical structure back to stage one. It could be months...perhaps longer.”

Adler turned from Murphy over to Norman, her frown deepening. “You don’t have months, Mr. Osborn.”

Norman set the papers aside, his elbow still leaning heavily against his desk. With a far off stare, he pinched his index finger and thumb together, rubbing the two in a repetitive motion. The skin-on-skin friction hissed in his ear, rough calluses on his fingertips like sandpaper against concrete.

“To quote the great Genevan philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau...” Norman looked over at the two, the crisp collar of his white button-down ruffling at the movement. “Every man has the right to risk his own life in order to preserve it.”

His face remained mostly expressionless, no twitch to his brows, no curve to his lips — contained, professional and stoic.

It left Murphy confused. “You...want to...restart the Oz treatments?”

“I’m sorry to disappoint your team, Murphy, but no.” Norman leaned back in his Italian leather chair, waving casually to the door. “You may kindly leave now, thank you.”

The scientist’s shoes barely made a sound on the heavy Persian carpet below him, the unique Oriental designs hardly visible in the low lit office.

Once sure he had departed down the hallway, Adler took a step forward, her hands resting deep in the pockets of her white lab coat.

“Are you sure about this?” she asked, her voice low.

Norman folded his hands together, letting them rest across his stomach. He observed the woman
quietly, calmly, his jaw set tight.

“I have spent my entire livelihood in research studies, doctor. OsCorp has been sitting on what could possibly be the greatest genetically engineered protoplasmic cure for human ailments, and yet we’ve been too afraid to put it to the test.” He sat forward, his hands going to rest on the desk, fingers still laced tightly together. “The answer we seek could possibly lay in what we’ve already created. Who am I to deny the world such a blessing?”

Another log from within the fireplace mantle split in two, a hard snap creating a fresh burst of hot red embers.

Adler gave a curt nod. “Very well, then. You know what to do.”

She turned and left, closing the door behind her.

Norman straightened his posture, digging into his blazer jacket and retrieving his cell phone from the inner pocket. For a brief, fleeting moment he stared at the dark screen, his own reflection mirroring back at him. The crow’s feet around his eyes stood out like unwanted scars, imprinted deeply in his skin.

It took only a few seconds to turn the display on and access his contact list, dialing the phone number he needed.

It took less than that for someone on the other end to answer.

“It’s me. It’s time to initiate phase two protocol.” Norman returned the fountain pen between his fingers, still naked of its cap, unsealed with the engraved nip exposed. It dripped black ink down below on the neatly stacked papers, each beat he tapped saturating the documents. “Tomorrow...we begin Project Symbiote.”

Taptaptap…

Tap tap.

Chapter End Notes

( on’t o it... )

( ...please don’t do it... )
Norman Osborn will return in

Identity Crisis

■__■

(god you're such a nerd...)

End Notes

This story will contain a lot of comic book references, and some may be altered. If you're interested in knowing the canon of the characters or objects brought into this story, make sure to read the A/N's at the beginning of each chapter; my inner geek is happy to explain it all :) You can find and reach out to me on Tumblr if you'd like - KitCat's Tumblr - I love connecting with fans from all 'doms!

Looking to binge the beast but don't have the time to read the whole thing at once? Let me recommend the following "segment" dividers. Think of these as phases or seasons, where you can drop off safely with some form of closure within the story.

Segment 1: Chapter's 1 - 4
Segment 2: Chapter's 5 - 10
Segment 3: Chapter's 11 - 18
Segment 4: Chapter's 19 - 25
Segment 5: Chapter's 26 - 30

A massive thanks to all the amazing artists who have provided such beautiful fanart for this piece of fiction!

Shoyzz: "Mr. Stark will find me."
Shoyzz: "Don’t touch me — get off!"
speakerunfolding: "I don't feel so good, Mr. Stark."
dragonnan: "‘I’m sorry I couldn’t get there sooner."
gigglewaterart99: Comic Panel: Page 1
gigglewaterart99: Comic Panel: Page 2
Shoyzz: "God, her life had gotten to be so bizarre."
Shoyzz: "Easily best sleep he’d ever gotten."
Shoyzz: "Easily best sleep he’d ever gotten."

xerogravity: Identity Theft Art Banner

Works inspired by this one: Identity Theft Fanart by dragonnan, Bah Humbug by Reshma, Two Times Natasha Sees Behind Peter's Masks by Reshma
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!